

An Advent God An Advent People

Advent Sermons

The following pages include five sermons as a resource for mid-week Advent services prepared through the SED Ablaze Task Force.

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Coming Ones – Genesis 12: 1-4

^{12:1} Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ²And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

⁴ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. *Genesis 12:1-4 ESV*

We have heard that the Lord called Abram, but the text does not tell us how God called him. Was it a theophany, like when God called Moses from the burning bush (Exodus 3)? Perhaps an angel appeared to him, like the call of the Virgin Mary (Luke 1:26-31). Of course, it might have been in a dream, like when God instructed Joseph to marry Mary (Matthew 1:19-20). Then again, it might have been through the words and actions of another prophet, like when Elisha was called by God through the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 19:19-21). My preference is ... (*state what your preference is*) ..., but that is just my preference. In reality, the text just doesn't say.

Perhaps not knowing how this key Old Testament calling from God came is good. That way we can't say our call from God isn't valid because it hasn't come to us in the same way it came to Abram.

But there is one thing that the callings of Abram, Mary, Joseph and Elisha all have in common: None of these saints of old were looking for a call from God. They were just going about their everyday business and God came to them.

When it comes right down to it, that is God's standard operating procedure. In the Garden of Eden, God came to Adam and Eve after the Fall. Adam and Eve would never have come to God (Genesis 3). God sent Jonah to Nineveh and through that prophet called the people to repentance. The Ninevites would never have come to God. Through the Apostle Peter, Jesus called 3,000 to faith in him on the first Pentecost (Acts 2). These people were not looking for Jesus and would not have come to him. Christ, through the Apostolic Church, called people from all over the Mediterranean world to himself. Those people were not looking for Jesus, but Jesus was looking for them and came to them through the spoken word. God comes to us poor, miserable sinners. He always has. I guess you could say that we have always had an Advent Lord, a Lord who comes.

Why doesn't God wait for people to seek him, to come to him? Because that would never happen; God must initiate the action. God must first come to us. And he does.

He came to many of us first through the waters of baptism. To others of us he came first through the spoken word. To still others of us he came first through the written word. Perhaps the Lord used your parents, perhaps the Lord used a friend, perhaps the Lord used a radio program, perhaps the Lord used a song, and even, perhaps, the Lord used a pastor, but however it was, God initiated your conversion, Christ came to you.

Left to our own resources we would have spent our lifetime hiding from God like Adam and Even in the Garden, or simply going about our daily lives, like Abram, without a thought about God. That is what sin has done to us.

Of course, the greatest coming, the coming we are celebrating right now, is the coming of our Lord Jesus 2,000 years ago.

The Son of the Father became a man for our sake and for our salvation. Through his atoning death, he purchased and won us from sin, death, and the devil. The Holy Spirit worked in us faith so that we might receive what Christ earned for us. What a blessing!

A fair question for us to ask, though, is “Why?” If by “why” we mean what motivated God, the answer is easy to find in Scripture: “For God so loved the world . . .” (John 3:16). The motivation of God is his love for all sinful humanity. That includes Adam and Eve, Abram, Jonah, the Ninevites, Mary, Joseph, you, me, and everyone else that has lived, is living, or ever will live. God is love, and we see that love in action when we look to Christ.

But if by “why” we mean, for what purpose, we need to find a different answer. The calling of Abram helps us here. Abram was called for the purpose of becoming a blessing to all people. We know the ultimate fulfillment of that blessing was Jesus Christ. Abram didn’t know the name Jesus, but he knew that his Descendant would be the promised Seed spoken of by the Lord to Adam and Eve.

What a wonderful thing to know. But knowing that about Abram doesn’t answer the question for what purpose God came to us. But there is another little detail in this story that helps.

We read, “So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him.” Now isn’t that interesting? Lot was an adult, not a small boy. If his later economic success is any indication of the skills he possessed at the time of Abram’s call, Lot probably already had a reasonably successful life going for himself. What could have motivated him to pack up everything and go with his uncle?

