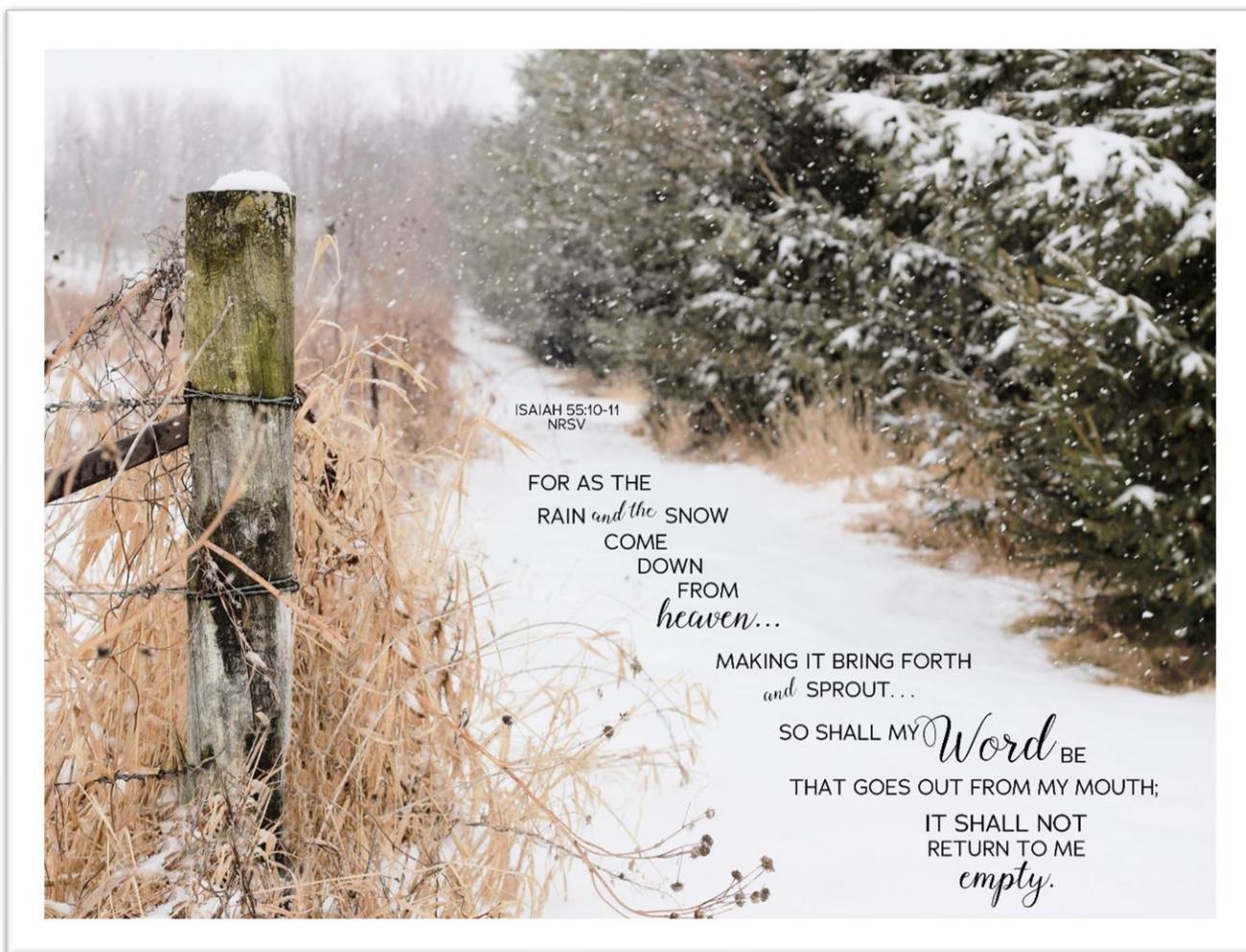


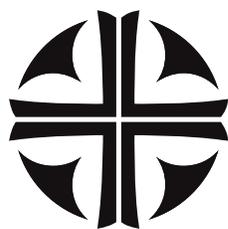
Central Lutheran Church

Generosity into Advent Devotions

"God's Word does not return empty"



November 13 – December 30, 2021



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Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

God's Word does not return empty. This is one of the many promises of God. We hear this promise in Isaiah 55:

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

This fall the narrative lectionary lessons have reminded us, time and time again, that when the promise of God is in danger, God intervenes. God's Word goes out to heal, renew, restore, bring justice, and bless with unconditional love. For our part, we respond in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. The gift of faith often finds its deepest expression in gratitude.

This devotional begins on Global Mission weekend, November 13/14, and runs through Christmas Day. What a beautiful arc to travel together as we celebrate God's Word at work around the world, pause for Thanksgiving Day, prayerfully offer our faith intentions and then prepare for the Word made flesh at Christmas.

The devotions from fellow members are grounded in a reflection on this passage from Isaiah 55 and how God has shown up in their lives. God's Word has not returned empty for them or for you.

Thank you for pausing for this daily time of devotion. God is with each of us as we continue to emerge from the pandemic. In this shared season of gratitude and Advent, we give thanks that "God's Word does not return empty."

God bless you,
Pastor Stephanie Friesen

Saturday and Sunday, November 13 and 14 – Global Mission Weekend

Invitation to Centering Prayer

You are invited to slowly read the narrative lesson for this weekend. It is a time to be grounded in God's Word. One of the many promises of God is that God's Word does not return empty. Then, you are invited to enter a time for centering prayer. Centering prayer is one invitation to a deeper, contemplative prayer life. With centering prayer, a single word is used to help us return to openness and listening for God. When our minds wander or emotions enter, we quietly return to the word, saying it to center. In this return to the single word, we return time and time again to God. Begin by lighting a candle to welcome the presence of God. Breathe in and breathe out. What word or image from the narrative lesson stays with you? Offer that Word to ground you in a time of prayer. As your time of centering prayer concludes, carry your word or image with you as a reminder of the presence of God.

Narrative Lectionary – Amos 1:1-2; 5:14-15, 21-24

¹The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of King Uzziah of Judah and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake. ²And he said: The Lord roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds wither, and the top of Carmel dries up.

¹⁴Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. ¹⁵Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

²¹I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ²²Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. ²³Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. ²⁴But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.

Prayer of the Day

God of all people, Show us how to let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an every flowing stream. Create justice and righteousness in us, that all may rejoice in your blessings. Amen.

Monday, November 15

Meditations from Isaiah 55: Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters;

Spirit of Love that moves between and amongst us, guide us to seek the refreshment of Your eternal waters. Fulfill our longing for an ever closer relationship with Your divine presence that lives within us and throughout Your entire creation. Guide us to look beyond the limits of our

temporal thirsting, to see more clearly our quest for spiritual resilience.

