

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 7:10-17

Ahaz is one of the people in the Old Testament who serves as an example of God's enduring love for His people. We don't see God's love through Ahaz' goodness, but in response to his sinful behavior. In verse 12 Ahaz *seems* to be a humble servant-king of God, but we learn in the 16th chapter of Second Kings that he was only telling the prophet what he thought he wanted to hear, not what he believed in his heart. In Second Kings we find that Ahaz was a most despicable character who worshipped false gods. Ahaz not only bowed at the feet of the king of Assyria, he had the altar in Jerusalem modeled after the one in the capital of Assyria, a nation that stood in opposition to God.



Even in the face of such arrogant disobedience, God did not turn away from His people. Knowing that Ahaz was becoming a great servant of the king of Assyria, Isaiah told him what great distress his actions would bring to God's people, but in the same words Isaiah also delivered God's message of promise for the future. While verse 14 was a prophecy of a lad who would see the destruction of Ahaz' new partner and of the kingdom of Israel to the north of Judah and Jerusalem (Jerusalem itself would barely escape destruction), it was also a prophecy of the greatest act of love in all of the history of eternity. The verse refers to the birth of the Messiah Who would come to save all sinners who, like Ahaz, could never seem to pursue anything but rebellion. As the "house of David" pursued rebellion and idols, God pursued His plan for salvation.

As we come to the end of Advent in the year of 2001, what an astounding feeling of gratitude comes into our lives. God, Who endured so much from His people (both Jews and Gentiles) throughout history, actually chose to send His Son to die on the cross in our behalf. Even after that, we continue to rebel and He continues to love. In Advent, we celebrate God's love by celebrating Christ's birth and anticipating His return.

Is your Bible study group sharing God's love with others?

(A message from your Iowa District West Education Committee)

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 7:10-17

1. Who is Ahaz and what is the context of Isaiah's message to him? Why is the reference to the "house of David" (vs. 13) significant? (Read the opening verses of chapter 7 and a Bible dictionary or other reference.)
2. What was the "sign" of hope that God gave to Ahaz and to everyone else? (see vs. 14)
3. Where do we find the fulfillment of this promise in today's Gospel lesson?
4. What does the word "Immanuel" mean? (See Matthew 1:23) What does it mean to you that God is with you?
5. The virgin birth is emphasized in the Old Testament lesson, the Gospel lesson (and we confess it in the Apostles' Creed). Why is it important to confess the virgin birth of Jesus?
6. Another Advent season is nearly completed. Are you prepared to again celebrate Jesus' first coming to earth? Are you prepared for His second coming?



Fourth Sunday of Advent

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Have you ever wanted to go out and do something for God? Apparently King David did. He wanted to do no less than build a temple for God. He wasn't the first or last religious leader to want to do something spectacular for the Lord. Unfortunately these great plans of men don't always match the plans of God. It's a little like steaming straight forward "in the name of the Lord," blinders on, foghorn blasting, not realizing that God pulled into port five miles back!

Often these plans of ours come at times when the last thing we need to be doing is charging out on our own. Maybe there is stress in the church or family; maybe we just feel like we need a change of lifestyle; maybe we're just angry at the way our culture is turning, so we set out to *fix* the problem. Only, if the truth were known, we're trying to fix the problem or perform the task all on our own.

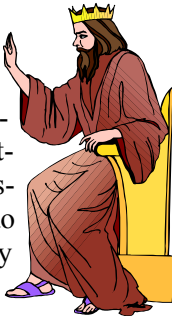
King David didn't realize that his plans were not according to God's will, but then he didn't ask either. Apparently Nathan's God-connection was a little weak that day too, because he assured David of God's approval and then had to change his advice. In a way, it's good to know that even King David could forget to ask God which path to take. The other part of this story that is reassuring is that God did not become angry with David. Along with correction God even promised the blessing of a lasting house of descendants, and King David's descendants would include the Christ!