As we read the rest of the story of Abram and Lot in Genesis, something becomes clear; Lot knew that Abram was a prophet from God and Lot knew about the promise given to Abram concerning the future Messiah. How do you think Lot came to know this information?

I can almost hear the conversation between Abram and Lot:

“Hey Lot, I’m going to move to Canaan.”

“What?!? Why would you do that? You have a great set-up here, and when you get too old, you can move in with me. Canaan is the arm-pit of the world.”

“Thanks, my boy. But you don’t understand. God has revealed to me that my Descendant will be the Messiah. He will redeem all humanity. Through that Descendant the world will be blessed. But God wants me to move to Canaan, so to Canaan I must go.”

“Well, uncle, then to Canaan WE must go. For I believe your words and so I will go with you.”

Well, that may not be exactly how the conversation went, but it did happen, and Lot did decide to go with Abram, and Lot did believe in the coming Descendant of Abram (2 Peter 2:7). Abram, to whom God came, went to Lot. Not only did Abram come to Lot, but he came to Canaan, and shared the message of the Coming One with the citizens of the foreign land (Genesis 12:8; 13:4, 18; etc.). Abram became, you might say, a coming one himself. He came to others with the message of the Coming One, Jesus Christ.

Therein lays the answer to the question, for what purpose does God come to us? He comes to us so that through us he might come to others. Luther once asked why we do not die when we are baptized. Why doesn’t God take us straight to heaven so we

can avoid all the trials and tribulations of this life? His answer was so we could share the Christian Faith.

As we look through the history of the Church, we see that pattern over and over again. Wherever Christians went, there Christ went too, calling the lost to faith through the witness of the Christians.

It was not just the professional clergy that called others to faith. In fact, most of the calling of people to faith was done through average, ordinary, run-of-the-mill Christians. Certainly, Christ used the pastors, but by no stretch of the imagination did he only use the professional clergy. That is why Peter tells each one of us that we need to be ready to give a reason for our faith whenever we are asked (1 Peter 3:15). When any of us step into a bowling alley, a restaurant, an elementary school Parent Teacher meeting, a grocery store, the office, and so on, we are the one coming with the message of the Coming One. We are, so to speak, the coming ones for the current generation.

Sure, the people you meet will not be seeking God. What else is new? That is the result of sin. But we come to them with the Gospel anyway; Christ comes to them with the Gospel when you come. I can't help but think of what we sing in our Sunday morning worship after we receive the Lord's Supper: "Thank the Lord and sing his praise; tell ev'ryone what He has done." We sing it on Sunday, "tell ev'ryone what He has done." We come to Monday with that ringing in our hearts. We come as coming ones telling everyone what He has done. Amen.

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Hymn: *LSB* 827 "Hark, the Voice of Jesus Calling"

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Collect: Almighty God, You have called Your Church to witness that in Christ You have reconciled us to Yourself. Grant that by You Holy Spirit we may proclaim the good news of Your salvation so that all who hear it may receive the gift of salvation; Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one Lord, one God. Amen.
(For the mission of the Church (104), LSB page 305)

Courage Over Fear – Luke 2:1-18

2:1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2:2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 2:3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 2:4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 2:5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 2:6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 2:7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. 2:8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 2:9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 2:10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 2:11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 2:12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 2:13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 2:14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" 2:15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 2:16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 2:17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 2:18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

In the congregation at the Lutheran Church of Our Savior there is an evangelism group that will go throughout the community and speak to strangers about Jesus Christ. They will knock on doors, will visit malls, and will help people get their groceries out of the car and have conversations with them. Now, many people will either question the fruitfulness of such a practice or wonder if these members are Jehovah Witnesses. They are not. Their pastor is a Lutheran minister who simply happens to love telling people about Jesus. He is convinced that spreading the good news of Jesus Christ is something that absolutely should consume us as Christians. Every encounter that we have with people is an encounter where the love of Jesus can be brought upon the situation; and what we read in Luke 2 is that evangelism is something that should immediately flow out of our love for Jesus. Yet, interestingly enough, we also see in Luke 2 the primary reason why people often find it difficult to speak about Jesus Christ.

