

ADVENT | DECEMBER 2022



COME, LORD JESUS

AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL
BY RICK WOLLING



THE TEXT OF

Come, Thou Redeemer of the Earth

This Advent devotional is based upon four verses from the hymn, *Come, Thou Redeemer of the Earth*. The hymn has six verses. The first two verses and the last two are cited in Rick Wolling's commentaries; verses 3 and 4 (shaded below) are omitted.

- VERSE 1 **Come, thou Redeemer of the earth, and manifest thy virgin birth:
let every age adoring fall; such birth befits the God of all.**
- VERSE 2 **Begotten of no human will, but of the Spirit, thou art still
the Word of God, in flesh arrayed, the Savior, now to man displayed.**
- VERSE 3 *From God the Father he proceeds, to God the Father back he speeds,
runs out his course to death and hell, returns on God's high throne to dwell.*
- VERSE 4 *O equal to the Father, thou! Gird on thy fleshly mantle now;
the weakness of our mortal state with deathless might invigorate.*
- VERSE 5 **Thy cradle here shall glitter bright, and darkness glow with newborn light,
no more shall night extinguish day, where love's bright beams their power display.**
- VERSE 6 **O Jesus, Virgin-born, to thee eternal praise and glory be,
whom with the Father we adore and Holy Ghost, for evermore.**

Introduction

The Advent season of the church year is a time of looking to the past; contemplating the present; and longing for the future.

Looking back, we consider the scriptural promises of the Messiah's coming to redeem us from our sins through His sacrificial death on the cross.

In the present, we remember God's faithfulness to His word, while we prepare to celebrate the fulfillment of His promises in the advent (coming) of Jesus Christ on the first Christmas.

And as our gaze is directed forward, we anticipate the second coming of Jesus Christ the King and we affirm our certain hope in the establishment of a new heaven and new earth which will last for all eternity.

Some of the most beloved hymns of the church are those we sing during this rich, four-week period of preparation. While there are many well-known hymns that aid us in this wonderful period of reflection, celebration and hope, this year we are focusing this devotional on the not-so-familiar hymn: *Come, Thou Redeemer of the Earth*.

The text was written in the 4th century by St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan. In contrast to some of our more-familiar Christmas hymns, this one is noted for the depth of its theology regarding Christ. There are valid historical reasons for this emphasis.

St. Ambrose wrote the hymn during a period of significant turmoil in the early church. The controversy surrounded the promotion of Arianism, a theology espoused by Arius, an Alexandrian church leader and priest. Arius believed Christ was not eternal and self-existent but instead, a creature called into being by God the Father.

Jesus was, therefore, not divine – He was not God.

The controversy ultimately led to the calling of the Council of Nicea (located in present day Turkey). The council of Christian bishops in 325 AD led to the creation of the Nicene Creed, which is still used in the church today.

The Nicene Creed represents, perhaps, the most wonderful theology of the second Person of the holy Trinity ever written. This "high Christology" is wonderfully expressed in four verses of our hymn (on the facing page), to which now we turn.



SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 27

Come, ...

The ultimate plea of the Advent season is “Come.” Almost every hymn of this glorious season contains this cry. It is a passionate appeal for the dawn of the Son of promise.

In Old Testament times, the people of God longed for the arrival of Him Who would deliver His people from a bondage that was political or national. Such was the case with Israel in servitude to Egypt and in exile in Babylon. The people cried for a divine Deliverer, for the Messiah to “Come.”

Such ardent and hopeful longing is expressed in Isaiah 25 when the prophet, in speaking of the impact the Savior’s arrival would make, said: “It will be said on that day, ‘Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.’ ”

These prophetic words express the delight of believers in every age at the arrival of the One Who came to save us from our sins.

Simeon expressed such delight when, upon seeing baby Jesus at the temple, he declared God’s fulfillment of His promise to send a divine Redeemer before his own death: “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples.” (Luke 2. 29-31, ESV)

Once more this year, the church will express its longing for the return of the Savior in His promised Second Coming. We will join Christians everywhere in singing, “Come!”

But do we really mean it? We must confess that notwithstanding the trials, troubles and tribulations of this world, we still cling to sin and degradation. Our petition may be no more than half-hearted.

An appropriate appeal for us this Advent season is that our hearts be filled with the divine passion of believers in the past so that when we sing, “Come,” we may truly rejoice in His salvation, with glad anticipation.





MONDAY, NOVEMBER 28

... thou Redeemer

The One for Whom we long is our Redeemer.

Redemption is paying a price in order to have something returned that was lost. When the Bible speaks of redemption, it refers to our bondage, to sin and guilt, and the separation it creates between our sinful selves and a holy God.

Because we have sinned and cannot enjoy fellowship with a holy God, we are lost and must be rescued; bought back and brought back into communion with our Creator.

In order to be reconciled to God, a payment must be made to redeem us from this deadly alienation.

Such redemption has many facets. Jesus is our Redeemer because He took on human form, becoming like us so that His actions would represent those who trust in Him. He is our Redeemer because He gladly receives from us the guilt of our sin which we give to Him by faith.

Jesus is our Redeemer because He suffered all the consequences of our sin for us. He was alienated from the Father for us; He died in payment of the penalty for our sins; He descended into hell for us and rose again for us.

Jesus, our Redeemer, secures forgiveness of sins, restoration of fellowship with God, along with peace, hope and joy.

When, today, we sing “Come, Redeemer,” our plea may be for the continuing (or renewal of) fellowship with God that Christ’s redemption has purchased for us. We long for intimacy with Christ which is His free gift of grace to us.

But your cry may be for the start of that fellowship, which is possible only through faith in the Redeemer. “O, come to my heart, Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for Thee,” is a simple way of expressing a faith-full longing for the best Christmas gift one can ever receive.





TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 29

... thou Redeemer

In writing to the church at Corinth, the Apostle Paul spoke of God as the “source of your life in Christ Jesus,” (1 Cor 1. 30) identifying the source of our daily and eternal existence with the Son’s work of redemption on the cross.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul declared that we have redemption through the shed blood of Jesus Christ by which the forgiveness of our sins is purchased. This was according to God’s eternal purpose, “a plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in Him” (Ephesians 1. 7-10).

When we cry “Come, Thou Redeemer,” we are confessing that life and hope can be found in only one place. Religions and philosophies promote themselves as the source of fulfillment. Politicians attempt to legislate that which will make one’s life full. Many believe that money, power, possessions, experiences and relationships have the potential to make one’s life whole.

The Bible says that the fullness of life can be enjoyed only when we are “plugged in” to God, the true source of fullness. But the problem is that our sin disconnects us from that source, so we are lifeless, merely existing through a living death in this world, with no hope in the next.

We need resolution of our sin. We need a divine forgiveness that removes the barrier of our guilt that keeps us from enjoying fellowship with God. No one, and no thing, can plug us back into communion with God but Christ, our Redeemer.

Despite the vain promises, nothing else can deliver so great a salvation. Christ’s redemption is unique, complete, and definitive. It cannot be surpassed or equaled.

When we get plugged into the source of life through faith in God’s Son, we are “ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,” as one hymnwriter put it.

Life in this world, and hope for the next, is possible. It is found in Jesus Christ. Truly, our Advent cry must be, “Come, Thou Redeemer!”





WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 30

... *Redeemer of the earth,*

God's creation needs divine redemption just as men and women do. The Apostle Paul writes in Romans (8. 20): "... the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope."

The natural order is groaning. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God and prompted God's wrath, the creation too suffered. Thorns and thistles sprang up in the Garden. Mutations began to impact that which God had first pronounced "very good." (Genesis 1. 31)

Additionally, fallen men and women have contributed to its decay and destruction. We have clear-cut entire forests, allowing the earth to erode. We have killed wildlife while polluting land and sea and endangering the air we breathe. We have rendered much of the earth's farmlands incapable of producing food, without the use of massive amounts of fertilizer, pesticides and other destructive chemicals.

It's no wonder "the whole earth has been groaning in travail together until now" (Romans 8. 22). God's good earth is suffering under the power of sin. Paul's description makes use of words such as frustration, bondage and decay.

The earth needs a Redeemer.

C.S. Lewis underscores the situation in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, with a picture of Narnia under the power of the White Witch. The earth was in a state of perpetual winter in which spring never came. But with Aslan's return, the ice melted, the flowers bloomed, and eternal spring came to life.

"The creation waits with eager longing" (Romans 8. 19) for its redemption. In his paraphrase of the New Testament, Anglican clergyman and Bible scholar J.B. Philipps captures the idea of the passage by translating the text: "... is on tiptoe to see." The fallen creation is looking beyond itself to God its Maker, stretching and straining to see "the glorious freedom of the children of God" (verse 19) that a Redeemer will bring to all creation.

The natural world lends its groaning to our Advent cry: "Come, Thou Redeemer of the earth!"



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 1

... and manifest thy virgin birth:

Of all the miracles identified in the Bible, the virgin birth has generated the greatest controversy in church history. Some believe the Gospel accounts of the virgin birth are a myth or a legend, while others assign it to the realm of fantasy.

Our hymn was written to address one such dispute in the early church. In it, St. Ambrose, the 4th century Bishop of Milan, was responding to false teachings by the priest and ascetic, Arius. The so-called “Arian Controversy” focused on the question of the nature of the Lord Jesus Christ.

How could Jesus be both the eternal and divine Son while, at the same time, fully man? That question, with its bitter disputes in the church, ultimately led Emperor Constantine to call the ecumenical Council of Nicea in 325 AD.

Closely associated with this dispute was the question of how the divine Son could also be human. What is the meaning of the biblical affirmations that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary? Is not a virgin birth impossible?

This was no tempest in a teapot. The very nature of God’s redemptive work through Jesus on the cross was at stake. In order for our sins to be forgiven, Jesus had to fully represent us in His obedience, death and resurrection. He had to be fully human.

But He must also be fully divine so that the sacrifice of His blood, as the spotless Lamb of God, would completely and entirely atone for our sins.

We therefore confess, in the Nicene Creed, that Jesus was “the word from God, God from God, light from light, life from life, the only-begotten Son,” Who, for our salvation, gave up heavenly glory and divine prerogatives, took on human flesh and died for our sins.

Jesus came and manifested His virgin birth and He is coming again. May He, by His Spirit, come to us again this Advent season and manifest to us, anew, the wonder, majesty and glory of His person.





FRIDAY, DECEMBER 2

... let every age adoring fall;

Unbelievable! It blows me away! I don't get it! Such are the reactions we have to things we don't understand or fully comprehend.

But when events occur which can have only divine explanations, there is just one legitimate and appropriate response on our part – worship.

When Mary heard of her pregnancy by the Holy Spirit, through angelic pronouncement, she fell to her knees and worshiped God.

When Zechariah heard of his wife's pregnancy and that of his sister-in-law, Mary, his first reaction was disbelief; he then extolled the name of God for His great mercy and grace.

After seeing Jesus lying in a manger, the shepherds returned to their flocks “glorifying and praising God.”

And the wise men from the east followed the star to the place where Mary, Jesus and Joseph took up residence after their stay in the barn. They brought their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh and they knelt in worship.

One may find the advent of Jesus, the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world, unbelievable, mind-blowing and incomprehensible. But such gut reactions must go beyond feelings. They must lead to action and that action is, first and foremost, worship.

From the very beginning of time in the Garden, through God's dealing with His people and by His word declared by the ancient prophets, the coming of Jesus was announced again and again ... from heaven to earth ... born of a virgin ... laid in a manger ... and suffering on the cross of Calvary for our salvation.

And what's more, it actually happened, just as God said it would. What is our appropriate response today, and every day? It is worship.