When we rush forward and err in our efforts to please God, it's comforting to know that God is there not as our Judge, but as our Father. Sometimes He has to remind us that we are the children and He is the Father but He reminds us out of love.

How can we know what to do? How can we know God's will? One step is to be in constant prayer to Him. Another is to be in His Word every day. A third is to seek the advice of Christian friends whom we respect. There is always something that God wants us to do and He will let us know what it is as we learn to listen.

Renew your walk with Christ through a Bible study this week!

(A message from your Iowa District West Education Committee)



Fourth Sunday of Advent

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

1. What was King David's initial desire? (vs. 1-2) Was God concerned about the absence of a temple structure?
2. How had King David come "from the pasture and from following the flock?" (See 1 Samuel 16:11-13)
3. What promises does God make to David (vs. 9b-16). How would these promises be fulfilled?
4. Read today's Gospel lesson (Luke 1:26-32). What references do you note to King David? How were God's promises in 2 Samuel 7 being fulfilled?
5. What kingdom (vs. 16) would "endure forever?" How is this promise helpful as earthly kingdoms fade and fall?
6. Another Advent season is concluding. How has God come to you in His Word? Are you ready for the celebration of His earthly coming? Are you ready for His second coming?



Fourth Sunday in Advent

Micah 5:2-4

The Assyrians, strong and cruel, were trumpeting their power over Jerusalem. They had even placed the city under siege. Though they would not succeed in crushing Jerusalem and her people, they were able to strike at King Hezekiah, a move meant to prove their superiority.

As in many prophecies, we can see Jesus in the prophet's words. While prophets spoke to the contexts of their day, God was speaking a much broader and deeper message. We are privileged to celebrate promises fulfilled in Jesus.

Micah wrote of two kings, one earthly king that he thought would yet be born, and the eternal King, though he did not realize it at the time. He writes of the one that His origins would be "...from long ago, From the days of eternity." He tells us that Bethlehem would be the birthplace of the ultimate King of Israel.

The expected earthly leader who would perfectly fit the prophetic words did not arise. After Jerusalem was destroyed by her enemies and until the birth of the Messiah (over 400 years later) there would be no king in Jerusalem, no king over the people until the eternal King to be born in Bethlehem, a very small and quiet village.

Knowing that the messianic prophecies had not been fulfilled by one of their kings, most Jews of Jesus' day longed for a Messiah who would ride a horse of war and lead them in revolt against their enemies (by that time the Romans) and restore the former days of glory and power to Israel, but Jesus brought something much greater. He gave eternal salvation to all who would believe in Him.

Verse 4 may refer to God's protection against the Assyrian army at Jerusalem's gate in Micah's time, the peace and protection of God that we all share as believers now, and it may also reflect the reign of Jesus over His eternal kingdom at His return. All send a message of comforting assurance, an assurance of God's presence and His provision. It was in the strength of God that the prophet saw the hope of Israel. It is in the strength of God that we rest, assured of His guidance and protection.

Is your Bible study group sharing God's love with others?

(A message from your Iowa District West Education Committee)



Fourth Sunday in Advent

Micah 5:2-4

1. Read Micah 1:1-2. What is the context of Micah's prophecy? (Read more about Micah and his prophecy in the Concordia Self-study Bible book introduction or another reference.)
2. What contrast between Bethlehem and the "Child of Bethlehem" is described in 5:2?
3. How is verse 4 fulfilled in Jesus' words in John 10:1-18?
4. What are some of the insecurities of our lives? What security do we have in Jesus?
5. How does verses 3 and 4 emphasize that the Messiah would rule beyond the peoples of Israel?
6. Another Advent season is almost completed. Reflect on your journey. In what ways has Christ come again into your heart and your home? Are you prepared to meet Him for another Christmas celebration? Are you prepared to meet Him for His final coming?



Fourth Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 7:10-14

Ahaz, king of Judah, hated Isaiah. Though the ruler may have feared God, he did not respect Him. He had long ago decided to run his life on his own terms. His reply to God's offer of a sign was yet another indication that the king was a stubborn rebel when it came to spiritual matters, and none too bright when it came to politics and war.