As you hear the text for this sermon you might be struck by the message of the angel to the shepherds that night, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord."

Have you noticed that whenever an angel appears to a person in the Bible they must begin their message with the words, "fear not!?" Angels are celestial beings with great power – to behold an angel is a terribly frightening experience. In Isaiah the angels are pictured with six wings. An angel delivered Hezekiah and struck down one hundred and eighty thousand in one night. An angel came and killed the first born of every Egyptian on the night of the Passover. Angels are terrifying. And yet, this message to the shepherds had nothing to do with death – it had to do with life. It was not about fear – it was

about faith. A Savior was going to be born – Christ the Lord. He would bring peace to all people on whom the favor of God rests.

Yet, in pondering this text it strikes us that if the shepherds did not overcome their fear of the angel they would not possibly have been able to listen to the message of the angel. If they did not hear the message, perhaps out of their fear they would not visit the child. If they did not visit the child, they would not have spread the word concerning Him. Fear could have stopped them from experiencing the great joy of seeing Christ and spreading His Word.

Fear is a terribly crippling thing. In our experience fear stops us from doing a great many things. Fear has stopped us in the past from speaking when we should have spoken. Fear of rejection has stopped us from speaking a word in due season. Fear of, “what am I supposed to say?” has stopped us in the past from beginning a conversation. Fear is the antithesis of faith.

There is a commander in the Navy that is a consistent worker on an Evangelism team. His name is Andrei. He was a commander on a naval vessel. He has commanded hundreds of men in the Navy. He is now a civilian contractor. He is very intelligent, very professional, and a very good friend to those he knows. He is also one of the better evangelists in his congregation. Yet, the first time he joined an Evangelism team his pastor was taught a lesson in fear – and courage.

Prior to going out and evangelizing, the evangelism team spent weeks and weeks preparing for how to go about spreading the word. They had spent weeks and weeks talking about how they were going to go out, knock on doors, hand out tracts, and tell people the good news of Jesus Christ. They were taught what to say, how to say it, etc...

The day came when they would finally go out. They went out two by two and began to canvass a neighborhood surrounding the church. The pastor went with Andrei. As they approached the driveway of the first house and this commander in the Navy’s knees were actually shaking. He admitted at that moment that he was extremely afraid. This intelligent, high powered, highly professional, amazingly equipped man was afraid – afraid to knock on a door and tell someone about Jesus.

But let me tell you something – he knocked on the door. He talked to the people. He witnessed his faith. He continues to this day to knock on doors – and now without any fear. He boldly speaks his love for Jesus to all of whom he meets. At the end of every single e-mail his signature reads, “solī de Gloria” [To God be the glory] Many people ask him what this means and he will write them back about his love for Jesus. He now teaches Bible classes at the local jail in his county. There is no man that has a greater passion for the lost than Andrei. He has come a very long way from the first knock on that first door.

This was a lesson both in fear and courage. You see, many people believe that courage is the absence of fear – but it is not. Courage is being afraid but doing it anyway. This is the lesson of Andrei – and this is the lesson of the shepherds that night. They were afraid. They saw an angel. But they listened to the message, they went to see Christ; and upon seeing Jesus they were overjoyed with His presence that they went about telling everyone what they had seen. They overcame fear by the joy of the message.

In the same way, any fear that we have concerning telling other people the good news of Jesus Christ is a fear that is

unfounded. Jesus gives a promise in Luke 12 that we absolutely cling to in all situations. It comes from Luke 12:11 and it reads, “When you are brought before synagogues, rulers, and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.”

When we have come to faith in Jesus Christ God has implanted within us the promised Holy Spirit. He is God in us. What this means is that we have God so close to us that we do have every word that needs to be uttered when we speak to someone. He lives in us. We simply need to trust that at the moment we speak, the Holy Spirit will use our vocal chords and speak words of conviction, peace, law, and Gospel so that a soul may be converted to Christ.