Our thirst is not solely for the spring water of the well or the flowing water from the tap, but the ocean's depths of Your bottomless love. We need not worry of drinking too deeply or losing our whole selves in the majestic waves that beckon us, for Your word is trusted from generation to generation, never returning to us void of fulfillment. Fulfillment of the personal strength, grace and courage to live Your message of renewal and rebirth. Love for the stranger at our door, the refugee, the child on the corner, the lost, the patient and the prisoner. All reflections of You, without distinction or exception.

You are the divine spark that enlivens our hearts and leads us forward, quenching our spiritual thirst. May we drink deeply of Your eternal waters as we faithfully await, the continuous fulfillment of Your promise in the Word made incarnate. When goodness and redemption was brought into our world, and is with us still.

For all this we pray in the name of Your divine Son, Amen.

Tim Sheehan

Tuesday, November 16

"I will pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it" (Malachai 3:10)

I was blessed to be raised in a Christian home where God's Word was taught and practiced. The Bible reminds me of a truth I learned early and have made a life-long principle. You can't outgive God!

My parents were missionaries in China where we lived for many years. We didn't have much but of course we tithed our income and served gladly, wanting to give back to God because of God's generous love for us. Then Pearl Harbor was attacked, we became prisoners of war under the Japanese who occupied China at the time and we lost everything. Yet God provided enough for our basic needs throughout prison camp and later a miraculous return to the United States. Generous people got us started again. Only a year or so after that, our house burned to the ground with all our possessions in it. God provided amply as we started over once again.

Throughout my life of many gains and losses, I have seen God provide generously over and over. I was able to attend a private Christian high school by working off my tuition. Scholarships, working and a grant got me through college and graduate school so that I had no student loans. Along the way jobs opened up just when I needed them providing me with a satisfying and meaningful 40 plus year career in nursing, teaching and public health.

No matter how much I give in time, energy and money, God always does more. God's Word never returns empty because God's purpose is to show us love. It's true. You can't outgive God!

God of abundance, help us to give freely knowing that we can never outgive you.

Bobbie Spradley

Wednesday, November 17

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Return: the verb stands out in our theme verse from Isaiah 55, calling to mind our time-honored routines that are gradually becoming possible again. In-person worship has returned, as well as community meals, Sunday school, book discussions, Bible studies, choir rehearsals – all missed by many and now happening again, albeit altered by changing circumstances. Passing the offering plate is one old routine that I miss – the mini conversations, the eye contact, the fleeting recognition of fellow worshipers. It was a meaningful act that I hope will return, even as we keep the ease of the Give Today button. In the meantime, an important routine of stewardship has also returned to us this fall: the practice of pledging. Thoughtful consideration of our giving pledge is an opportunity to respond to the Word that calls us with purpose. May we respond to the Word not as quid pro quo, but rather a great tide of grace flowing out and returning. Thanks be to God.

Louise Griffin

Thursday, November 18

My Conundrum

Are you like me and often wonder if what you have to give is enough? The right thing? At the right time? Am I making a gift of time, talent, or treasure to make myself feel good? Or to impress someone else? Is there a bit of “I’m going to please God with this gift” in my giving? And quickly, I’m into works righteousness territory.

So I abandoned that train of thought and reread Isaiah 55. Verses 1-9 speak of the promises of God. They speak of God’s thoughts and ways being beyond human ways. They speak of the gifts God gives to the earth coming back to God. Verses 10-11 tell us that everything (even my meager offering or talent or small amount of time) is used to God’s purpose. Maybe I’m getting a glimmer now.

Verses 12-13 are what really turns on the light-bulb for me but especially verse 12.

“You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.”

I tend to think in terms of music and song lyrics. As I read verse 12, I can hear the hymn “Light

Dawns on a Weary World" (ELW 726) in my head with the lovely lyrics by Mary Louise Bringle <https://youtu.be/9QmwXPtr6L8>.

Even in this weary world, I hope this is how we think of our gifts that we offer to God. They should be joyful. They should make us want to dance and clap our hands. They should bring us peace. Not because we've done the biggest or most expensive or most noteworthy. But because it is an expression of returning the gifts and love which God gave us.

Dear God. Take our gifts in whatever shape or quantity or volume they might appear and turn them to your purpose.

Judy Hedman

Friday, November 19

You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. (Corinthians 9:11-12)

As I thought about what I would write for this devotional, memories of my parents,' grandparents' and great-grandparents' generosity came flooding back to me. As a young child, I learned that offering gifts of money on Sundays were not the sole means of showing generosity toward others; sharing what we had (sometimes going without to do so) was a hallmark of my family. One memory in particular stays with me: my great-grandparents lived just outside of town, on the river and near the railroad tracks, and many people knew of their generosity. One day when my grandma and I were visiting, I looked up from my book to see a man's face in the glass window at the kitchen door and I was really frightened. I started to run from the kitchen and they both stopped me. They told me to open the door and tell him we would prepare food for him. They invited him in, but he stayed on the porch. After they had put together some food, they gave it to me to take it out to him. He knew I was scared, but he was very gentle and so grateful, thanking me as he left. Afterward my grandma said to me, "we will never have much money, but we will always be able to share what we have with others, which is what God asks of us." I will never forget that.

But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand. (1 Chronicles 29:14)

Susan Troselius

Saturday and Sunday, November 20 and 21

Invitation to Centering Prayer

You are invited to slowly read the narrative lesson for this weekend. It is a time to be grounded in God's Word. One of the many promises of God is that God's Word does not return empty.

Then, you are invited to enter a time for centering prayer. Centering prayer is one invitation to a deeper, contemplative prayer life. With centering prayer, a single word is used to help us return to openness and listening for God. When our minds wander or emotions enter, we quietly return to the word, saying it to center. In this return to the single word, we return time and time again to God. Begin by lighting a candle to welcome the presence of God. Breathe in and breathe out. What word or image from the narrative lesson stays with you? Offer that Word to ground you in a time of prayer. As your time of centering prayer concludes, carry your word or image with you as a reminder of the presence of God.

Narrative Lectionary – Isaiah 9:1-7

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. ²The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness — on them light has shined. ³You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. ⁴For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. ⁵For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. ⁶For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Prayer of the Day

God of light, There can be overwhelming obscurity in this world. But you shine your light and increase joy, and for your brilliance we are grateful. Amen.

Monday, November 22

For me this year has been a year to learn the meaning of gratitude. That exchange of appreciation for the help and support of those in a community. Extreme gratitude for those who took the risk to cure my ills during risky times. Amazement in the missions of the church that were able to stay relevant and develop despite persecution and limits placed on their activities.

Our time in creation is finite and there is joy to be found in discovering God's hand in our adventures. It's easy to retreat to our bubble and miss out on participating in the shared experiences where we discover God's purpose and presence. Life is a dance between risk and benefit and it is good to move to God's purpose.

