

"O LORD, HOW SHALL I MEET YOU?"

2020 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

“O Lord, How Shall I Meet You?” (ELW 241)

1

O Lord, how shall I meet you,
how welcome you aright?
Your people long to greet you,
my hope, my heart's delight!
Oh, kindle, Lord most holy,
your lamp within my breast
to do in spirit lowly
all that may please you best.

2

I lay in fetters, groaning;
you came to set me free.
I stood, my shame bemoaning;
you came to honor me.
A glorious crown you give me,
a treasure safe on high
that will not fail or leave me
as earthly riches fly.

3

Love caused your incarnation;
love brought you down to me.
Your thirst for my salvation
procured my liberty.
Oh, love beyond all telling,
that led you to embrace
in love, all love excelling,
our lost and fallen race.

4

Rejoice, then, you sad-hearted,
who sit in deepest gloom,
who mourn your joys departed
and tremble at your doom.
All hail the Lord's appearing!
O glorious Sun, now come,
send forth your beams so cheering
and guide us safely home.

Text: Paul Gerhardt (1607–76)

Sunday, November 29

"O Lord, How Shall I Meet You?" (ELW 241)

Advent is derived from the Latin word "advenio," which means "to come to, to arrive." Paul Gerhardt's great hymn assumes the Lord is coming. Our preparation does not cause him to come. That was true in Jesus' time, is true in our time, and will be true at the end of time. This hymn isn't about our preparation at all, but rather is about God's coming. God came incarnate in the past, God comes to us now in word and sacrament, and God will come again at the end of time. The only question is, "O Lord, how shall I meet you, how welcome you aright?" Gerhardt's hymn describes Christ's work—kindling a lamp within us, giving us a crown, embracing us in love, and guiding us safely home. Advent focuses not on our preparation, but on God's work for us, coming to us repeatedly to kindle, give, embrace, and guide.

O Lord, we thank you that you came, that you come today, and that you will come in the future. Help us to welcome you aright. Amen.

Monday, November 30

Isaiah 40:1–11

The writer knows a people who have experienced defeat and destruction. In that situation, it is easy to question what kind of God we have and what that God has in mind for us. It is to these people that Isaiah directs his message. God's people experience comfort, firm in the knowledge that their Lord is coming. The ephemeral quality of our existence contrasts sharply with the Word that stands forever. Isaiah assures us that God has not forgotten or forsaken God's people. The one who comes indeed comes with might and comes in a way that changes the very landscape, does not come to destroy us but rather to comfort us, feed us, and gather us to Godself. God's coming is not to be feared but to be welcomed. Truly, these are good tidings for all people!

We thank you that you have not forsaken us but rather come to comfort us. Help us to tell the good tidings of your coming. Amen.

Tuesday, December 1

Psalm 85:1–2, 8–13

"Surely his salvation is at hand ..." summarizes the message of Advent. But what is the real result—what is the content—of that salvation? Forgiveness, full pardon, restoration, steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, peace, good gifts, and God's glory among us. All given by God. It is almost as if the psalmist struggles to find adequate words to describe what the LORD God brings and what happens when God comes. God speaks and, in God's speaking, comes to us. We are hearers of God's promise and recipients of God's gifts. Can we find the words to describe them? And will we trust and live in their reality?

Help us to believe and trust that your salvation is at hand. Help us to know the depth and breadth of what that salvation means. Amen.

Wednesday, December 2

2 Peter 3:8–15a

"The Lord is not slow about his promise ... but is patient with you ..." Here we are invited to reflect on what sort of God we have: a God whose sense of timing is different from ours, a God who keeps promises, a patient God—but also a God whose day comes in a surprising fashion, "like a thief." While we usually fear thieves, an unwelcome and destructive interruption in our lives, God's coming will bring new heavens and a new earth, "where righteousness is at home." God's coming brings something much better than what we have, and something we could never create ourselves. In this assurance—and in no other assurance—we are "found by him at peace."