We have been given a tremendous privilege in this life – we are children of God! And we are children of God because someone in our life loved us enough to open their mouth and tells us the good news of Jesus. We simply cannot wait until people come to our church or ask us about God. That simply will not happen; or if it does happen it happens rarely. God did not wait for us to cry out for a Savior. He came to us, told us not to fear, and offered His Son Jesus Christ as a sacrifice for sin all for one overarching purpose – to bring us back into relationship with Him.

With a holy fervor then *we must approach* our friends and neighbors. The impetus is on us to engage. The compulsion is on us who have the Spirit to engage those that do not. We must be mindful that there is a spiritual realm and that many of our friends and neighbors are without God in the world and are on a path of destruction. Our love for the Lord and our love for our neighbor compel us that we must tell them of Jesus.

C.S. Lewis, the famous author and apologist says something about our friends and neighbors that is compelling enough to share. It comes from his sermon entitled, “The weight of glory.” This is what he says:

"Remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is worth the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors."

God saw our state – we all would have been, “a horror and corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare” due to our sin. We all would have had spiritual imps gnawing at our soul. But God cared. God opened His heart. He opened His mouth. He gave His Son. He spoke His Word. He died on a cross. He rose again. He gave us His Spirit so that, like the saints before us, we might open our mouths and tell the good news of Jesus Christ to a hurting people. You may be afraid. Go anyway. He is with you, always, even unto the end of the age.

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Hymn: LSB # 830 “Spread the Reign of God the Lord”

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Collect: Caring and Benevolent Heavenly Father, we humbly come before you and thank you for your gracious action in Christ. Before we cared, you cared and sent your beloved Son Jesus Christ to this earth to save us sinners. Give us the Spirit, we pray, so that with great boldness and compassion, we may now, by Your Spirit, speak the goodness of Christ to our friends and neighbors.

It's Not About Us – Luke 1:67-79

1:67 Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: 1:68 "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. 1:69 He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, 1:70 as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, 1:71 that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. 1:72 Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, 1:73 the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us 1:74 that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, 1:75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. 1:76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, 1:77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. 1:78 By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, 1:79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

When Steve and his family joined the church, he was at the age to be instructed and prepared to receive his First Holy Communion. Then he was invited to become an acolyte. Steve was very shy and he worried about everything. Lacking in any self-confidence, it was surprising when he agreed to serve at the altar. He was not very good at this work, but what was remarkable was how he sang. He seldom hit the right note and he seemed oblivious to the fact that he sang in a different key than everyone else. But, he sang – with gusto!

Over time, Steve's love of singing songs of praise to God actually began to change him. He started hitting the right notes! This gave him confidence and he began to open up and

join in conversation. He became a Reader of the Holy Scriptures during worship and eventually a Communion Assistant. Now, a young man of 22 years, Steve speaks easily in public about many things, especially his faith, and he is becoming a leader in the congregation.

There is no doubt that singing helped Steve to grow – in confidence, in ability, and in faith. It wasn't the talent of the singer – yes, he gets the melody right most of the time now, but he's not choir quality by any measure. No, singing helped him, not because of his talent, but because of the songs he sang.

In the Gospel According to St. Luke, the first two chapters are filled with songs. There is the Song of Mary (before that a case could be made that Elizabeth proclaims a "song"), the Song of Zechariah, the Song of the Angels, and the Song of Simeon. It's as though Luke were urging Theophilus – and us – to arrive at a "certainty concerning the things (we) have been taught" by joining in the songs that testify to the good news of God's loving work. The song of particular interest to us now is the Song of Zechariah.

An interesting fellow, Zechariah. He was a person of confidence, ability, and faith and so was his wife. "They were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord" (1:6). He served as priest before God and the people confidently offered their prayers as he burned the incense in the temple. One day an intruder appeared standing on the right side of the altar of incense. It was Gabriel, an angel of God sent from the presence of God to speak good news to Zechariah. "Your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be

great before the Lord” (1:13-15). Now if news like that doesn’t move a man to break out in song, what will?