Bill Nicol

Tuesday, November 23

1 Corinthians 13: Paying attention to the Word

I am the eldest child of a Lutheran minister and I recall countless Sunday mornings, sitting in the front pew with Mom, dutifully taking notes on Dad's sermon so that we could have a discussion at Sunday dinner. "Punitive" comes to my mind when I remember my reaction to this family ritual—"of course I listen to what you're saying, Dad!" But with plenty of hindsight, I now know deep in my heart that Dad was teaching me a lesson that has shaped my life – he was reminding me to "pay attention," to attend to the Word, the words of grace and hope and peace, to pay attention to love breaking into our lives as God's faithful people.

The story of the Word – the afflicting, difficult, divine, prophetic word – is found throughout the scriptures, and especially in the Apostle Paul's epistles. Garry Wills, in his wonderful little book, *What Paul Meant*, reminds us that Paul's letters are the first accounts we have available of how the early faithful understood Jesus' ministry, his death and resurrection. Paul's missives provide a perspective on what the early Christians (a term that Paul and the early faithful would not have used) struggled with as they sought to understand how to live as faithful people in the time being.

In particular, the lens of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, the 13th chapter—the love chapter—is especially meaningful as it provides a still (and perhaps never more urgent) relevant blueprint of how the Living Word will be proclaimed by the community of believers. I think we can assume that the Corinthians were having their own issues in hearing and living the Word in the midst of the noisy and frightening early days after Jesus had left them. So Paul offers this remarkable hymn of love as a pattern for their lives—Paul offers the Word of Love to help the Corinthians (and us) make sense of our lives. If all I have are the words of mortals (or even angels), I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If all I have are human power and knowledge, I am nothing. Even if I give away all I have and give up my body, I gain nothing. Unless I have the Word, unless I have Love, I will not find the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Wow – this concrete word to a very real community of the faithful – just like this one at Central Lutheran – is the call to live as the beloved, to live in the midst of the world as the Living Word, the body of Christ. It is the call to pay attention.

And so the story continues – as it has now for more than 2,000 years – here at Central, as we seek to live as the beloved community, to be the living Word in a world that more than ever needs to know the Word. Pay attention, my friends!

Paul C. Pribbenow

Wednesday, November 24

"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater....."

The harvest is again upon us. Unless one has a garden in the city, it is easy to forget what is happening now in the rural areas of our state. The seed that was planted months ago has been watered and sun-drenched to produce a harvest of plenty. In some sections of Minnesota the extra dry condition has cut into the harvest yield, but in many areas there is again an abundant harvest of grain, corn and a variety of produce. I walked the aisles of the St. Paul Farmer's Market one Saturday and was overwhelmed by the harvest displayed beautifully on one table after the next of vegetables, fruit, flowers, honey, etc..

However good and wonderful the harvest which God so wonderfully supplies, there is an ongoing extravagance we all contribute to by thinking this gift of God will just keep going on forever. We know that faulty thinking is often not about good Stewardship of this earth. Unfortunately, there is a lot of extravagant taking and not often much care about giving back and taking care of this earth so that future harvests will occur. Yes, God waters, but we must care for the water. Yes, God gives the seed, but we must care for the earth so the seed can grow. We have to care for the sower, the farmers, who are trying to be good stewards. We do have a place in this creative cycle of planting and harvesting.

I am speaking to myself here and reminding myself that I cannot be passive when it comes to climate change. I still must be aware of how and what I consume and how and what is trashed and recycled. I still must be concerned about reducing carbon dioxide emissions. I still must be concerned about deforestation. Every act of caring and stewardship, however small, which partners with God's gifts of water, seed, sower, and soil will bring forth bread to the eater for future generations.

God, forgive my taking this creative cycle of planting and harvesting for granted. Thank you for your abundant harvest. Make us good stewards of this abundance. Amen.

Glenn Nycklemoe

Thanksgiving Day, November 25

Being Grateful

"Give thanks to the Lord and praise his name." (Psalm 100:4)

Being grateful is something we hear about especially at this time of year with Thanksgiving as a national holiday. Our family used to celebrate it with a big turkey, homemade stuffing and cranberry sauce, candied yams, green beans, jello salad and several kinds of pies. It was always a feast! Before we ate and offered a prayer of thanks, we went around the table and each person said something she or he was thankful for.

Finding things to be thankful for was such a good exercise that I later started keeping a gratitude journal. At the end of each day I'd write down five things I was grateful for that had happened that day. Now I build on that idea, thanking God for many things each morning in my prayer time. I'm reminded that the Bible says to give thanks in all circumstances (I Thessalonians 5:18). It's a good rule to live by. Even when life has given me hard things to deal with, I've found it

helpful to look for what that situation can teach me and be thankful for it. In fact, research has shown that living with an attitude of gratitude can make a difference between health and illness. So living in thankfulness and showing love to my neighbors with a grateful heart is what I ask God to help me do. Help us, Lord, to live and give with grateful hearts.

Bobbie Spradley

Friday, November 26

"God's Word Does Not Return Empty"

Central Lutheran's mission statement declares that we are exploring the promise of God for all. On the Generosity Ministry Team, we often refer to our annual intention cards as our "Faith Promises." One of God's promises, found in Isaiah 55, is the basis for our 2021 Annual Generosity Appeal. In verse 10, God promises to give what is needed—rain and snow to water the seeds so that, when harvested, those seeds are plentiful for the next crop and become grains for bread to eat. The Bible uses illustrations from nature as metaphors to connect us with God and daily life. We know the importance of life-giving water to farmers, our health in general and for those who love lake life. Without the natural water cycle to replenish the earth, so much of what we hold dear is compromised. Just like the water cycle, there is a cycle for the word of God. God's words and promises are life giving too. When we draw close to God, his words are promised as the seeds of life. "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God." (Matthew 4:4)

God gives generously and promises there will be enough. As children of a generous God, we are encouraged to be generous in another metaphor from nature found in 2 Corinthians 9:6. "Remember this, whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly and whoever sows generously will also reap generously." As we make our giving intentions known this season, we promise to return to God a portion of what he has entrusted to us to use in for his ministries. We are reminded in the next verse in 2 Corinthians 9:7, "Each person should give what they have decided in their heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." Please cheerfully consider how your offerings will help others and serve God's mission on earth in 2022 at Central.

Kathy Fiscus

Saturday and Sunday, November 27 and 28 – First Saturday in Advent

Invitation to Centering Prayer

You are invited to slowly read the narrative lesson for this weekend. It is a time to be grounded in God's Word. One of the many promises of God is that God's Word does not return empty. Then, you are invited to enter a time for centering prayer. Centering prayer is one invitation to a deeper, contemplative prayer life. With centering prayer, a single word is used to help us return to openness and listening for God. When our minds wander or emotions enter, we quietly return to the word, saying it to center. In this return to the single word, we return time and time again to God. Begin by lighting a candle to welcome the presence of God. Breathe in

and breathe out. What word or image from the narrative lesson stays with you? Offer that Word to ground you in a time of prayer. As your time of centering prayer concludes, carry your word or image with you as a reminder of the presence of God.

Narrative Lectionary – Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ⁴Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

⁸For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord. ¹⁰For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹²Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

Prayer of the Day

God of hope, How often have we found ourselves in exile, separated from your presence! Restore us, and let us find you when we seek you. Amen.