Appropriately, this Sunday – and every Sunday – is the day of worship. Let us join together and declare with joy: “*Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.*” (Isaiah 25. 9)





SATURDAY, DECEMBER 3

... such birth befits the God of all.

Is anything too hard for God? No, not at all – He is God!

Just because the minds of men and women cannot fathom the virgin birth, does not remove it from the realm of reality. That we don't understand it indicates the limitations of being human. That God accomplished it indicates the wonder and power of being the God of all.

What does the virgin birth tell us about God? At least four things immediately come to mind.

First, He works miraculously. As the creator and ruler of all nature, He established the operation of all He made but also, from time to time, He works outside the established and observable limits of the created order. The virgin birth is surely a miracle, but such befits the God of all.

Second, He is a God of promise and fulfillment. Long before Jesus was born, His virgin birth was promised through the prophets. And He was faithful in keeping His promise when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea. Such faithfulness befits the God of all.

Third, He is a God of sacrificial love. He gave up His only Son in death on a cross because He loves us. Can anyone beside God exhibit greater love than this?

Finally, He is holy. He is wholly-other than we are in all that He says, in all that He does, and in His very being and character.

There have been many and varied human responses to the reality of God taking on human flesh in His Son Jesus. Some deny it, while many others ignore it. But when people in the first century heard the angelic announcement of Jesus' birth, and saw the visitation of the heavenly beings in glorious array, they fell to their knees and praised God for sending His Son.

May we do the same.





SUNDAY, DECEMBER 4

... Begotten of no human will,

When we confess our faith by using the Nicene Creed, we say that Jesus is “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, **begotten not made**, one in being with the Father. Through him all things were made. He was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man.”

That Jesus is the only begotten Son of God is one of the most challenging concepts in all of Christian theology to understand. The thought proceeds from an understanding of the Greek word *monogenous* which is found in John 3. 16 (among other places in Scripture): “For God so loved the world that He gave His **only begotten** Son ...”

What does it mean that Jesus is begotten, not made? John 1. 1-3, 14 give us clues for the start of an answer. In John 1. 1-3, we’re told three important things. First, Jesus (here called “the Word” but in verse 14 identified as the incarnate Son) was in the beginning – before the beginning began, Jesus existed. He was, therefore, not created. There was never a time when Jesus did not exist. This is what “begotten” means.

Second, Jesus eternally existed with God the Father. The Word was “in the beginning **with** God.” So, Jesus is eternally God but distinct from the Father. Jesus is a distinct Person of the Godhead and the Father is a distinct Person, too (along with the Holy Spirit).

Third, Jesus, the Word, is God: “The Word was God,” (verse 1).

These three points were absolutely necessary to state clearly and unequivocally (hence the repetitive nature of the creed quoted above) because they addressed the theological controversy in the 4th century church. Arius believed and taught the very opposite of these three great truths.

Why is it important for us to believe and confess these truths today? Because they are the foundation of our redemption in Jesus Christ.

Only One Who was eternally God could make full atonement for our sins. If Jesus were not 100% God in nature and character, His death for us could not procure forgiveness of our sins and fellowship with God Who is our Source of Life.



MONDAY, DECEMBER 5

... *but of the Spirit,*

It is difficult to know how the Holy Spirit fits into the thinking of St. Ambrose when he wrote this hymn.

Is he suggesting that the Spirit plays a role in the eternity of the Son? Is the reference not to Jesus being begotten for all eternity, but Jesus continuing today as the Word of God?

It is difficult to say with no extant commentary on the writing of the hymn. However, the reference to the Holy Spirit does serve us in a number of ways.

First, the hymn affirms the reality of the Trinity. This is an important corrective for the modern church which, in its attempts to fully extol and worship God's Son, the Holy Spirit is sometimes reduced to an afterthought. As the Son is fully the eternal God, so does the Holy Spirit share in the fullness of the Godhead. Our worship in prayer and in song, therefore, must be fully trinitarian.

Second, it is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, Who enables us to recognize that Jesus is the Messiah, God's Deliverer. That we sing *Come, Thou Redeemer of the Earth*, and invoke the return of Jesus, is enabled by the Holy Spirit Who helps us to see Jesus for Who He is and prompts a longing for us to be with Him forever.

Finally, the Holy Spirit enables us to know our need for a Savior and empowers us to cry out to Jesus in believing faith.

The first advent of the Son of God and His future return are acts of the triune God. All three persons of the Trinity are engaged in this world-changing event. The Father sends the Son; the Son willingly comes to save us; and the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see, softens our hearts to believe, and fortifies our wills to live the reality of God's blessed redemption for all who trust in Him and long for His appearing.





TUESDAY, DECEMBER 6

... thou art still the Word of God,

Jesus Christ is the Word of God. In the prologue to his gospel, the Apostle John refers to Jesus as the “logos,” the Word. It is a word that would have been understood by both the Jewish and the Greek readers of the Fourth Gospel. It is a word with deep theological and philosophical meaning.

A word is a way of expressing and communicating an idea or truth. A word has content and meaning. It is a tool of revelation, of making something known. Words are used when one speaks.

If Jesus is the Word of God, what is it He reveals? What is God making known to us through Jesus? Three things immediately come to mind.

In Jesus, God is saying “This is who I am.” When the disciples said they wanted to see the Father, Jesus replied: “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14. 9). When Jesus came to earth in His first advent, He came to reveal who God is. He revealed the holy character and nature of the Father. He made known God’s love and His commitment to His creation.

In Jesus, God is saying: “This is what I have to say to you.” As the Word of God, Jesus declares the truth; He reveals that which accords with things as they really are. Jesus said, “I am the truth,” and He reveals in His actions and His words what the Father desires to communicate to us.

In Jesus, God is saying: “This is what I intend to do.” In Jesus, God expresses His desire for fellowship with us and His intention to do whatever is necessary to ensure we enjoy that divine fellowship.

When our heavenly Father spoke by sending Jesus to earth, He declared (in my own words): My desire is that I would be for you your all-in-all. Come to Me through my Son and enjoy the fullness of life.