But, the “singer” was thinking only of himself instead of the song that could be sung. “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years” (1:18). Sounds like the person who sits in church staring at the hymnal with lips glued shut. “I can’t sing, never could carry a tune, I don’t read music.”

“You don’t want to sing? Then, you won’t sing,” said Gabriel. And, for the next nine months Zechariah didn’t sing a song – or speak a word! Whether it’s a song, a message, an idea, or a dream, when it’s all about us, then, there is nothing.

We are entering a most wonderful and a most dangerous time of the year for Christians. We are preparing to celebrate the advent of our God into human history in the person of Jesus. How wonderful to celebrate that moment in time when “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). Gabriel drove it home six months later when speaking to Mary, a more ready recipient of his message, he said, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God” (1:35).

It is a most dangerous time for Christians because it is so easy – and so tempting – to make it all about us – decorations here, there, and everywhere; choirs practicing anthems and cantatas; children memorizing parts and dressing in costumes; preachers working to make this the best sermon ever. Beware. If it is all about us, then come January the pews will once again be gathering dust, we’ll go for weeks without ever seeing a visitor darken the door of our church and “Ablaze” will be something for which we raised money so it can happen someplace else.

For nine months Zechariah could speak not a word – he could sing no song. It was a time of quiet reflection, of remembering and wrestling with the words that Gabriel had spoken to him. He watched as Elizabeth grew larger and larger with child. He watched – and listened to the conversation – when Mary came for a three month visit. And he discovered. He discovered that even though Gabriel had said that God had heard his prayer, the answer to that prayer was not about Zechariah, it was about God and what he was doing. God was taking the blessing to Zechariah and Elizabeth and turning it into a blessing for all of Israel! “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people...” (1:68). Finally! He could sing because the Holy Spirit had filled his heart with joy at what God was doing. He no longer was consumed with worry about the “singer’s” role and ability. He caught the vision; he saw the purpose in God’s gift of a son. His joy would not simply be in having a boy-child, but in seeing that boy serve the plan of God to come and save his people. “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways...” (1:76).

Zechariah’s Song was not complete. We do not know whether he lived long enough to hear John say, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (not just Israel). No doubt he would have been as shocked and surprised as were Peter and the other disciples when, after Pentecost, they began to experience how inclusive was the reach of God’s love and mercy (even to the Gentiles). But, what he saw and believed, he “sang.” And, God used it for good. “And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, ‘What then will this child be?’ For the hand of the Lord was with him” (1:65, 66).

We who live on this side of the story know so much more than Zechariah ever did. We know that the Lord for whom John prepared the way – the “sunrise” – HAS visited us. His name is Jesus. By his death and resurrection he has redeemed the world from sin and death. He is the “light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death” and he is the way and the truth and the life “to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

We have experienced the forgiveness of sins in the waters of Holy Baptism; we have seen and tasted the steadfast love and mercy of the Lord in Holy Communion. “For by his grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast... remember that you were at one time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace...” (Ephesians 2:8-9, 12-14).

So, Sisters and Brothers, sing your song. You may not yet know all the words; perhaps you sing off key. Zechariah has good news for you: It’s not about you! Your song is about what God has done and is doing through Jesus for all the world. Your song is part of his plan to bring his message of love to those who still “sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.”

May the Holy Spirit who once filled Zechariah fill us and our churches so that we sing “The Song” that our neighbors are longing to hear.