Monday, November 29

This year's generosity campaign theme comes from Isaiah: 55, in which we're reminded that God's words and gifts are sent to us to for a specific purpose which they achieve. So as I apply this message to my experience, I ask, "What is my purpose in this life?" What is it that I can do to make sure that I will accomplish the purpose for which I was sent? I suppose I have pondered that issue from time to time through my life. But now, as I'm reaching a point in life where I am contemplating retirement from my work career, entering the next phase in life and wondering what my legacy will be, it has become a more front-of-mind issue to work through. How can I be sure that I have fulfilled God's promise? How can I best show my thankfulness for the wonderful life I've been given and the gifts that have been entrusted to me? What can I do now to make sure my purpose is achieved?

Prayer: Lord, help us understand the promise of your word and gifts, and our need to share

generously from what we have been given.

Ron Fiscus

Tuesday, November 30

The writer of Isaiah 50 refers to snow.

- How relevant to Minnesota, where our rich soil for new growth lies resting under a blanket of frozen crystals for over a third of the year.
- How appropriate also for Advent, when we wait in hope for the arrival of God's word amongst us in the birth of Jesus Christ.

Whether through angels singing alleluias in the heavens, or through meteorologists forecasting the path of an upcoming blizzard, God's word will demand our attention. It will disrupt our lives. We try our best to prepare, because "ready or not." God's word will accomplish its purpose.

Most likely, Mary and Joseph made many preparations for the arrival of their first-born son. How inconvenient for them to be required to travel to Bethlehem for the census just as Mary was about to deliver. How frightening for the shepherds to leave their flocks at night to seek a baby lying in a manger. Yet those inconveniences became essential parts of the story of God's arrival amongst us.

Certainly when TV weather forecasters predict the first snowfall of the season, we don't expect the second coming of Christ. (Christ's already here.) Yet we know that we will be inconvenienced, so as wise Minnesotans, we follow a checklist of preparations:

1. Locate the shovels.
2. Test the snow blower.
3. Find the windshield scrapper.
4. Gather warm winter gear, and
5. Subscribe to DOT's snow emergency alerts.

When the snow starts to fall, we hunker down to rest up for the work that will follow, perhaps indulging in some of our favorite creature comforts, like a cup of hot chocolate and a feel good movie on the Hallmark Channel. However, once the snow stops, something magical happens in many Twin Cities neighborhoods. I'm blessed to live in such a neighborhood. We all emerge from our homes armed with shovels, prepared to do battle with the weather. We compare our expert scientific analysis of the snow---"wet and heavy", or "light and fluffy." We jokingly call out to one another with the question, "Are you having fun yet?" We notice cars on the street that are spinning their wheels, and those with strong muscles run to provide a push. Those who own snow blowers, clear a path several properties beyond their own. I have to admit that as the winter wears on, the magic of the first snow fall disappears and we emerge from our homes to commiserate in our complaints about the city's failure to adequately plough our streets. Nevertheless, winter weather has motivated us to become a community.

No doubt God's main purpose in sending snow is to provide a way to store water until the resting, frozen earth can unthaw and receive it and the crocuses of spring can pop up through the melting snow. However, I can't help but think that God smiles when she sees the accomplishment of a by-purpose—the creation of community amongst her beloved children.

Ann Oyen

Wednesday, December 1

I was walking in a scientific and natural area on a familiar path. Above me towered the ancient maple trees ablaze with color, an occasional leaf twirling down, and beneath me lay a blanket of green and gold and coral beauty. I noticed a descending path new to me. Curious, I decided to follow it—down the hill, along a steep bank, toward a sparkle of water in the distance. To my astonishment, before me lay a small lake whose banks were covered with crimson maples, their beauty reflected across the water. It was breathtaking. I was overcome with this gift of God. The words of the Psalmist came to mind: “What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?”

As I walk in the forest, and in fact, as I move through each day, I find myself giving thanks for God's countless and endless gifts of love—people with whom I interact in person and virtually, tasks tackled, precious memories, oases of quiet, opportunities to engage and encourage and be encouraged. Our generous God never stops giving! Note the invitation of Isaiah 55: “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come buy and eat!”

“Oh God, I come. Open my heart to generous giving of my substance, my service, myself.”

Lynda Minnick

Thursday, December 2

What a beautiful passage from Isaiah 55! It's full of blessings freely given in great generosity. God's being seems to be like a mirror where God's Word is reflected back to God as God moves the Word through creation and through us as receivers of the Word and as participants in God's creation.

Just as God works through seasonal cycles from seed planting to providing rain for watering the earth where seeds grow into food—to providing snow to protect fallen seeds by keeping them alive though dormant until the warmth of spring—so does God's Spirit instill growth in us as receivers of the Word - the Word made flesh in the Incarnate Jesus whose coming we anticipate throughout Advent and celebrate during the Christmas season.

I like to think that I receive God's Word in a positive, grateful way. But at times I question where God is in the midst of such a long lasting pandemic and amid so much violence, injustice, and division. When I ignore a chance to help out a neighbor in some small way because of a strange fear or because I don't seem to have time, I find myself in need of God's mercy.

Reading a daily devotional helps prompt my lagging spirit to realign with God's love for me. I feel God blessing me when I read a lesson during worship or sing a choir anthem because it's an opportunity to feel closer to God and to convey that blessing out to people who are listening in person and/or virtually. Seeing someone get baptized reminds me that I too am a beloved child of God.

Everyone's time, talents, and treasures [monetary or otherwise] are all gifts from God, as is God's Word to us and in us. I pray that the Spirit will nurture this living Word to be reflected in us in generous kindness to ourselves and our neighbors. Amen.

Lois Wolff

Friday, December 3

Mid-Day Sky

The mid-day sky is dark blue gray, streetlights become lit. What will happen? Where should I seek shelter? The sky opens spilling rain. As the parched earth and soul soak the refreshing waters, God informs me with a rainbow—a promise, “All will be well with my soul!” My soul looks at the water refreshment of the land. A barefooted walk in the grass reveals a softness, no longer crunchie. The air offers wonderful smells to diagnosis.

The times between sunrise and sunset are becoming shorter. The multiple shades of green, are changing to brilliant colors of green, yellow, red, and brown just as the promises of God come to us for purposeful growth and wonderment.

As we wonder, what surprises and reassurances will come forth? The wheat is grounded into flour. With the added ingredients of water, and salt, we wait for the chemical reactions of growth—a natural sourdough. Then comes the time to add more flour and kneading to form the loaf of bread. God's word is all around us, kneading our souls to grow and produce love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

“All is well with my soul” as the dark time of the year draws near.