O that God would speak to us anew this Advent season, confirming the wonder of His being, declaring to us a word of hope, and enabling us to come to Him even as He comes to us.





WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 7

... in flesh arrayed,

In referring to Jesus' first advent, the Apostle John says in 1. 14: And the word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Notice he didn't say Jesus took on a body or He became a man. Rather, John used a rather coarse term to describe the incarnation of God. Why?

It has been suggested that John was addressing the spread of what is termed "Docetism." This early Christian heresy believed in the divinity of Christ but not in His humanity. Docetics held that a holy God could not corrupt Himself by taking on human form. Jesus was, therefore, fully divine but not human.

Accordingly, Jesus was all spirit, a ghost with no human body.

The Bible teaches us something quite different. To stress the full humanity of Jesus, John chose to declare that Jesus took on human **flesh**; he had bones and blood and organs, just as all men and women do.

John italicizes the point of Jesus' full humanity when he records, in John 20, Jesus' encounter with Thomas, who disbelieved the report of the Savior's resurrection (verse 25): "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe."

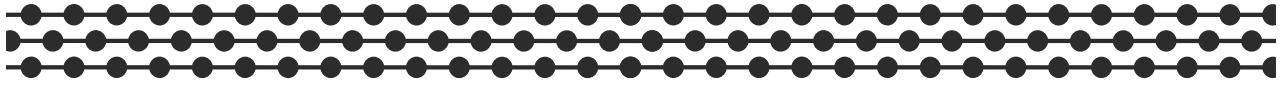
To this doubter, Jesus said two verses later: "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing."

And why is it important that Jesus had a body of flesh and blood like ours? Because unless Jesus was made just like we are, He could not fully represent us. Unless Jesus was fully human, He could not die for us; He could not go to hell for us; He could not rise from the dead for us.

Unless Jesus had taken on human flesh, He could not be our Redeemer.

But He did and He is and, what's more, He's coming again!





THURSDAY, DECEMBER 8

... the Savior,

All good Christian hymns possess similar and significant characteristics. Good hymns rehearse the great truths of the faith. Good hymns have a tune that is sing-able and one that Christians enjoy singing.

And good hymns focus, not on the worshiper – our thoughts, feelings and desires – but on the One Who is worshiped. They extol His nature, character, actions, promises and their fulfillment.

Good hymns, therefore, center the attention of the worshiper on God.

Our Advent hymn is a good hymn for all of these reasons and, above all, because it highlights the names and, therefore, the functions of Jesus Christ. He is identified as Redeemer; Word of God; as equal to the Father; as virgin-born.

In verse two, Jesus is extolled as our Savior. Matthew’s gospel account of Jesus’ birth (1. 21) includes the report of a dream in which an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph with the instruction to “call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins.”

Salvation is deliverance and Jesus is our Deliverer. He delivers us from the penalty of sins through His self-sacrifice on the cross. He delivers us through forgiveness which He secured by His substitutionary death. He delivers us from eternal separation from God, the very Source of our lives.

And Jesus as our Savior makes it possible for God, the Holy Spirit, to live in our hearts as the sign, seal and guarantee of our eternal deliverance and the foretaste of eternity in heavenly fellowship with our Creator-God.

When, during Advent, we implore our Savior to “Come,” we remember the longing of God’s people for deliverance by the promised Savior prior to His first advent. We also remember that the longed-for Deliverer was identified by John the Baptist as “the lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world.” (John 1. 21)

Today, when we cry “Come,” we express our desire for the consummation of God’s plan of deliverance and our eternal enjoyment of all the benefits for which He came long ago, for which He will come again – soon we hope.





FRIDAY, DECEMBER 9

... now to man displayed.

Years ago, many New Yorkers and holiday tourists to that great city enjoyed an annual Advent trip to midtown Manhattan and a much-anticipated stroll down Fifth Avenue. Thousands of visitors from near and far ambled past department store windows to see their festive seasonal decorations.

A visit to the Christmas tree in Rockefeller Center, with its ice-skating rink below, was a necessary stop. The day's highlight was often an experience of the Christmas show at Radio City Music Hall, with kicking Rockettes and live camels parading up and down the theatre's long aisles.

Sadly, difficult economic times and the rise of crime in the city have curtailed many of these beloved holiday treats – two reasons why our Advent cry for Jesus to come again is so passionate and heartfelt today!

If there is an upside to this sad situation, it is that the Santa Clauses, reindeer, the snow and the gift packages that provided magnificent showcases in the windows of Macy's, Saks and Bergdorf Goodman, occupy a less prominent place in preparation for the Christmas celebration.

What might be put in its place? What is God's Advent display? It is Jesus, of course. In Jesus, God shows us Who He is, what He has accomplished, and what He is still to do.

On display in Jesus is God's faithfulness to His Word. He promised at the very beginning of time that He would send Jesus to earth for our salvation and He did. On display is our faithful God.

In Jesus, God shows us His character – His love, mercy and grace as well as His wrath and His justice. On display is the fulness of the divine nature which can only be described as "glorious."

And in Jesus, God shows us that there is nothing He will not do, up to and including the sacrifice of His only begotten Son, that we may enjoy fellowship with Him.

On display, this and every Advent, is the arrival of our Savior to secure our salvation – and, with it, the expectation of our Savior's return. This is the greatest of all holiday gifts.





SATURDAY, DECEMBER 10

Today is Saturday, the day before the church gathers for worship. It is therefore a day of preparation.

Sadly, too many believers fail to see the benefits of laying the ground work for worship. The busyness of the prior week typically runs right into the late hours of Saturday night. On Sunday morning, there is a rush out the door to arrive at church in time and settle into a seat with a weary sigh.

What about today? Can the cycle of frantic weekly activity, which leads into an equally hectic weekend, be halted in favor of arranging a time for getting ready to meet the living God?