Isaiah replies to the king's terse answer to God's offer with an angry retort that though Ahaz does not desire it, God will send a sign anyway. In the context of Ahaz' time, God said that a son would soon be born who would not reach maturity before the two kings with whom Ahaz was so concerned (of Syria and Israel) would be plundered by a new enemy (Assyria). But, Isaiah's prophecy meant much more than that. It referred not to just the "house of David" in Ahaz' time, but far in the future as well.

The descendants of David, God's favored king of Judah, would continue in the rebellious ways of Ahaz. Because they could not correct their own actions; could not become righteous in their own right, God would fulfill the judgment message of Isaiah.

Isaiah had expressed a blurry picture of what would come, or a "shadow," as Scripture sometimes puts it. In order to save His people from His own wrath, God would fulfill the words that "*a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.*" Though destruction awaited Ahaz and his followers, one day God Himself would come to right the wrongs and heal the sin that wounded His people.

Ahaz had no idea that Isaiah's words referred to the coming Messiah. Isaiah probably had an inkling, but little more. We are blessed by God to live in an age when the prophecies of Isaiah and others have been fulfilled and made clear. Jesus, born of a virgin and called Immanuel (God with us), has come. His advent in our world has changed our present lives and our eternities. We have been bought by His blood, freed by His death, confirmed by His resurrection, eager for His return!

Learn more about Jesus in prophecy in a Bible study this week.

A message from your Iowa District West Education Committee.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 7:10-14

1. Read the preceding verses of this chapter (7:1-9). What is the context of the "sign" (vs. 10) to Ahaz?
2. Why is the prophecy to the "house of David" significant? (Matthew 1:1,6,17)
3. What was to be the sexual history of the Savior's mother? (vs. 14) [Notice Matthew's repetition of this prophecy in chapter 1:23.] How do we confess this fact in the Apostles' Creed? Why is our confession of the virgin birth important?
4. Why would an "Immanuel" (God with us) God be important to Ahaz?
5. Why would an "Immanuel" God be important to Joseph and Mary (see today's Gospel lesson in Matthew 1:22-24)? Why is an "Immanuel" God important to you?
6. The Advent season concludes this week. Celebrate the "Immanuel" God by reading/singing/praying the Advent hymn "Oh, Come, Oh, Come Emmanuel." Pray that He comes again to you, to your family, to an un-churched friend or neighbor.

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Romans 16:25-27

The world wants us to think and to say that our religion, our faith, is no more true and no more correct than any other. Amazingly, some Christians bow to the demand.

As this season of Advent culminates in the celebration of the advent of our Lord and Savior, both in the past and in the future, Paul reminds us of why we are so blessed to be part of the kingdom of the true God of all creation.

Paul, and we, celebrate a God who establishes us—rescues us, stands us up as His children, enables us as His servants, loves us in spite of our sinfulness, gives His own Son so that we can be with Him through eternity. Not only has He not given up on us as hopeless rebels, He promises that He will come in glory to restore all of His creation to its intended glory.

Through the prophets, His own intervention in history, and through the witness and life of His Son, our God has made Himself known to us. He is still mysterious to us and will remain so until we see Him face to face, but He has also shown us Himself, and invited us to imitate Him by imitating His Son who has demonstrated His Father to us in His own life. Through Jesus and His ultimate gift of death in our behalf, we see how much we are valued by our God.

This faith, this religion, that we practice is so different from any other. Our God does not require us to justify ourselves in His eyes. He does not condemn us to return to this life time after time in unending efforts to make ourselves worthy of Him. He does not tell us to kill those who disagree with us. Only our God calls us to overwhelm the earth with His love.

The world calls this the “season of giving.” It has forgotten why it is called this. Perhaps we can remind the world that we celebrate the “season of giving” because the one and only true God began it all by giving His love so completely that it included giving His Son so that we could know Him eternally.