Marie Wiegert

Saturday and Sunday, December 4 and 5

Invitation to Centering Prayer

You are invited to slowly read the narrative lesson for this weekend. It is a time to be grounded in God's Word. One of the many promises of God is that God's Word does not return empty. Then, you are invited to enter a time for centering prayer. Centering prayer is one invitation to a deeper, contemplative prayer life. With centering prayer, a single word is used to help us return to openness and listening for God. When our minds wander or emotions enter, we

quietly return to the word, saying it to center. In this return to the single word, we return time and time again to God. Begin by lighting a candle to welcome the presence of God. Breathe in and breathe out. What word or image from the narrative lesson stays with you? Offer that Word to ground you in a time of prayer. As your time of centering prayer concludes, carry your word or image with you as a reminder of the presence of God.

Narrative Lectionary – Ezekiel 37:1-14

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” ⁴Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ⁵Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.” ⁷So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” ¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. ¹¹Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ ¹²Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act,” says the Lord.

Prayer of the Day

God of breath, You promised new life to your people in exile by breathing into a valley full of dry bones. Breathe new life into us, so that we might live passionately for you. Amen.

Monday, December 6

Isaiah 55 brought to mind that song kids sing when it’s raining and they are jumping in the puddles with their bright green froggy boots.

“It’s raining, it’s pouring, the old man is snoring. He jumped in bed and covered his head and didn’t get up until morning.” Somehow, I think Jesus might be on the porch watching the rain with a big smile on his face and jumping for joy! I see Him surveying the fields as the rain soaks the ground and checking out the empty rain barrel filling up to be used later.

I imagine the Holy Spirit showering me with His words, that fill me up to share with my children

later. That well in me continues watering them as they grow, building their own internal rain barrel, which in turn waters their own children and so on through the generations. God's words in each generation's rain barrel gets used to produce actions that are life-giving. Maybe your daughter or son or both become tithers. Maybe they teach Sunday school or serve on the Council. Maybe they all sing in the choir or work on the task force for solving homelessness. Whatever their Christian action is, the source is God's word working in them to "fill up" someone else's rain barrel.

God's words never return empty when the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control are evidenced in each of our children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, etc. It all begins with listening to God's words.

When my five-year-old great-granddaughter hears the song, "Jesus loves me, this I know..." and sings it to her brother and he sings it to his sister, we have the seeds of evangelism being nourished by the rain; and the tomato seedlings on my windowsill being watered by the barrel's leftover rain to banish hunger, we become aware that God's words never return empty!

Karin Abel

Tuesday, December 7

Before attending worship at Central, in 1976, I had never read the Bible. Oh, my mother had bought this huge Catholic Bible, which sat on our dining room buffet, but no-one ever read it. So when a Bible study was offered at Central, I decided to find out just what it was I was suppose to be believing. I found it fascinating and continued to take all the classes I could; even did seven years of Bible Study Fellowship. In the early days of my learning God's word, a trip to Israel was offered through Central. I wanted to go, but we didn't think we could afford it, I was just starting my new job as an insurance agent that same month and it was too late to sign up, or so I thought. The thought of seeing the places that I had been learning about in my studies and to see and walk in the same places Jesus had walked, put a big desire in my heart. So when Pastor W. told my husband, Bob and I that there were three spots left yet to fill for the trip, we found the money, I extended my work start date and Bob, my son John and I signed up.

In a boat, on the Sea of Galilee, I was asked to read the scripture from Mathew 14, where Jesus came to the disciples walking on the water.

There, Peter asked to come to the Lord, "if it is you." As Jesus beckoned Peter to come and Peter was also walking on the water, he noticed the strong wind, became frightened and took his eyes off of Jesus and began to sink. How many times I have thought about that passage, when I have taken my eyes off Jesus and cried out as Peter did, "Lord Save Me." He did. I was. God's word does not return empty.

Bonnie Weisenburger

Wednesday, December 8

As I reflect on Isaiah 55, I am struck by the images of rain and snow coming down from heaven, having a purpose of watering the earth and therefore bringing seed and bread. I tend to equate this with our own journey on this earth... thinking we each have a purpose and work to do, to attempt to be the "face" of God to those whom we encounter.

Once, while living in another town and belonging to another congregation, Jeff and I invited an elderly woman to our house for Christmas Eve. She lived alone, and had been so kind in welcoming us to this new church. She used a walker but still drove, throwing it in the back of her Prius in all kinds of weather to attend church supper clubs, Bible studies, and fundraisers. We marveled at her ability to be such an outward example of faith and service. "Goals!" we would say to each other, as she was a spitfire and quite an example of living life. She even drove to a small country church to play the organ and provide music several times a month.

That evening, as we shared stories of our lives, she broke down in tears as she told us of her spouse, who had gone to jail after the discovery of sexual misconduct in his workplace. Our hearts broke as she told us about the pain she had endured. At the end she said, "Didn't people tell you about this scandal?" They had not. The church was her family, standing by her side, bringing meals, counseling and comfort; being the face of God to her as she guided her children and herself through this horrific ordeal. We were struck by the members of this congregation, continuing to lift her up, never sharing the past, but rather supporting her and shepherding her on her path.

The words of Isaiah remind us we have a purpose on this planet, called to be workers of progress, pardon, and love along the way. God's promise is to be with us on this journey, offering us all kinds of experiences to minister, and be ministered to.

Thanks be to God.

Kristin Block

Thursday, December 9

In. Out. Breath.

Spirit. Ruah. Pneuma.

Swirl. Spiral. Nautilus.

Gathering + Word + Sending

At a seminary gathering of preachers some years ago, I heard a sermon drawing parallels between Lutheran theology and "The Wizard of Oz" as the story unfolds in the beloved film version. Dorothy, displaced from Kansas by a great wind which they call a cyclone (just now dawns on me that her surname is "Gale") spends the film trying to get home. "Home," the preacher said, is the blessed state in which humanity was created (think heaven), the cyclone represents sin and those ruby slippers the gracious gift of baptism. As we travel through life, we are accompanied by that which powerfully brings us home. We are surrounded by love on our journey (those appearances of Glinda here and there helping us/Dorothy along). The framing of

all this may be a bit trite and even far-fetched but, after a couple of decades, it is memorable and brings me joy and even comfort.

Thinking of our Isaiah text, another part of the story comes to the fore for me. Dorothy begins her journey through Oz alone—alone (albeit with Toto) on a yellow brick road that begins as a swirling spiral on the pavement in Munchkinland (perhaps mimicking the tornado?). On her journey Dorothy is joined by other seekers: a scarecrow, tin man, lion. Waking up in her own bed back home she realizes the fellow travelers who have become good friends resemble those who surrounded her back home. A true and living cloud of witnesses.

Like the breath that swirls from our bodies carrying the words we speak, the stories created by our words travel through space—through the communities we occupy, our families, our friends, our church. And the best thing about these stories, our stories, is that they are memorable and powerful—often testimonies of the gracious gifts that have embroidered our lives, made us who we are. Stories create community. So, take a breath (pandemic’s hopefully almost over). Spread the word (your story) of how God’s grace has influenced your technicolored journey. And give thanks. Amen!