O Lord of time and space, we thank you that you are faithful to your promises. Grant us faith to trust that your coming brings us new possibilities. Amen.

Thursday, December 3

Mark 1:1–8

For Martin Luther and his followers in the 16th century, John the Baptist was the paradigmatic evangelical preacher. He preached law, calling for repentance, and gospel, pointing to Christ. They did not admire or praise John because of his odd lifestyle, unusual dress, or distinctive culinary choices. No, what was most important about John was his message. He did not advocate imitation of his unusual lifestyle; he preached the coming Christ. John knew that he was not worthy even to untie the thong of Christ's sandals—and yet he also knew that his calling was to be the messenger, sent to preach Christ and thereby prepare the way. Both the confidence and humility of John might impress us—but in the end he points to Christ, and invites us to do as well.

Lord, help us to hear clearly both your word of judgment and your word of forgiveness. Help us to live in humility and hope. Amen.

Friday, December 4

Mark 1:1–8

John's choice of location is odd—why not head for the city, where you can be assured that a good number of people will be around to hear your message? Instead, he appeared in the wilderness. Yet the message he preached drew people out to him in the wilderness, drew them to confession and to baptism. His message bore fruit, yet he always realized “the one who is more powerful than I is coming after me.” The announcement of that coming one had a power that overcame many obstacles, that drew people out of their comfort zones into a new place, and that created a movement thought impossible. Simple words—yet words laden with power and possibilities. Can we hear those words today?

We thank you, Lord, that your word comes and creates a new reality. Amen.

Saturday, December 5

“O Lord, How Shall I Meet You?” (ELW 241, stanza 1)

Our Lord comes—and we are left with the question of how to welcome him properly. This is not a question we direct at other people but rather to the Lord himself. The hymn writer knows that only the one coming can be clear about what a proper welcome is. So we who sing along ask the one who is coming to kindle “your lamp within my breast,” with the result that in humble spirit we will do “all that may please you best.” Notice that this is not about offering our best to God; it is about God creating the appropriate welcome for God's own Advent. Advent is not about our self-made works of welcoming but rather is about the work of God who creates, redeems, and sustains us.

O Lord, light a fire in us. Let it burn brightly, and let us do what pleases you. Amen.

Sunday, December 6

“O Lord, How Shall I Meet You?” (ELW 241, stanza 2)

What chains or fetters bind you—addiction, hatred, stereotyping, violence, doubt, fear? The list goes on. Whether a result of your own actions or of the actions of others, they cause pain, harm, and shame. The promise is that the Lord comes to set us free from our chains. And not just that—the Lord goes further to honor us and give us crowns. Rather than being prisoners at the bottom of the social scale, we find ourselves at the top, wearing a crown. A crown is traditionally worn by a ruler, one who is not ruled by another. Martin Luther reminded us that God gives us all that God possesses and takes all that is ours (Luther called this the “happy exchange”). So we receive the crown, and God takes our chains. The coming of the Lord results in a radical reversal—all to our benefit.

O Lord, thank you that in your coming you have freed us and crowned us. Amen.

Monday December 7

Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11

The afflicted, brokenhearted, imprisoned, mourners, and devastated—these are the ones to whom the good tidings came and still come. God is not only faithful from a distance but comes bearing good tidings of an actual change in our situation. Now we are “a people whom the Lord has blessed,” and we are clothed with the garments of salvation. Many in the COVID-19 pandemic have experienced fear, sickness, isolation, and mourning. These are precisely the people to whom God brings good tidings and comfort. We can rest assured that, despite appearances to the contrary, God is at work bringing righteousness and blessing in the midst of it all. God reminds us that the story is not over; it has taken a very different turn. God’s promise of new life, embodied in God’s coming to us, causes us to rejoice.