Learn more about God’s mercy and love in a Bible study this week.

A message from your Iowa District West Education Committee

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Romans 16:25-27

1. Note the context of these verses. Where do they appear in the book of Romans? What has immediately preceded these verses? What makes these verses an appropriate ending?
2. What are some of the “mysteries” (vs. 25) that we especially recognize during the Advent-Christmas season? (See I Timothy 3:16)
3. What is the purpose of this and all writings of Holy Scripture? (vs. 26)
4. The world may suggest many gods. Who is the “only wise God”? How do we see God’s wisdom revealed and displayed? What is foolish about following other gods?

For Family Reflection

5. What’s your favorite mystery book or story? Has God kept His love for us a mystery?
6. God has Good News for the whole world (vs. 26). With whom can you share the Good News of Jesus? Is there someone in your neighborhood or in your family who you could invite to Christmas services this week?

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Matthew 1:18-25

The world around us seems to change every day. It is impossible to keep up with all that is happening, both the good and the bad. We live in a world that is increasingly hostile to Christianity. We live in a society that has been pursuing the task of separating God from everyday life, confining Him to the interior of the church. Our culture is running after every sin it can imagine and pretending that whatever the sin is, it really isn't sin—since there is no such thing. In our world, all religions are the same—all manmade, all equal, each as effective as all the others. We are seeing a resurgence of Paganism, Wicca, and even the cults of the Old Testament. As time goes on, everything keeps getting a little more crazy. Once when Saint Paul was wrestling with his own helplessness in the face of his own sin, part of his response was “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 7:25). He knew that no matter how desperate the situation, God had already provided the solution through the cross.

In a couple of days we will celebrate Christmas—the birth of the Savior. What can we say that is new about this story? Nothing. Isn't it great! In our crazy world only the Gospel stays the same. God is the same now and forever. His love cannot change; His control of the world is real. We celebrate the coming of this almighty God to His creation. He is born of a virgin: True Man and True God. He comes to show us God, and He comes as a babe in a manger. He comes to show us how to live. He comes to die for our sin. He comes to be resurrected in glory as a witness to us that it is all true!

As you celebrate Christmas this year, whether at home or away, whether with a big Sunday school production or a simple song, whether with many gifts under the tree or none at all, take some time with your family or friends to remember the wonderful, and most glorious story of all time. It is the story of God's love even for our world today, and His answer for its future.

Learn more about God's mercy and love in a Bible study this week.
A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Matthew 1:18-25

1. Joseph's anticipation turned to agony. How did Mary's pregnancy complicate Joseph's life? Why didn't Joseph leave her?
2. What is the significance of the name “Jesus” (vs. 21)? Why is the name “Jesus” significant for us?
3. What is the significance of the name “Immanuel” (vs. 23)? Why is the name “Immanuel” significant for us?
4. What was the role of the Holy Spirit in Mary's pregnancy (vs. 20)? How do we confess this fact in the Apostles' Creed?

For Family Reflection

5. What are some other names that are given to Jesus (Isaiah 9:6)? What do they mean for us?
6. This text shares the Christmas story according to Matthew. Share the more detailed Christmas story (Luke 2) with your family.

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Luke 1:26-38

Luke, the only Gentile author of Scripture, a highly educated physician, an accurate and meticulous historian, wrote the words that fill today's passage. Words like, "...the angel Gabriel was sent from God...". Luke reports Gabriel's words, "Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you." At the announcement of the coming birth, Luke writes that Mary replied, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (vs. 34) Gabriel assures Mary and continues, "...the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God." (vs. 35)

Good old Luke. His intelligence cannot be questioned, yet he throws all of these impossible ideas at us, assuming that we will believe him. He noted at the beginning of his gospel, "...having investigated everything carefully...." Luke demands that we understand that his words are true!