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Hymn: LSB #831 “How Shall They Hear,” Who Have Not Heard

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A Collect: Stir up your power, O Lord, and come to your Church today as you once came to your servant Zechariah. Fill us with your Holy Spirit that we may have the courage to boldly testify of your love that caused you to send your only-begotten Son to be the Savior of the world. Open our mouths and teach us to sing out your good news until every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord. We ask this in the strong name of the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Being Where – Genesis 3: 8-15

Have you ever watched young children play hide-and-seek? There is a glee about those running to hide from the seeker. Each seeks to find the absolute best place to hide. Usually, in the house it is behind a couch, in a closet, or behind drapes. Some of the hiding places are quite clever and others make no sense at all. If adults are nearby they and the children form a silent conspiracy to keep the hiding places secret. The younger the children the harder it is for them to remain hidden, usually, because the giggles or boredom set in if the spot is too good. They are quickly found and the game starts over with new hiders and a new seeker counting to the prescribed number. It is simple fun. Today, however, we want to talk about hiding that isn't simple fun. It is deadly serious in fact. Hear how it is recorded in ...

Genesis 3:8-15 (ESV)

⁸ *And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.* ⁹ *But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?"* ¹⁰ *And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself."* ¹¹ *He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"* ¹² *The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate."* ¹³ *Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?"* *The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."*

¹⁴ *The Lord God said to the serpent,
"Because you have done this,
cursed are you above all livestock*

*and above all beasts of the field;
on your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.*
¹⁵ *I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel."*

In today's text, God comes walking in the cool of the day. Adam and Eve know of His coming and hide but it is no game. They are hiding from God because they have done exactly what God forbade them to do. They ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In an attempt to be like God they traded that very likeness for far less. They became naked in sin before each other and God. The relationship they enjoyed with God and each other was broken. Now they hide themselves from each other with coverings that will not last and cannot truly cover their nakedness. They hide from God in a garden He created, knowing they dare not approach Him in their nakedness. There is no glee in the hiding and no excitement about being found. There is fear.

God knows their state and instead of pure, right, and just wrath He comes in love seeking them, "Where are you?" In His coming and His question God makes the first move toward fallen humanity because humanity can no longer move toward God. The perfect relationship is broken by sin. Adam and Eve have turned away and hidden themselves.

"Where are you?" It is God's invitation to come out of hiding and into His presence. The response, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." It is the nature of broken relationships that we turn away from each other and hide. In our brokenness we hide not

so much physically but emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. The ultimate hiding place of humanity is in the denial of God. In hiding we once again demonstrate that we are afraid. In hiding we keep secrets. In hiding we lie. In hiding we blame. Oh yes, we blame.

“Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” An invitation to confession and repentance. But, the depth of the fall is quickly realized as the blaming begins. Adam blames God and the woman. Eve blames the serpent.

Interestingly, God does not quibble with their excuses and blaming. His movement is direct. He curses the serpent and Satan who has used the serpent in his scheme to deceive and destroy relationships of the man and woman. In the curse He speaks what is often called the first gospel as He addresses both the downfall of Satan and sacrifice of Jesus. Here is God’s way of framing that gospel.

¹⁵ I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel.”

One only needs to read a little farther in Genesis to see that Adam and Eve took this promise of one who would “bruise” the head of Satan seriously. When Eve gives birth to Cain she believes he is the one. How wrong she was. The offspring for whom she waited was a long way off. His birth (greatly anticipated for generations and missed by most when it finally came in a stable in Bethlehem) as a virgin girl brought forth the child who would and did indeed bruise the head of Satan and accomplished so much more. She gave him the name that is above all names, Jesus. A name and a destiny because it means

“God saves” because he was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. He was both God and human and through him God saved the world.

In Jesus is the fulfillment of the word spoken by God before Adam and Eve to the serpent. He lived in perfect harmony with God. He lived the life that God intended for humanity from the beginning. He fulfilled perfectly the law, the requirements of God, that no man or woman could have fulfilled apart from God. In love for God, the Father, and all of humanity he gave himself as the perfect sacrifice to pay the price of Adam and Eve’s original sin and all the sin of humanity that followed because of their fall. He died to restore all of humanity to God. While his death is of utmost importance, his resurrection from the dead brings the greater promise of life. In fact, Jesus said of himself, *“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”* (John 10:10)

In accepting Jesus’ sacrifice, God could once again fully embrace all of us and give to us the fullness of life both in this present age and in eternity. We live the life won for us by Jesus here and now and we join with the Church in praying, “Come, Lord Jesus, come,” as we await his triumphant return at the end of time.