Lord, thank you that your word of life comes especially to the afflicted, those who mourn, the brokenhearted, the imprisoned, and the devastated. Amen.

Tuesday, December 8

Psalms 126

Recalling God’s restoration of the fortune of the people of Israel (probably referring to the return to Jerusalem from Babylonian exile around 539 B.C.E. or later), the psalmist relies on God to act again, perhaps in a time of drought and famine. Through faith, the psalmist is certain that restoration and joy in the past can be replicated in the present and on into the future. And so the petition, “Restore our fortunes, O Lord.”

We may not have restoration in mind, but our world is nevertheless, repeatedly, in need of renewal. The season of Advent is a time of hope for renewal. That comes as we hear and rejoice in the gospel of the birth of Jesus, which makes us new again and again. More than that, renewal can come to all the world as we join with others in the project of justice, peace, and abundance for all.

Good and gracious God, as you restored your people of old to peace and security, renew our lives and grant to all humankind what you have granted to your people of old. Amen.

Wednesday, December 9

1 Thessalonians 5:16–24

Concluding his letter to the Christian community at Thessalonica, Paul exhorts his readers collectively as a body, not as individuals. He uses plural verbs and pronouns, which is evident in Greek but not in English. Some instructions relate to corporate worship, such as rejoicing, praying, giving thanks, and listening to prophets. Other instructions have to do with behavior, such as honoring the good and resisting evil. All of this is to anticipate “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The Advent season is one of anticipation, both for the celebration of the coming of Christ as the Son of God and son of Mary and for his coming again in his own good time. Faith looks to the future of God, who is faithful in life now and in life to come. In the meantime, we gather to rejoice, pray, give thanks, and listen to the Word of God—and we seek to be good to one another.

Bless, O Lord, our congregation that it may worship and serve in ways that are pleasing to you. Amen.

Thursday, December 10

John 1:6–8, 19–28

John the Baptist is an enigma, and he has been from the beginning. “Who are you?” the delegation from Jerusalem asks. He is quick to say who he is not. He is not the Messiah, and he is not one of those persons expected by some as forerunner of the Messiah: he is not Elijah returned to earth, and he is not “the prophet” like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15). Instead, John is the voice proclaiming the need for people to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. The message is more important than the identity of the messenger.

For us to “make straight the way of the Lord” is a matter of reflecting on the ways we live our lives. The way we conduct them can help or inhibit our relationship to God and to one another. Every day is a possible day for self-examination. Today we hear John the Baptist say that we should get on with it.

Good and gracious God, help us to gaze deeply into our lives, see our shortcomings, repent, and go forth in freedom and with gracious, loving conduct. Amen.

Friday, December 11

John 1:6–8, 19–28

In his own words, John the Baptist has said that he is not the Messiah, Elijah, or the prophet (1:20–21). The opponents on the scene latch onto what John has said—gotcha!—and question what business he has baptizing people (1:25). More will be said by John about baptism as the Gospel of John continues. But for now he declares that the Coming One—still unknown to the opponents—is already present on earth, and the time of his earthly ministry is about to begin. John says more about the Messiah. He is great, so great that John cannot do such a menial task as to untie even one of his sandals.

As the season of Advent continues, we are getting close to celebrating the coming of Jesus, Son of God, son of Mary, into our world to carry out his earthly ministry. If yesterday we emphasized our preparation for his coming, now we turn attention to the one who is to come. We are humbled by the panorama of God's grace, which comes to its highest point of revelation in Jesus Christ.

Dear Lord, grant to us the grace to know your Son, whose sandals we are unworthy to untie. Amen.

Saturday, December 12

"O Lord, How Shall I Meet You?" (ELW 241)

Our hymn was composed by the 17th century German pastor and hymn writer Paul Gerhardt (1607–76). Although that was an era of Lutheran orthodoxy, formality, and theological rigor (of which Gerhardt was supportive), the hymn exudes warmth, a personal relationship with Christ, and the joyful expectation of the Advent season. Moreover, it does not leap over the season into Christmas. But with subtle restraint, it hints at what is to come.