Perhaps our Advent hymn can be of help. A rereading of these devotional entries may serve to capture one's attention with a refocus on the One Who is to be worshiped.

Jesus is our Redeemer. He was born by the miracle of the virgin birth. He is, as the Word of God, our Creator's message to us. In Jesus, God tells us that He loves us and He desires fellowship with us.

When we gather together in holy assembly on the Lord's Day during Advent, we celebrate the faithfulness of God to His promise to send His Son, which He did. We celebrate His promise that He will send His Son again, which He will. And we celebrate His promise that where two or more are gathered in His name, He is in the midst of us, which He is.

Preparation for worship involves an anticipation of the elements of worship in which one will engage. We sing the praises of the One Who came long ago for our salvation. We offer prayers of thanksgiving for all of God's provisions for us in Jesus.

We sit under the tutelage of the word written, which points us to the Word incarnate, and we receive the blessing of God to go out into the world and serve Christ and the advancement of His kingdom until He comes again.

Tomorrow is the Lord's Day. Are you ready?





SUNDAY, DECEMBER 11

*... Thy cradle here shall glitter bright,
and darkness glow with newborn light,*

Rejoice – it’s the Lord’s Day and the third Sunday in Advent. Have you prepared yourself for worship? Join with the people of God in praising the One Who came, Who is coming again, and Who meets with His church when we gather to glorify His name.

The theme of this week’s verse is light.

In speaking of the future of God’s people who longed for the advent of the Messiah, the prophet Isaiah spoke these words of hope: “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the people; but the Lord will arise upon you and His glory will be seen upon you.” (Isaiah 60. 1-2)

This was a prediction of both the first and second comings of Jesus. Our hymn speaks of the “bright glitter” that surrounded the place where Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Part of that brightness came from the glory of the angels who gathered around the place where Jesus lay in a manger. Part of it came from the star that guided the shepherds from their fields to the stable where Jesus slept.

But the greatest light shone from Jesus Himself. Though He was born fully human, He was also fully divine. It was the radiance of divine glory that “glittered” in Jesus’ nursery-stall. Truly, the glory of the Lord could not be subdued by the humble surroundings in which the babe slept. Though newly born, poor, weak and lowly, the glow of eternal divinity filled the place of His nativity.

Later in His ministry, Jesus would famously declare in John 8. 12: “I am the light of the world.” It’s a statement fraught with meaning which we will explore this week (supplemented by citations from the luminous gospel of John).

For today, the hymn of John S. B. Monsell, a 19th century Irish Anglican cleric, draws us into worship and prayer: “Light of the world, illumine this darkened land of Thine, till everything that’s human be filled with what’s divine; Till every tongue and nation, from sin’s dominion free, Rise in the new creation which springs from Love and Thee.”





MONDAY, DECEMBER 12

*“In Him was life, and the life
was the light of men.” (John 1.4)*

With these words that begin the prologue to the fourth gospel, the Apostle John makes the link between Jesus as both light and life.

One third of the New Testament references to “life” are found in John. As these opening verses harken back to the creation account in Genesis 1. 1 – “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” and “In the beginning was the Word” (John 1. 1) – Jesus is affirmed as the Creator and source of our *physical lives*.

John also identifies Jesus as the source of our *eternal life*. John affirms this in his later epistle (1 John 5. 11), “And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son.” Eternal presence with God through the forgiveness of sins which Jesus secured for us, and gives us life as a gift of grace which we receive by faith.

Jesus is also the source of our *abundant life*. He said (in John 10. 10): “I have come that they might have life and have it to the full.” That abundant life is one lived in fellowship with our heavenly Father through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It is also a life of meaning and purpose as we live to glorify God in worship, and to advance His kingdom in obedient service.

This abundant life is also one of joy and hope. It is joyous because we know that the plans of God are being worked out in our lives. And, it is full of hope because the salvation of Jesus guarantees that even in death, all will be well because eternity in His presence awaits us.

How can the reality of life through faith in Jesus Christ be considered anything but glorious light? Absent is guilt, fear and alienation from God. In Jesus, our sins are forgiven; fear of death is removed; and separation from the Source of our life is bridged.

Life in Jesus beams with glorious light!



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 13

“The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world.” (John 1.9)

Our hymn describes Jesus’ birth as an occasion for darkness to “glow with newborn light.”

God is the source of the light of life. The Psalmist said (in 21. 1 and 36. 9): “The Lord is my light and my salvation,” and “For with thee is the fountain of life; in thy light do we see light.”

Jesus, the light, puts confusion to flight. In darkness, we don’t know where we are or where we’re going. Darkness is disorienting and frightening. Without the light of Jesus in our lives, things don’t make sense, don’t hold together and don’t comport with the way God created them to be.

Jesus, the light, also makes revelation and discovery possible. As the light, Jesus reveals who God is. He also reveals who we are (and are not!) and, thereby, reveals our need for a savior.

C.S. Lewis is often identified as the source of this relevant quotation: “I believe in Christianity as I believe in the Sun, not because I see it, but by it, I see everything else.” It is by the Son that we “see” and understand ourselves, and the world around us.

Jesus, as the light, also provides guidance for our way forward in life. Who am I? What am I to do with my life? What are God’s purposes for me? What am I to think about the issues of the times in which I live? These questions must all be considered in the light of the person and work of Jesus Christ, Who is the light of the world and the light of my life.

Finally, Jesus, the light, provides us with a warm glow of love, acceptance, care and assurance that God is for us. During the Advent season, we are reminded that God cares for us so much that He sent Jesus, His Son, to confirm that there is nothing He will not do to provide us with the fullest of heavenly blessings.

His first advent ensures it and His second coming will complete it!





WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 14

*... no more shall night
extinguish day,*

Jesus, the light, came into a dark world. Darkness takes many forms.

There is the darkness of a world that exists without truth. Jesus said “I am the truth,” but people prefer to live in darkness. Science, philosophy and education all promise the offer of truth. But unless these disciplines are rooted in the truth that comes only from God, the result is the darkness of falsity.