Deacon Cantor Mark Sedio

Friday, December 10

Remember as a child when you had enough candy that you were generous with your friends? Even proud of the fact that you were in a position to give them a treat? And you were so happy to do this? Remember as a neighbor when you were inspired to bring food or something needed next door because it was the best thing you could do for them; you were inspired, even with joy, in your gesture?

The seed idea in Isaiah 55:10 is our inspiration to be generous and to have that generosity, when we give it, to spring forth and sprout, like a seed responding to rain and snow coming down from heaven. It’s about what we have and what we can do to accomplish God’s purpose. God blesses our efforts. “So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth...it shall not return to me empty.” In our pilgrimage, this journey brought on by the pandemic, we pray for daily bread and for forgiveness, among other needs, knowing that we will always be a child of God. And as a pilgrimage has a sacred destination, look at what our worship in generosity can be. We are blessed to share our selves, our gifts, to become the church. Thank you, Lord, for filling us with good things! To be generous! Amen!

Viki Kimsal

Saturday, December 11

Invitation to Centering Prayer

You are invited to slowly read the narrative lesson for this weekend. It is a time to be grounded in God’s Word. One of the many promises of God is that God’s Word does not return empty.

Then, you are invited to enter a time for centering prayer. Centering prayer is one invitation to a deeper, contemplative prayer life. With centering prayer, a single word is used to help us return to openness and listening for God. When our minds wander or emotions enter, we quietly return to the word, saying it to center. In this return to the single word, we return time and time again to God. Begin by lighting a candle to welcome the presence of God. Breathe in and breathe out. What word or image from the narrative lesson stays with you? Offer that Word to ground you in a time of prayer. As your time of centering prayer concludes, carry your word or image with you as a reminder of the presence of God.

Narrative Lectionary – Isaiah 55:1-13

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. ²Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. ³Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. ⁴See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. ⁵See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

⁶Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; ⁷let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. ⁸For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. ⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. ¹⁰For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, ¹¹so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. ¹²For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. ¹³Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Prayer of the Day

God of restoration, Save us when we find ourselves spiritually thirsty. Help us walk your road with your purpose, strengthened by your living water. Amen.

Sunday, December 12

“God’s Word does not return empty,” so shares Isaiah. It is a reminder that when the promise of God is in danger, God intervenes. We have our stories, the touchstone moments when God showed up. Yet, when we are in the valley we wonder about the presence of God. Deeper still, we can feel abandoned and lost. How do we tend to an awareness of God? Maybe that is one of the questions that open us to God in the good and the bad?

For me, poetry opens me to God and the promise that God's Word does not return empty. In remarkable words I hear God bringing healing, wholeness, and love. One little poem invites to awareness. God's presence in these words as we drink the dewdrop's Mystery.

Snail

Little snail,
Dreaming you go.
Weather and rose
Is all you know.

Weather and rose
Is all you see,
Drinking
The dewdrop's
Mystery.
~ Langston Hughes

Pastor Peter Nycklemoe

Monday, December 13

For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. (Isaiah 44:3)

I had the privilege recently to travel to the Hawaiian island of Kauai. The oldest of the Hawaiian Islands, Kauai is known as the *Garden Island*. If you've had the chance to visit there, you saw that it truly lives up to its motto. Everywhere you see lush green fields, green volcanic mountains, and thick forests of palm trees lining white sandy beaches which border crystal blue waters. As we move into the cold months of winter, maybe this devotion can even serve as a way to warm you up a bit.



While driving high up a windy road to view Waimea Canyon, which looks a bit like a mini Grand Canyon, I happened to notice an unusual large patch of dry, red and rocky soil along the side of the road. There were a few people who had stopped to look at something, so being curious, I stopped the car and walked over to see what everyone was looking at. To my surprise and delight, there in front of me was a small waterfall pouring out of the red, dry and rocky soil. I didn't see where the water was even coming from but I was mesmerized by its unusual beauty.

The passage above from Isaiah promises that water will pour out on dry land and God's spirit will be on our offspring and blessings on our descendants. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ, what a blessing it is to know that God keeps God's promises. God's

only Son came into our dry world with water for thirsty lands and blessings on our descendants. Even in our dry times of despair He washes us with His loving kindness. Our spiritual thirsts are quenched. What a gift that is. Let us celebrate this Advent and Christmas time how Christ is with us always and loves us just the way we are.

We pray, God, we thank you for Your beauty that surrounds us. As we prepare for the birth of Your Son, we thank you for the living water you give us that quenches our thirst and lifts us up in our despair. Help us to share that message of love with those around us. Amen

Tom Edelen

Tuesday, December 14

Isaiah speaks of God's infinite generosity. From the first moments of our solar system to our ever-evolving world. Expansive rivers, miles of sea coast, oceans, and glacial caverns millions of years old. God's loving touch gave birth to fruits and vegetables, and the shade of trees. Plantings that received God's generosity, gave back, nutrients, minerals and vitamins. Trees that drank of the water responded with photosynthesis for the propagation of species.

By receiving divine generosity, there is an inherent giving back that perpetuates a cyclical process of receiving and giving.

Enlightened with judgment and imagination, peoples of the world receive God's blessings and many seek to love in return. As God bestows love, so it is the case that we return that love by caring for others and all creation. Creation reciprocates for God's loving care. We too, reciprocate by loving others and caring for creation.

We are offered a no strings attached abiding love.

How do we reciprocate that generosity? Is it by loving others with no exception, sharing our time and talents, supporting environmental activism, saying, "I love you" more often, volunteering for the common good, and/or contributing to our faith community.

As we re-tell the holy story of the shelter-less babe born on a winter's night, will our reciprocating love help warm the manger by our efforts to reach beyond ethnicity, gender fluidity, religious traditions and nationality, to genuinely share God's generosity? To love without distinction.

May it be so and amen.

Tim Sheehan

Wednesday, December 15

Singing/Inhale and Exhale

Singing allows the Words of God to return fully. As you inhale and exhale you get into the beat

of the song!

Sing to the Lord a new song as this is my father's world. As the sky opens with rain, we gather under one umbrella—a community. While under the umbrella we inhale and exhale in a rhythmic manner. Our hearts beat together, relationships improve—inhalation and exhalation!

Inhalation and exhalation—the rain stops the umbrella closes, now the community is allowed to grow larger, as the community is not confined. Just like seeds potentially sprouting into plants growing and maturing in time.

The emotions of the community continue. There are many, many emotions with culture playing into these emotions and responses. But as the community gathers the pulsebeat becomes a synchronized rhythm.

As a child probably one of the first songs we learned was "Jesus Loves Me This I Know, for the Bible Tells Me So!" We learned new words of God. These words planted themselves in the deep mitochondria of our cells. As the seed of we are wonderfully made, allow us to grow in gratitude, love, and joy. In this season of shorter daylight and longer darkness, we continue to inhale and exhale, inhalation and exhalation, linking our breathing to a common rhythm of hope and love.