As we look ahead to the celebration of the Nativity in the spirit of this hymn, we are reminded of God's abundant love, surpassing any other love we have known. And as we contemplate that love, our delight in Christ's coming to be among us is kindled. We go forth in this season with confidence in the love of God, which sets us free from sin and leads us onward in love for others.

*"Kindle, Lord most holy, your lamp within my breast, to do in spirit lowly all that may please you best." Amen.
(from stanza 1)*

Sunday, December 13

"O Lord, How Shall I Meet You?" (ELW 241, stanza 3)

So often, and so easily, people talk about salvation as something that humans want. Yet, truth be told, many people are just as often oblivious about it. Or they seek salvation in all the wrong places.

But one thing is certain. God is interested in our salvation, a living relationship with us. In this stanza we see that Paul Gerhardt was obviously attuned to the good news of the "prevenient" grace of God, the grace that comes to us before we have prepared ourselves for it. How else could he write about God's "thirst" for our salvation?

Advent is a time of preparation on our part, and at its best it is a time for the Spirit to work within us to make us aware of the unbinding love of God—God's thirst for our salvation—that makes the coming of Christ to us and our world possible. As we sing, pray, and hear the gospel, the Spirit is indeed active among us, and for that we give thanks.

Holy Spirit, stir up our hearts and minds to behold the "love beyond all telling" that led God to embrace us and all humankind. Help us to reflect and enact that love all our days. Amen.

Monday, December 14

2 Samuel 7:1–11, 16

King David wants to build a house (temple) for God (7:5), but God says "no" through the prophet Nathan. Why no? Because God will build a house (royal dynasty) for David (7:11, 16). The word play is clever, and it works in both Hebrew and English.

The promise to David that his dynasty would last forever did not materialize in an earthly political sense. It ended in 586 B.C.E. with the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem. But expectations for the Messiah (the son of David) grew over the next four centuries. Accordingly, as in next Sunday's gospel reading, the angel Gabriel promises Mary that her son will inherit "the throne of his ancestor David" (Luke 1:32).

The promise of God to David has been fulfilled. Jesus, as Messiah, is the Son of David, and his kingdom is an everlasting one. The title was revitalized and renewed with the coming of Jesus on the scene. Rather than that of a militaristic or nationalistic leader, his reign is that of a shepherd-king, the suffering and merciful king, and it embraces all.

God, your promises are sure, even if they are fulfilled in surprising ways. Help us ever to rely on all the promises you have given to us, especially that you have bound us to yourself in love through the ministry of Jesus, Son of David. Amen.

Tuesday, December 15

Luke 1:46b–55

Prior to Mary's song, the angel Gabriel announced that she would give birth to Jesus, Son of God and Messiah. Now with her song, she praises God for what has been done in her life and what will be done for humanity in God's good time. The verbs are in past tense, as though the deeds mentioned have already been accomplished. But the point is made: The deeds are certain and will be carried out. Those with power and riches will be judged; the lowly and the hungry will have places of honor and abundance.

Martin Luther King Jr. declared, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Whether in the long story of the human race, this statement is a simple hope or a verifiable fact, the effect of Mary's song is to provide us with a fresh perspective, aligned with the reign of God. Mary's song prompts us to acts that correspond to the goodness it foresees. The struggle for justice is never over, because of human sinfulness, but must be carried on in every generation with God's reign in view.

God of Abraham, Mary, and all the saints: Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Amen.

Wednesday, December 16

Romans 16:25–27

These three verses make up one long sentence (79 words in the English version and 53 in the Greek text) packed full of theological words and phrases. The object of the sentence ("glory") doesn't come until the end. Essentially, the sentence says "Now to God ... be the glory."