There is the darkness of a world that exists without righteousness. We live in a time of moral crisis. Lying, cheating and hatred are rife. Robbery, murder, abortion and confusion about gender identity are commonplace, not only in other communities but in our own.

There is the darkness of a world filled with fear. People are afraid to leave their homes, afraid to speak with neighbors whom they do not know, afraid to venture into any place or situation that has not been fully “vetted” for safety’s sake.

At its heart is the fear of death. Though the resurrection of Jesus from the tomb is the declaration (in I Corinthians 15. 55) that death “has been swallowed up in victory, that death has lost its sting,” people will do just about anything to avoid death except coming to the one, true remedy – Jesus, the light of the world.

When Jesus the light appeared, He dispelled all of this darkness. John the Baptist’s father, Zechariah, prophesied concerning Jesus. He called Him the “Dayspring from on high Who would give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Luke 1. 78-79)

Jesus said this is the verdict: “Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.” (John 3. 19)

That’s a dark sadness that, thankfully, can be remedied when one cries: “Come, Thou Redeemer of the earth! Come, Thou light of the world! Come into my heart, Lord Jesus!”





THURSDAY, DECEMBER 15

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (John 1.5)

The word translated “overcome” has a variety of meanings in the original language. It can mean “to seize” or “to apprehend.” It can also mean “to overtake” like a runner catching up to and passing an opponent in a race. Making another sports reference, the word points to a wrestler who “takes down” his opponent, dropping him to the mat.

Additionally, “to quench,” “to eclipse,” or “to extinguish” are other common meanings of the word “overcome.”

All of these connotations attached to the one Greek word are correct and can bring nuanced meaning and clarity to our understanding of the rejection of Jesus, the light.

Though longed-for and awaited, Jesus’ birth was met with the power of darkness which attempted to diminish the glory of His light. Behind the darkness is the “prince of darkness,” the evil one. His lies, deceptions, confusions and distractions all have the goal of extinguishing the light Jesus came to shine in our lives.

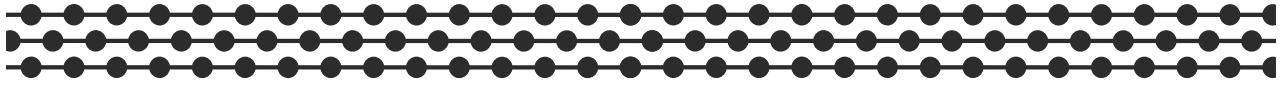
On an evening flight from Europe to the United States, the airplane “chases the sun.” One flies to the west, which is where the sun seems ever-setting. On that six-hour journey, the sky is brilliant with color and light.

But eventually, the darkness catches up to the light as the day turns to night. The darkness overtakes the light.

The darkness cast by the evil one attempts to eclipse the light of Jesus in our lives. The evil one’s tools are varied. They may take the form of false philosophies; the dulling over-abundance of experiences and material things; discouragement with the failure of the world’s promises, when added to the sin of self-centeredness and personal reliance. All of this creeps into our lives, slowly eclipsing the truth and extinguishing the light that is found in Jesus.

Malcolm Muggeridge, the British satirist, social commentator and once-strident atheist, said: “Having seen this other light [the light of God revealed in Jesus Christ], I turn to it, striving and growing toward it as plants do toward the sun. ... Your light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. Nor ever will.”





FRIDAY, DECEMBER 16

*... no more shall night extinguish day, where
love's bright beams their power display.*

The Apostle John sees the fulfillment of Jesus' victory over the evil one's attempt to extinguish the light of His glory in the world and in our lives. In the vision given to him by the Holy Spirit, he saw the ultimate triumph of God's light over darkness.

"And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light shall the nations walk; and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it, and its gates shall never be shut by day - and there shall be no night there." (Revelation 21. 22, 25)

He continues in 22. 5: "And night shall be no more; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign for ever and ever."

Watching the television news, reading the newspapers, and checking one's newsfeed can have a positive affect on our spiritual life. While most of the accounts are disheartening and discouraging, they serve an important function. They give us greater reason to long for Jesus' return.

How wonderful it will be to enjoy eternal and uninterrupted fellowship with God our Maker and with His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Light of the world! How wonderful it will be to have freedom from all manner of unrighteousness! How wonderful it will be to be released from pain and suffering!

And how wonderful it will be to enjoy the power of love's light beaming in powerful display - forever!

While we continue in this world, we will have all manner of darkness with which to contend. Jesus promised as much when He said: "In the world you have tribulation ..."

But His promise to us and our sustaining hope is this: "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." (John 16. 33)

And by faith in Him, His victory is ours!





SATURDAY, DECEMBER 17

“As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” (John 9.5)

Jesus is the eternal God. He had no beginning and has no end.

In heavenly glory, Jesus will be the eternal light. There will be no need for sun, moon or stars, because the glory of God will eternally shine forth from Jesus.

But one biblical text declares Jesus is our eternal light, while another declares that His light is about to run out. Is this a contradiction? Not at all; Jesus was simply stating that His earthly ministry would soon come to an end, so He must complete the work His Father had for Him on earth.

The Bible assures us that the light of Jesus Christ will never go out but will continue to shine in the world until He comes again.

How can this be? The light of Jesus Christ continues to shine in His absence from earth through us, His church.

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5. 14-16)

Until Jesus comes again, the light needs to shine in the words and works of believers, so that men and women might come to see Him and know Him as our great *Redeemer of the earth*.

Are you up to the task?





SUNDAY, DECEMBER 18

*... O Jesus, Virgin-born, to thee
eternal praise and glory be,*

Today is the fourth Sunday in Advent. It is the Lord's Day.

It is often the case in churches that prepare for Christmas through Advent observance, that anticipation of that joyous occasion prompts impatience. By the fourth Sunday, people are ready to begin the festivities. There is the desire to begin singing Christmas carols in corporate worship.