During this time of new life in Jesus and waiting for his return we have a mission given to us by Jesus himself.

¹⁸ *And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded*

*you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”
(Matthew 28:18-20)*

We are compelled by Jesus to share the peace, the wonder, the joy we have with God with others and invite them into this same faith relationship with Him through Jesus. It is a mission grounded in Jesus’ own mission. He said of himself in Luke 19:10, “*for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.*”

There are millions of people beyond the doors of our ministry who are lost. They are stuck in the broken relationship with God that came about in the fall of Adam and Eve. They do not know that Jesus restored that relationship through his life, death, and resurrection. They do not have the hope we share. Many are seeking for something or someone to fill the emptiness created by the fall. All sorts of things are dumped into this empty hole in peoples’ souls. But it is an emptiness that only God can fill. But God cannot fill it with the saving faith we know and live unless someone shares the message of hope with them. You and I are the “someone” God compels to share the message.

Those “lost” whom Jesus came to seek and save will not wander into our church. Those days are gone. We are compelled by the gospel to take the message out to them. Like God walking in the garden we must ask the question, “Where are you?” Knowing that the “where” is beyond our doors. It is our calling as Advent People who await the return of Jesus to go where those who do not know him are and share the faith we have with them in a way that makes a difference in their lives. It is not enough to simply tell this good news. We must live it in a way that gives proof to the message we proclaim. Our testimony must be one of action. It is a testimony that

requires that our hands and knees get dirty. It is a witness that requires that we exhaust ourselves physically, emotionally, and intellectually that others may know the love of Jesus through our presence. We are compelled by this wondrous gospel to be Jesus incarnate in the midst of people who are lost.

After Adam and Eve fell into sin God proved Himself to be a seeking God, one who made the first move toward fallen humanity because we could not move toward him. He invited Adam and Eve back into relationship with Him and assured them that He would redeem their sin. Through Jesus he fulfilled the promise of the first gospel. Jesus in turn has given this gospel into our lives that we may share it with those who do not yet know the love and grace of God. The gospel compels those of us who have it to go where those who need are and share it in a way that is winsome by both word and deed. Amen.

Hymn: "In Adam We Have All Been One" *LSB* 569

Collect: Loving Lord God, all humanity, like Adam and Eve, seek to hide from You, but out of Your gracious love for us You seek with the Gospel of grace all who hide by means of those You have found. Grant that we may gladly carry Your search for those who hide into our communities and beyond to the end that the ones hiding from You may obtain eternal life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

The Call of Abram – Genesis 12:1-4

1 The Lord had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. 2 I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” 4 So Abram left, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. (Genesis 12:1-4)

Dear Friends in Christ,

The call of Abram reminds us that God did not wait for us to come to him (something we would never do) but came to us with grace and forgiveness, bringing us new life in Christ. As we are conformed into the image of Christ we too do not wait for the lost to come to us (something they will never do) but we come to them with grace and forgiveness, bringing them new life in Christ.

As people, leaders and pastors in the 21st century, we know first hand the joy and privilege of being a part of God’s mission and ministry to go and share with all people God’s blessings and new life in Jesus Christ. That is why we in the Southeastern District of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod are excited that God has provided the resources of time, talent, and treasure to reach out to all peoples through *Ablaze! For God’s Mission*. With God’s help, one of the goals set by the Southeastern District is to be a blessing and share the Gospel with 2.5 million people by 2017. It has been reported that in 2009, “Already, 305,875 faith-sharing moments have been recorded by individuals across the District.”

An example of what God is doing through your mission dollars is reaching out to new Chinese immigrants in Montgomery County, Maryland.