Marie Wiegert

Thursday, December 16

One of the things I love most about late fall is watching the migratory birds bunch up in preparation for their long journey south. With intention and purpose, they gather as the temperatures cool and the daylight diminishes. They join with one another, and as they do, one wonders how they just pick up and leave their familiar home here in the north to resettle at some unknown destination in the south.

How do they know where they are going? How do they prepare? What must they think about as they travel from Minnesota to Mexico and beyond? Will they come back?

Perhaps there is something to learn from these migrating creatures about God's generosity. God gives us food and tools for the journey. God provides companionship and accompaniment by sending God's Spirit and the presence of one another. These relationships flow in and out of us with grace and compassion and love so that together, we have what we need for daily living. All we have comes from God. We pray, "give us this day our daily bread" which Martin Luther describes as food and drink, clothing and shoes, faithful rulers and good government, life-giving friends and loving neighbors. God gives us all these things and more so we are free to live - loving God and loving our neighbor.

God's word – God's love is refilled and replenished and renewed; it does not return empty. God's love comes to us new each day; it comes again and again just as the migratory birds come and go. In this beautiful cadence of going out and coming in, we are reminded that God's word

returns to us each day as a generous gift and a great blessing for our life together. God returns to us again and again.

Pastor Stephanie Friesen

Friday, December 17

Advent and the generosity appeal come together. In the Bible, the word stewardship is used. When I look at the perspective of the steward in the teachings of Jesus through parables, I see that the steward does not own the property, but he has the responsibility for it. He is to take care of it for the master, the owner, and to also make an effort to increase the property. So that which we have acquired is really not ours to hoard but to share in order to increase the kingdom of God. If we use our resources to help bring people to discipleship, we are furthering God's kingdom.

People have given money to the church for a variety of reasons in the past: Guilt (do you spend more on pizza and pop in a week than you give to the church?), Financial Jeopardy (the church may have to cut programs or staff), Support programs (we need more money if we want to continue doing the great things we do), Prosperity (Luke 6 says, "give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.") But those reasons are not the reasons one feels joy in giving. One can feel the joy of generosity when coming to the realization that God loves unconditionally. The joy comes from a manifestation of ones relationship with God. So feel the joy!

Bonnie Weisenburger

Saturday and Sunday, December 18 and 19

Invitation to Centering Prayer

You are invited to slowly read the narrative lesson for this weekend. It is a time to be grounded in God's Word. One of the many promises of God is that God's Word does not return empty. Then, you are invited to enter a time for centering prayer. Centering prayer is one invitation to a deeper, contemplative prayer life. With centering prayer, a single word is used to help us return to openness and listening for God. When our minds wander or emotions enter, we quietly return to the word, saying it to center. In this return to the single word, we return time and time again to God. Begin by lighting a candle to welcome the presence of God. Breathe in and breathe out. What word or image from the narrative lesson stays with you? Offer that Word to ground you in a time of prayer. As your time of centering prayer concludes, carry your word or image with you as a reminder of the presence of God.

Narrative Lectionary – John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Prayer of the Day

God of all time, Your Word became flesh and walked among us. Receive our gratitude and awe for all that you have done through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Monday, December 20

God makes all kinds of great promises to us. The promise that God's word will not return empty takes me deep into the heart of abundance. I am often the person called upon to remind us in the Restoration Center that we have had enough, we have enough, and we will have enough. This has been a huge learning in my life as I remember times growing up when it was clear that we were short on money for things like the mortgage or groceries. Experiences like that leave a permanent mark. It is a running joke in the kitchen at Central that no one should let me be in charge of ordering food. I always order way too much. I just want to be sure that we don't run out, that no one goes without a meal.

God promises to care for our daily needs as the sparrows don't have to worry about their next meal nor do the lilies of the field worry about their dress (Matthew 6), we too will be cared for out of God's great abundance. Once our need for daily bread is met, God turns to the Word. It's one thing to have a full and satisfied belly and it's another thing to be the recipient of God's word, "pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap." (Luke 6:38) In the Kingdom of God there is enough, enough food, enough word, enough love and we don't have to wait for it until we die. Jesus has come to live among us so that we can be the inheritors of this abundance here and now. How sweet are God's words to our taste, sweeter than honey to our mouths." (Psalm 119:103)

Pastor Melissa Pohlman

Tuesday, December 21

As a gentle snowfall or a steady rain, there is a rhythm to our days and nights that comes from beyond ourselves. Without getting lost, we can for a moment, catch a glimpse of this rhythm or this center. Like a pebble dropped into a pond there is a cause and effect that ripples outward to our hopes and dreams and inward to our deep emptiness, to the parched earth. Sprouting in our lives while we sleep. Generously giving us an ever-flowing reason for gratitude. It is my opinion that we are all swimming in a somewhat complex sea of grace. Within this sea we live our lives; our going out and our coming in.

Thank you for your grace, Lord. Thank you, Lord, for our daily bread.

I long for something sometimes without my even knowing what it is. And then when that longing is fulfilled sometimes, I don't even know how. And then it's gone again. Is this the process of being, or of being undone? Maybe being undone is how we become. Just letting go.

Word. Words can stir and words can also calm. Where is the word we are seeking? Surely from God. But just as possible from neighbor near, far, and on the margins. By zeroing in on our possibility for growth we can see the many ways we are invited to be thankful. God's word of love comes to us every day. Sometimes all we have to do is listen. Pouring down from the sky. Sprouting up from the earth. Spoken in the silence, in a smile, in a nod, in a kind gesture. Like a river flowing through a barren land is God's word of hope in a broken world.

At one of my two jobs, I am mostly at a cash register. Now, I know God is not transactional. But I wonder if there is not a bit of an exchange happening between God and us: God gives us love and grace, then we go out and share it with the world, then we return with love to God, openhanded needing to be refilled. It's kind of like a dance or like a hymn where the words swirl up and around going out, and then coming back again. Always returning to the refrain. Most of all it's grace.

Ben Longman

Wednesday, December 22

In October, South Dakotans experienced their first winter snow fall of the year. Snow came down from the heavens to nourish the Black Hills. The shimmering snow put all the other colors of nature into sharp focus—the green pine trees, the blue sky, the brown mule deer, the yellow aspen leaves and the pink quartz. It was a thin place, near to God. Let's turn to that nearness listen closely and be grateful for God's sweet mercy.

Lorene Gillicksen

Thursday, December 23

As we prepare for the birth of Jesus, we remember God's promise to send a savior – a messiah – the very essence of what God shared with us so long ago. This savior will bring peace. Jesus is

the promise fulfilled – God’s word that would and will not return empty. God’s word comes to us in abundant grace – in the love of Jesus Christ.

In the Advent hymn, *Now the Heavens Start to Whisper*, images of God’s love emerge from the whisper of heaven through a thin veil. Earth awakens from slumber and new life springs forth. Clouds make way for moonlight and the brilliance of diamonds illumine the sky. These earthly and cosmic metaphors invite us to dwell in the beauty of creation and in the anticipation of Jesus’ birth. God’s love is here – born in a stable and cradled in a manger. God’s love is fulfilled.

