



Advent
Devotions
Inspired by
Handel's
Oratorio
Messiah

Editor

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Art

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December 7

Malachi 3:1

Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, He is coming, says the Lord of hosts.

Sunday morning can be such a hassle with all the stress of getting to the church on time. Once you arrive, there are hands to shake, mailboxes to check, people to chat with. Then you make a mad dash for *your* pew seconds before the organist begins playing the first hymn. Breathless, you plop down.

What a way to prepare to worship the Triune God! Do you wish that you could have a few moments of silence in which to properly prepare your heart and mind to worship God, with a true sense of humility and awe, to really and truly “be still and know that the Lord is God” (Ps 46:10)?

The liturgy has often been described as a meeting between the King and His subjects. A summons has gone out to all His loyal people to meet Him at the castle. But we are not fit to be in the presence of such power and glory. Therefore, with humble hearts and sighs of contrition, we confess our unworthiness as we stand outside the dwelling place of the most High Lord.

In His grace and because He is a righteous and just ruler, the King pronounces us absolved through His chosen spokesman, the pastor. Then we are escorted into the King’s courtyard by none other than His beloved Son, the heir who has gathered His people from the four corners of the earth.

He presents us to the Almighty One (Rev 7:14), holy and blameless, having washed us by His shed blood and clothed us in the garment of salvation. As we come into His presence, we offer our thanksgiving and praise, in the words of the introit, the “entrance.”

Our liturgy is well-suited to prepare us for worshipping our God. May we ever rejoice to come into His presence with hearts of faith, trusting in God’s Word and Sacraments to make us worthy to be in His holy presence.

By Rev. Ray Salemink

Prayer

*“O Lord how shall I meet you, How welcome you aright? Your people long to greet you, My hope, my heart’s delight! O kindle, Lord most holy, Your lamp within my breast To do in spirit lowly All that may please you best.”
Amen. (LSB 334)*

December 12

Isaiah 60:1

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

Because we are so familiar with the idea of Advent and Christmas, because we can just take for granted that Jesus comes, we sometimes forget the true astonishment that our Lord’s coming brings. We can forget how wondrously and radically different things are because God has become man. Take today’s verse—it seems just to be sort of an “oh, be happy” type of verse. But it says much more.

Consider what Paul teaches us in Romans 3: “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” In our sin, we are fallen, we are laid low, we are down and out. And yet we hear from Isaiah, “Arise!” Be lifted up, for the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. We hear that our light has come; we have been moved from darkness to light. As Paul writes in Ephesians 5, “For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.”

This is not just a call for joy; Isaiah here is describing what the Messiah does by His coming. It is a radical change that Christ brings. We had been as children in the dark, huddling under the covers for fear of the monsters in our closet (except Satan is no mere figment of our imagination!). Now the day of joy and wonder and Christmas morn has dawned. All thoughts of fear or worry are banished, for God is with us to save us.

You are different now because Christ Jesus has come. You are no longer abandoned to your sin, but you are a forgiven and renewed person. You are able to see and understand God’s love for you in Christ and to rejoice in all things because of it. Your life, your eternity is different because of the Lord’s coming.

By Rev. Eric Brown

Prayer

Grant us wisdom, O Lord, that we might always be thankful for knowing Christ Jesus, the Light of Light, who has won for us salvation and has restored us to everlasting glory with You. Help us to always cherish this gift. This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

December 11

Isaiah 40:9

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"

Although Handel was a deeply religious man it has been noted that he was at a point in his life in which he was very despondent. In his mid-fifties he watched as his career appeared to be going downhill. Nevertheless, in 1741 he was compelled to hear again the promise of salvation in God's Word as he composed this oratorio.

The coming of Christmas is often a period of struggle for many as they take stock of their lives. For many it is hard not to look down. Our heads are raised to hear this news that is so good it must be shouted from mountaintops. As the world says, "Here is your life, such as it is," the Gospel proclaims "Here is your God!" God has not abandoned us as we might expect or punished us as we deserve. God Himself has come into this world, with all of our sins, stresses and struggles. Jesus took all of that upon Himself and carried it to the cross for us. His death has brought us forgiveness and His resurrection brings us the assurance of everlasting life. You are not in this life alone. "Behold your God" who comes to you right now in His comforting Word. "Behold your God" who comes to you in the bread and the wine of the Lord's Supper to bring you His body and blood for your forgiveness. He is with us now, every step of the way, and we shall be with him eternally in heaven.

Do not be afraid to share this good news with someone who may be struggling this year. This is exactly the Good News that needs to be shouted from mountaintops for all to hear.

By Rev. David Tannahill

Prayer

Gracious heavenly Father, thank you for the precious Good News of the salvation you have given to me in your Son. Grant me joy in hearing it and the courage to proclaim it once again this blessed season! Amen.

December 8

Malachi 3:2

But who can endure the day of His coming, and who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap.