Strictly speaking, it is during the season of Christmastide (Christmas Eve through New Year's) that the beloved songs of Jesus' birth are sung. But the expectancy often gets the best of us. We like to join in the music of His birth, even though Christmas is still a week away.

However, there is still a great deal of richness in our worship during Advent. If our focus is not yet on the babe in the barn, the shepherds and angel visitants, what might we center our hearts upon today?

We can focus on God Who promised that He would send His Son to earth. In the fullness of time, did just that. God is a promise-making and promise-keeping God Who deserves our adoration and praise.

We can focus on God and the eternal life we were given through Jesus' atoning death and resurrection from the dead. God is a life-giving God Who deserves our adoration and praise.

We can focus on the fellowship we were created to have with God. It is fellowship that our sin destroys but which is renewed by redemption through His Son. God's desire is that we might have intimacy with Him which He secured at great personal cost. He deserves our adoration and praise.

Our children count down the days before the congregation joins in declaring "Jesus is born." Until that time, now only a week away, we have to "sit tight" in eager expectation (as Pastor Nate instructs the children when the Advent candle is lit each week). But while we wait, let's not miss the opportunity to glorify the One Who came and Who is coming again.





MONDAY, DECEMBER 19

*... whom with the Father we adore and
Holy Ghost, for evermore.*

Our worship of God must be trinitarian in nature because God exists in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Are our seasonal contemplations and our worship trinitarian? Focus on God the Father is prominent during Advent as the One Who promised the coming of His Son our Redeemer and the Source of the heavenly visitants who announced His miraculous birth.

Of course, Jesus is at the heart of our Advent celebration. His coming was promised and fulfilled and His sure return is rightly a part of our joyous observance.

But what of the Holy Spirit? Where does the third Person of the Trinity fit into the Advent scheme? Our hymn appropriately cautions us against forgetting the Spirit's role and our consequent worship.

We must not forget that the conception of Jesus was by the Holy Spirit.

Luke records that an angel declared to Mary, the mother of Jesus: "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." (Luke 1. 35)

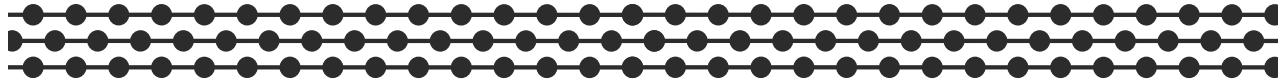
The Psalmist in Psalm 104. 30 says: "Thy Spirit O God makes life to abound." In ways that are truly incomprehensible, the Holy Spirit was the operative agent of the triune God in causing Mary to conceive Jesus. The overshadowing of Mary by the Holy Spirit was by "the power of the Most High."

When confronted by this great mystery, we are tempted to seek more information about the hows, whys and wherefores of this enigmatic event. We join with Mary in asking, "How can this be?" (Luke 1. 34)

The great 17th century nonconformist Bible commentator, Matthew Henry, counsels, "We must not covet to be wise above what is written." Indeed, little explanation is given other than that God, the Holy Spirit, is the source of this wondrous event.

Here is the great mystery of the union of the human body, the divine nature and the eternal begotten-ness of the holy Son of God. Wonder and worship are fitting as we ponder His birth we are about to celebrate.





TUESDAY, DECEMBER 20

*... whom with the Father we adore and
Holy Ghost, for evermore.*

It is fitting that during our Advent celebration, along with entreating the Son to come again, we also pray for the Holy Spirit to come to us today.

By the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, our contemplation of Christ's coming to earth is filled with a wonder and awe that prompts adoration and praise.

The Holy Spirit prompts joy over Jesus' birth – joy in our hearts and in our celebration. Joy is gladness that comes through the recognition that God's plans are being worked out in the world and in our lives.

Joy is one of the great themes of Advent and Christmas. The joy in our hearts and expressed in our celebrations is generated by the Holy Spirit. It is a joy that derives from a recognition that Jesus came into the world FOR ME.

“Joy to the World,” one of the most beloved carols of the season, was originally written by Isaac Watts to be sung as an Advent carol. Our joy at the birth of Jesus comes from the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit also prompts hope in our hearts.

Hope is a confident sense of peace and wellbeing. It emanates from the knowledge that all will be well because the Lord Jesus has settled the ultimate issue of our death in His resurrection from the tomb. No matter how bad things are in the world, the believer has the true hope that Jesus has secured an eternal future of life for us. That hope is inspired in us by the Holy Spirit.

Lastly, the Holy Spirit prompts true advent longing in us. When we observe degradation, trouble and loss in the world around us, there are two possible responses. We can become depressed, despondent and dejected; or we can be inspired to long for the realization of that which has been promised.

It is the Holy Spirit that transforms our perspective, and to live as faithfully as possible while working, watching and praying for the consummation of all things – when Jesus comes again.





WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 21

*... whom with the Father we adore and
Holy Ghost, for evermore.*

The birth of Jesus inspired thanksgiving and worship on the part of those who longed for His coming. The initial chorus of praise was sounded by the shepherds.

While in the fields keeping watch over their flocks, the shepherds were visited by an angel of the Lord which declared the good news – the greatest news that had ever been heard. A Savior was born in Bethlehem! This was followed by an angel choir from heaven saying: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.” (Luke 1.14)

The shepherds were intrigued by what they witnessed. They heeded the angelic message by going to Bethlehem. Sure enough, everything that was told to them by the angel was just as he had said. There they found Mary and Joseph with baby Jesus, lying in a manger.

When questioned where they had come from, why they came and how they knew about Jesus’ birth, the shepherds luxuriated in telling all that went into their decision to come to Bethlehem and see if it was really true. People were astounded at the story they told.

And as they returned to their sheep, they glorified and praised God for all they had heard and seen, “as it had been told them.” (Luke 2. 20) The worship of the shepherds was prompted by what they heard, what they saw, and by everything that had been told to them.