Dearest God, thank you for the beautiful season of Advent and thank you for keeping your promises. We delight in your creation – confident that your Word comes to us anew – again.

Pastor Stephanie Friesen

Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, December 24 and 25

Invitation to Centering Prayer

You are invited to slowly read the narrative lesson for this weekend. It is a time to be grounded in God’s Word. One of the many promises of God is that God’s Word does not return empty. Then, you are invited to enter a time for centering prayer. Centering prayer is one invitation to a deeper, contemplative prayer life. With centering prayer, a single word is used to help us return to openness and listening for God. When our minds wander or emotions enter, we quietly return to the word, saying it to center. In this return to the single word, we return time and time again to God. Begin by lighting a candle to welcome the presence of God. Breathe in and breathe out. What word or image from the narrative lesson stays with you? Offer that Word to ground you in a time of prayer. As your time of centering prayer concludes, carry your word or image with you as a reminder of the presence of God.

Narrative Lectionary – Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the

heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” ¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Prayer of the Day

Holy Father, We celebrate with you the birth of your son, and together we sing, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, goodwill among people!” Amen.

For this first week of Christmas, let these passages, hymns and prayers guide your devotional time each day. (*Hymns reprinted by permission under Augsburg Fortress liturgies license #26515.*)

Sunday, December 26

Scripture Reading: The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. Isaiah 35:1-2

Today we recognize Jesus’ birth as fulfillment of God’s promises in Isaiah. Jesus has arrived. Like the flower that has bloomed, Jesus has come to restore beauty, peace and love to the world.

Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming (ELW 272)

1 Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming
From tender stem hath sprung!
Of Jesse's lineage coming
As men of old have sung.
It came, a flower bright,
Amid the cold of winter
When half-gone was the night.

2 Isaiah 'twas foretold it,
The Rose I have in mind:
With Mary we behold it,
The virgin mother kind.
To show God's love aright
She bore to men a Savior
When half-gone was the night.

3 This Flower, whose fragrance tender
With sweetness fills the air,
Dispels with glorious splendor
The darkness everywhere.
True man, yet very God,
From sin and death He saves us
And lightens every load

*Prayer: You have brought us into the season of Christmas calling us into a time of love, joy and peace.
Bring us into the season with full and grateful hearts. Amen.*

Monday, December 27

Scripture Reading: In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. Luke 2:8-11

In this beautiful Christmas hymn, we experience a vision of Jesus' birth in a different setting – one that might be familiar to our own landscapes.

'Twas in the Moon of Wintertime (ELW 284)

1 'Twas in the moon of wintertime when all the birds had fled,
that God the Lord of all the earth sent angel choirs instead;
before their light the stars grew dim, and wand'ring hunters heard the hymn:
Jesus your king is born! Jesus is born, in excelsis gloria.

2 Within a lodge of broken bark the tender babe was found;
a ragged robe of rabbit skin enwrapped his beauty round;
but as the hunter braves drew nigh, the angels song rang loud and high:
Jesus your king is born! Jesus is born, in excelsis gloria.

3 The earliest moon of wintertime is not so round and fair
As was the ring of glory on the helpless infant there.
The chiefs from far before him knelt with gifts of fox and beaver pelt.
Jesus your king is born! Jesus is born, in excelsis gloria.

4 O children of the forest free, the angel-song is true;
The holy child of earth and heav'n is born today for you.
Come kneel before the radiant boy, who bring you beauty, peace and joy.
Jesus your king is born! Jesus is born, in excelsis gloria.

Prayer: God of all people and places, your love is revealed to us no matter what our landscapes may be. Help us see the miracle of your son Jesus' birth in all the places we call home. Amen.

Tuesday, December 28

Scripture Reading: How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." Isaiah 52:7

In this Christmas favorite, we are called to share the good news of Jesus birth with the world – that we are be messengers who announce peace.

Go Tell It On the Mountain (ELW 290)

Refrain:

Go tell it on the mountain,
over the hills and everywhere;
go tell it on the mountain
that Jesus Christ is born!

1 While shepherds kept their watching
o'er silent flocks by night,
behold throughout the heavens
there shone a holy light. [Refrain]

2 The shepherds feared and trembled
when lo! above the earth
rang out the angel chorus
that hailed our Savior's birth. [Refrain]

3 Down in a lowly manger
the humble Christ was born,
and God sent us salvation
that blessed Christmas morn. [Refrain]

Prayer: God of joy, you inspire us to share the good new of your son Jesus with the world. Help us sing to the mountains and beyond – proclaiming your love wherever we go.

Wednesday, December 29

Scripture Reading: Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” Revelation 21:1-2

Recognizing the chill of our own winters, this hymn draws us into the promise that, with Jesus, we are promised a new reality. Our bleak midwinter gives way to new life and renewed promise.

In the Bleak Midwinter (ELW 294)

1 In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
in the bleak midwinter, long ago.

2 Our God, heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain;
heaven and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign.
In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed
the Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

3 Angels and archangels may have gathered there,
cherubim and seraphim thronged the air;
but his mother only, in her maiden bliss,
worshiped the beloved with a kiss.

4 What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
if I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
yet what I can I give him: give my heart.

Prayer: Loving God, you promise new life for all – sending to us Jesus Christ – the Word made flesh. We give you thanks for sending us love and life in the midst of winter. Amen.

Thursday, December 30

Scripture Reading: Blessed be the name of the LORD from this time on and forevermore. From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the LORD is to be praised. The LORD is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens. Psalm 113: 2-4

These words from the Psalms guide us in one of our oldest Christmas hymns. Its words remind us that Jesus has been with us from the very beginning.

Of the Father’s Love Begotten (ELW 295)

1 Of the Father's love begotten
ere the worlds began to be,
he is Alpha and Omega,
he the Source, the Ending he,
of the things that are, that have been,
and that future years shall see,
evermore and evermore!

2 O that birth forever blessed,
when the Virgin, full of grace,
by the Holy Ghost conceiving,
bore the Savior of our race;
and the babe, the world's Redeemer,
first revealed his sacred face,
evermore and evermore!

3 This is he whom heav'n-taught singers
sang of old with one accord,
whom the Scriptures of the prophets
promised in their faithful word;
now he shines, the long expected;
let creation praise its Lord,
evermore and evermore!

4 O ye heights of heav'n, adore him;
angel hosts, his praises sing:
all dominions, bow before him
and extol our God and King;
let no tongue on earth be silent,
ev'ry voice in concert ring,
evermore and evermore!

5 Christ, to thee, with God the Father,
and, O Holy Ghost, to thee,
hymn and chant and high thanksgiving
and unwearied praises be,
honor, glory, and dominion
and eternal victory,
evermore and evermore!

*Prayer: Loving God, you are our beginning and our end – evermore and evermore. As we celebrate the
firrh of your son Jesus, helpus see all your holy faces in our neighborhoods and throughout the world.*