On any given day, do we for an instant expect the God of justice to appear, with a lightning bolt in hand, massively angry at our disobedience, ready to smite us, because of some sin? While we are sometimes told we have nothing to fear from the Almighty King of the universe, a heaping spoonful of fear can be good medicine. It might make us think twice or even thrice before committing acts of cruelty to our neighbor or flippantly using God's name in vain or robbing someone of their reputation with juicy gossip.

Or do we not see that Jesus hangs on the cross because of our sins? Do we not hear Him cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" See how much God abhors sin, your sin and my sin! Not just those sins that we think are over-the-top, like serial murder, child molestation and sexual deviance. Jesus suffered God's wrath for our little sins, our pet sins, our white lies and slips of the tongue. God is never happy with sin, and Jesus' bitter suffering and horrific death are proof.

This is the righteous judgment of the righteous Judge. Who can endure it? Jesus can. He handled God's anger for our sin, and the sentence of death was carried out on Christ.

Who can stand? We now can, by faith in the Son of God, who was the propitiation for our sin. And not only for ours, but for our neighbor's and our enemies' and those we deem most unworthy. Because Jesus suffered on the cursed tree, the Father's anger is satisfied. Now, by the grace of God in Christ, through faith in Christ, we can with all boldness and confidence endure his coming, for we know He comes with love to take us to be with Him. Now we can stand when He appears, for we shall shine like the sun because of Jesus.

By Rev. Ray Salemink

Prayer

"He comes to judge the nations, A terror to His foes, A light of consolations And blessed hope to those Who love the Lord's appearing. O glorious Sun, now come, Send forth your beams so cheering, And guide us safely home." (LSB 334:6).

December 9

Malachi 3:3

He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord.

The process of purifying silver involves taking silver ore, mixing it with some type of acid wash, and then placing the mixture in an extremely hot oven. The wash boils away the impurities leaving pure silver behind. The pure silver is then removed from the oven, ready to be shaped by the silver-smith.

These words of Malachi are often understood to mean that when troubles come, we should be of good cheer, for the trials of life are sent by God to purify us from our sinfulness, leaving us “pure, shining silver.”

While it is true that the Lord disciplines and trains us through various trials and tribulations, these words of Malachi are not about our suffering. They are about the One who came to purify the sacrificial system which had been corrupted by the “Sons of Levi.” They are about Jesus’ suffering. Though He was pure, Jesus took upon Himself the impurity of the world so that it would be burned away in His death. Jesus, who became sin for us, was “purified” in the fires of God’s wrath as He sacrificed Himself on the cross of Calvary. United with Christ in our Baptisms, we are thus also “purified” of our sin.

One reason we cherish Christmas is that at the heart of the holiday is the birth of a baby, an occasion which cheers even the hardest heart. Yet we must never forget the reason Jesus was born. Already in the Christmas narrative we see glimpses of the cross—from the gift of myrrh which was used to anoint dead bodies, to the words of Simeon that a sword shall pierce through the soul of Mary. Jesus endured the refiner’s fire so that we would be purified for eternity.

By Rev. William Sabol

Prayer

Come, Thou long-expected Jesus, born to set Thy people free; from our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in Thee. Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth Thou art, dear desire of ev'ry nation, joy of ev'ry longing heart. Amen. (LSB 338:1)

December 10

Isaiah 7:14

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel.

Sometimes God sends messengers not to bring immediate faith, but to bear witness against a hard heart. Isaiah was warned that his ministry would be like that. At Isaiah’s commissioning, the LORD said, “Make the heart of this people dull... lest they understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed” (Is 6:10).

Precisely this played out in Isaiah chapter 7. The kings of Judah had been promised that God would be with them, but King Ahaz preferred to find his allies among powerful nations (in this case, the Assyrians). Isaiah met with Ahaz to bolster the king’s courage and faith, promising God’s protection.

Ahaz must have seemed skeptical, because following this promise Isaiah offered a sign from the LORD, whatever Ahaz wished. Falsely pious, Ahaz responded that he would not put the LORD to the test—as if it is a test when the LORD offers a sign. So Isaiah gives Ahaz “a sign”: a virgin will conceive.

What did Isaiah think of this sign? Did he think Ahaz’ childishly absurd refusal earned a suitably absurd sign? A virgin will conceive? And how will we know she was a virgin? This “sign” is so vague, it could come to pass in David’s own city and no one would know!

I wonder if, over the years, Isaiah questioned the point of his ministry. Ahaz turned to Assyria and the move backfired predictably. Judah was never politically free again. Did Isaiah just shake his head in frustration and sorrow?

And yet the word of the Lord does not go out and return empty (Is 55:11). The sign of Immanuel has become one of the most glorious Christmas promises we celebrate. Isaiah’s words have given hope and comfort to millions of believers down to us today. Not vague at all, we see this prophecy as amazingly precise. The word does not return empty, indeed!

By Rev. Daniel Guagenti

Prayer

Almighty God, you promised to be with us and sent your Son to show us the lengths you would go to do so. Keep us from the false piety of Ahaz. Fill us instead with bold faith, certain that your word will accomplish all you have sent it forth to do. Amen.