But, the idea of an angel sent by God doesn't fit our logical, scientific minds. A virgin (Mary obviously refers to herself in the classical sense of a virgin) who will have a child is absurd. A life that will encounter almost unbearable sorrow described as "favored." (No thanks!) Above all, a Son to be born who will be both God and Man? How can these things be true?



Luke confronts us with facts that demand that we understand that we are not gods. God is so far above us in power, love, and understanding that all we can do is bow down in awe of Him. We only know Him because He chose to come to us and reveal Himself. His love for us is so great that He sent His Son, not only to die in order that we might live forever with Him, but to teach us how to live now. The Christmas celebration is all about the coming of God's Son, Who willingly gave up His throne for a time, to be with us rebels whom He loved, and still loves today.

Have a wonderful Christ-filled Christmas celebration!

(A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee)

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Luke 1:26-38

1. What was the angel Gabriel's message to Mary? Why was this news especially shocking to Mary?
2. How would this miraculous conception take place? Why is the virgin birth of Christ so critical to our confession? How do we state this confession in the Apostles' Creed?
3. The significance of Jesus' birth to her people and to the world is stated to Mary (vs. 31-33). What difference would this Child make?
4. How did Mary respond to the angel's announcement? (vs. 38) What can we learn from Mary's response?

For Family Reflection

5. The angel tells Mary "Do not be afraid." For what fears do you need heavenly assurance? How does the birth of Jesus calm our fears?
6. The Advent season concludes this week. What have you learned about Jesus' coming the last four weeks? How will you celebrate His coming in your heart, your home, and your church? How will you share His coming with others?

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Luke 1:39-56

Christians have admired Mary's faith for centuries. She was a teenage girl who seemed to have it all together. Her faith in God was strong. Her trust in Him was amazing. How did she do it? Mary's song of praise to the Lord may hold the answer to our puzzlement over her faithfulness.

Bible commentaries tell us that there are fifteen different Old Testament quotations exalting God in Mary's song. What does that tell us about her? Mary knew God's word. She knew the stories of her ancestors by heart. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the prophets were all familiar people to her. By knowing God's word, Mary knew God. She knew that He could be trusted. He had proved His love and His trustworthiness over and over through the centuries.

Mary's knowledge of God through His word meant that she could accept the greatest challenge of her young life. She could answer the angel's announcement with, "Behold, the bond slave of the Lord..." (vs. 38) because she already knew that God was in control of her destiny.

When we are met with difficult decisions, challenges, and conflicts, how often can we say, "God, do whatever you think is best. I am your servant"? Do we often fear that God will not take care of us or our loved ones? Can any of us honestly claim to trust as Mary trusted? Which of us has exalted in our God as Mary did upon arriving at Elizabeth's home? How did these women do it? Knowing God's word made a tremendous difference in their lives.

Verse 41 tells us one more thing—"and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit." As we seek to trust and obey God's will in our lives every day, the study of His word is imperative as is prayer. It is only by God's enabling that we can turn to Him in every need and in every joy, trusting Him for unfailing direction and care.

As we schedule through the busy Christmas season and into the coming new year, will we go so far as to schedule a time marked "no cancellation" to spend with our Lord and Savior? If you do, you will never regret it.

Have you invited a friend to attend a regular Bible study with you?

(A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee)

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Luke 1:39-56

1. Who was the baby in Elizabeth's womb? Why did the baby leap in Mary's presence?
2. Who was the Baby in Mary's womb? What title does Elizabeth give to the expected Child? According to vs. 41 what Presence filled and directed Elizabeth?
3. Why is Mary referred to as "blessed"? Was there anything special about Mary as a person? (see Luke 1:26-38)
4. Read Mary's song of praise (vs. 46-55). Why is it often called the "Magnificat"? Where do we find it in our worship liturgy?

For Family Reflection

5. Advent is a time of humility. Where do we see humility in Mary and Elizabeth? How do we humbly prepare for Christmas?
6. Advent is a time for joy. Where do we see joy expressed by Mary and Elizabeth? What is the source of their joy? What is the source of our joy? How is our Advent joy expressed?