Hearing, seeing and retelling the story of Jesus’ birth triggered a response of worship on the part of the shepherds. It can do the same for us.

The seasonal traditions of the church – the reading of the Old Testament prophecies and the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ birth, the singing of cherished Advent hymns and Christmas carols – can inspire us to worship, too.

And, when enjoyed by one whose heart has been softened by the Holy Spirit, it will lead to expressions of glory and praise to God. We will celebrate the wonder of His salvation for us and we will become enthralled in the majestic work of worship which will be our occupation throughout all eternity.





THURSDAY, DECEMBER 22

*... whom with the Father we adore and
Holy Ghost, for evermore.*

Anna was a woman of great faith. Luke identifies her as a prophetess in her 80s who lived as a widow for most of her life. She regularly attended worship in the Temple and may even have resided in a room on the temple grounds. Like Deborah and Huldah before her (Judges 4. 4; 2 Kings 22. 14), the Lord gave her special revelations of His truth.

As a woman of acute spiritual sensitivity, she longed for the advent of the promised Messiah and she was a companion and friend to others who, like her, were looking for the “consolation of Israel” in the advent of the Savior.

Due to her regularity in attendance at the temple, Anna was present when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to perform the prescribed sacrifices and dedication of their firstborn son.

Anna’s reaction upon seeing Jesus was not unlike that of the shepherds. She gave thanks to God and she told others about the arrival of the One for Whom they had long-awaited.

Evangelism and worship – might this not be a prescription for us today as we celebrate the birth of our Redeemer and long for His second coming?

Evangelism is a difficult task for many, if not most, believers. Uninterest and dismissal are often the reactions of those in the world who do not yet embrace the Savior by faith. But even for those for whom faith in God is unimportant, this season of the year is rich with significant opportunities to hear about God’s provision.

Will the glorious themes of Advent and Christmas prompt a desire in you to pause and give thanks to God for the arrival of your Savior?

Will you, like Anna, tell others about the wonder of Jesus’ birth?





FRIDAY, DECEMBER 23

*... whom with the Father we adore and
Holy Ghost, for evermore.*

When Jesus was born, wise men from a faraway country followed “His star” to Jerusalem so they could worship Him.

We do not know how they made the connection between the star and Jesus’ birth. We also do not know why they were inspired to worship the Son of God of Whom they, presumably, knew little.

We know, however, that like everyone else who is moved to pursue a relationship with Jesus, it is by the grace of God, that they were inspired to seek after Him. It was also by the grace of God that such an opportunity was afforded them.

We also know that their purpose in coming was to worship and adore Him.

Having followed the star and upon entering the house to which Mary and Joseph had moved with their newborn son, the wise men knelt before baby Jesus and worshiped Him. They did not worship King Herod when they came into his presence but before Jesus, they bowed.

And when they worshiped, they offered Him precious gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Some see significance in what they brought: gold as tribute to a king, frankincense for the sacrifice of a Lamb, and myrrh as an embalming herb for the One who was to die.

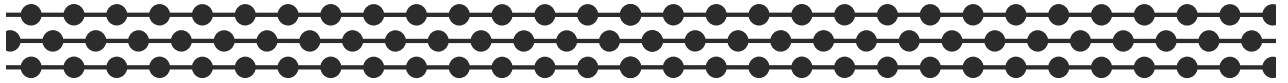
While we have no such specificity in the scriptures, we know that what they brought was valuable and precious. Therein lies the lesson for us today. Worship that is true and full of faith is one in which we offer to God that which is most precious to us.

And what is most precious to us is our very lives.

Gift-giving is a feature of our upcoming Christmas celebration. Much time and money will be spent in the exchange of presents with those we love.

The wise men proffer an important lesson in gift-giving: give to Jesus your life as an act of grateful devotion. He is our King and worthy of our lives in adoration and praise.





SATURDAY, DECEMBER 24

... *whom with the Father we adore and
Holy Ghost, for evermore.*

The worship we offer to Jesus Christ our Redeemer is a prelude to the glorious activity we will engage in for eternity.

In John's vision of our everlasting presence with Him, "There shall no more be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall worship him." (Revelation 22. 3)

It's hard to imagine what that will be like.

Our worship tonight and tomorrow is often distracted. The service will most likely be familiar in liturgy and joyously shared with loved ones and friends. The promise of Jesus' advent and the story of His birth will be retold. Many will squeeze into crowded sanctuaries. Many more will remain at home.

In heaven, there will be no distractions. Worship there will be pure and true, an expression flowing from a perfected heart of love for the One Who made it possible to gather around the throne of God and of the Lamb.

The advent cry *Come, Thou Redeemer of the earth*, will be augmented with the call: *O Come Let Us Adore Him, Christ the Lord.*

Wherever one is on this Christmas Eve, worship is the order of things. God has been faithful to His promise to send us a Redeemer.

Jesus has come. He has come to die on the cross to save us from our sins. Our fellowship with God has been restored.

Our hope is real, our joy eternal. Because Christ is born and coming again, God's great plan for eternal salvation is finished for all who trust in Him as their Savior and Lord.

Therefore, rejoice! *Come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ the newborn King!*





SUNDAY, DECEMBER 25

Rejoice ... it's the Lord's Day and it is Christmas Day.

For the past four weeks, we have been considering the ideas inspired by the 4th century hymn *Come, Thou Redeemer of the Earth*, written by St. Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan. It is a hymn with themes that have turned our attention to the glorious significance of the promise of Jesus' first advent and His hoped-for return.

Today, our final thoughts are inspired by verses that are not a part of the original hymn. They are instead 21st century lyrics which focus our attention on Jesus Who came long ago:

*O Jesus, Thou hast come to earth
We celebrate Your holy birth;
With blended voices here, we sing
Our joyous anthems now we bring.*

*You came to save us from our sin
That we to heaven might enter in;
"Lord, come again" we cry to Thee
With You we'll live eternally.*

R.G.W.

Thanks be to God. Merry Christmas one and all!