The Chinese Outreach Ministry at Lutheran Church of the Cross in Rockville, Maryland, was started in April 2005. Currently, the Chinese speaking congregation includes about 30 families (including 12 children ages 1 to 18 years) from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Four families of 8 Chinese from mainland China (5 adults, 1 teenager, and 2 younger children) have been baptized in to the Christian faith at Lutheran Church of the Cross.

Eighty percent of the Chinese people in Lutheran Church of the Cross’s Chinese-speaking congregation come from mainland China and speak Mandarin Chinese, which is the official language. The other 20% come from Taiwan and Hong Kong. Some also speak Cantonese Chinese, which is another common Chinese dialect.

Without a core group of Chinese members, how did the Chinese Outreach Ministry at Lutheran Church of the Cross begin? With the help of God, six months of analysis and studies were done by visiting the Chinese people and churches in the community. After it was learned that English as a Second Language classes would be the most helpful and effective way to introduce new Chinese immigrants to Lutheran Church of the Cross a year-round ESL class was opened during the week to provide a friendly environment for new Chinese immigrants and American teachers to build friendship while learning English. Classes are divided into Beginning Level I, Beginning Level II, Conversational Level, and U.S. Citizenship Exam Preparation.

The Lord has blessed many Lutheran Church of the Cross members who volunteer as teachers for the classes that provide a wonderful opportunity for faith- and Gospel-sharing moments, as more than 600 Chinese immigrants, who had not heard about God's love in Jesus, have attended the classes.

After a year, a Chinese Bible study group with about 10 Chinese people was started on Sunday. After another six months, a Chinese worship service was begun at 11:30 a.m. with about 15 Chinese people. By July of 2009, average attendance on Sunday at the Chinese worship service was 42 people. Eighty percent of the worshippers at the Chinese worship service on Sunday are non-Christians who are learning more about the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

The Lord also opened door to be a blessing to all peoples, including children. The Lord brought a total of 105 children ages 4 to 11 to Camp China for six weeks this summer at Lutheran Church of the Cross. The camp allowed children to learn Chinese culture through language, dance and singing. The church's prayer is that the seeds of God's word that have been taught and sown through Bible stories, songs, and chapel messages may grow in the years to come.

Many other blessings of God come through special events that are held for Lutheran Church of the Cross's Chinese-speaking and English-speaking congregations as they gather together during the year, including a celebration of the Chinese New Year, a Chinese dumpling making event, church picnics, and a Thanksgiving Dinner. The congregation also combines in a joint worship service four times a year, whenever there is a 5th Sunday in a month. The service is conducted in both English and Chinese. The joint services remind the members that even through they usually worship separately because of language

difference, they are blessed to be one church and one body in Jesus Christ.

A committee of 7 Chinese Christians coordinates people to serve during worship as ushers, Bible readers, Sunday school teachers, interpreters, and pianist. They also coordinate lunch preparation for a fellowship time after the worship service on Sundays.

Chinese Bible studies are offered on Sunday morning from 10 a.m. to 11:15 a.m. and once a month on Saturday from 5 p.m. to 7:30 p.m., followed by a potluck dinner. Sunday morning Bible studies focus on the basics of Christianity, (a "Christianity 101" course) for new Chinese immigrants. The monthly gathering on Saturday is more fellowship-oriented.

Why did God call Abram to be a blessing to all nations and peoples? Why did Jesus call the church to preach the Gospel to all nations and peoples? The answer is that "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." There you have it. God's target of love is not a person or one nation, but ALL nations and peoples in the world.

So the questions for us, as people, leaders and pastors in the 21st century are, "Is our church preaching to all nations and peoples or just one group of people Sunday after Sunday?" "Does our church challenge the members to reach out to the new immigrants who move into our community?" "What happens if our church is not involved in or supporting the Ablaze movement?"

We invite you to keep our mission starts and ethnic ministries in your prayers. We also encourage financial gifts from individuals and congregations.

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Hymn: LSB #349 “Hark the Glad Sound”

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Collect: Stir up, we implore you, your power, O Lord, and come that by your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and be saved by your mighty deliverance; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.