In keeping with the season of Advent, what stands out in the passage is the conviction that God has now revealed the content of a mystery hidden in ages past. That hidden mystery is the "proclamation," or preaching, about Jesus Christ—the gospel—which is being proclaimed now to people of all nationalities.

That gospel has come to us through generations of global witnesses, and it is now being extended to others—in congregations; through ministries of word, sacrament, and service; by companion synods; in works of mercy; in care for the poor. And so we add our own doxology: "to God be the glory forever."

Let the light of the gospel burn brightly in our world, O God. Bless all who proclaim it in word and deed. Amen.

Thursday, December 17

Luke 1:26–38

What's in a greeting, and how shall one respond to a surprising visitor? Well, it depends—especially if that greeting comes in angelic form. Mary is at least in good company. Luke's story has carefully structured her response to mirror that of Zechariah (1:12): She is "terrified" (not "perplexed") and full of fear.

But tucked in the angel's greeting is a clue to what's going on here—and the one thing that has the power to transform that fear. "Greetings, favored one ... for you have found favor with God." As the saying goes, the story loses a little in the usual translation. In the original Greek, the word translated "favor" is actually the word "grace." It is as if to say, "Mary, you have been graced by the presence of God."

For us, too, that is the greeting that calls for our response as we stand in this fourth week of Advent. The surprising good news of grace is the presence of God, transforming our fears into the joy of God's wonderful promise at Jesus' birth.

Merciful God, may we hear in your word of promise the surprising note of grace that has the power to transform all our fears into a welcome joy at your visitation. Amen.

Friday, December 18

Luke 1:26–38

In her terror and fear at this unexpected birth announcement, Mary can at least muster a question, "How can this be?" In the angel's message, Mary has heard two "words" of promise: "of his kingdom there will be no end," and "nothing is impossible with God." Once again something important to Luke is hidden in the usual translation. In the original Greek, "nothing" is literally "no word." That is to say, "with God no word (i.e., no promise) is ever impossible."

The new possibilities of God's promise are already breaking in for Mary. In the very next breath Mary responds by assuming her new role as faithful "servant": "Let it happen to me in accordance with your word!"

We stand poised near the end of our Advent journey ready to celebrate the wondrous birth of Jesus "in accordance with God's grace-filled word of promise." May that word once again inspire us to respond like Mary as faithful servants of the good news.

God of mercy and grace, inspire us with the good news of your promise made real for us in the birth of Jesus your Son, enable us to respond as faithful servants of the ever new possibilities of your kingdom. Amen.

Saturday, December 19

"O Lord, How Shall I Meet You?" (ELW 241)

Our theme hymn for Advent so fittingly mirrors Mary's question to the angel in this week's gospel reading: "O Lord, how shall I meet you?" Though the specific words chosen by the poet may differ from Luke's story of the Annunciation of God's promise to Mary, the themes and the power of God's promises still capture our hearts. We hear of the longing and hope of a world held in bondage and fear. We hear of the depth of God's love that reached out to embrace and liberate God's people in the birth of God's Son. And we hear of the power of that love to transform sadness and gloom into a joy like that at the sunrise— and we are led to respond like Mary with faith in God's power to lead us safely home to God's kingdom. Let it be also to us according to your word of promise.

God of excelling love, thank you for reaching out to embrace my longing for your presence. May the good news of freedom in the birth of your Son continue to dispel the gloom and fill me with joy and delight in this season. Amen.

Sunday, December 20

"O Lord, How Shall I Meet You?" (ELW 241, stanza 4)

The two halves of the last stanza of our Advent theme hymn are literally as different as day and night—they play compellingly with the contrasting images of darkness and light, which are so often a part of the gospel story of Jesus' birth and ministry. The first half speaks from a perspective of anxiety, fear, and a loss of hope. We hear a litany of sadness, gloom, mourning, departed joy, and trembling doom.

And then suddenly, with seemingly no transition, there is a great transformation of mood. We hear of the Lord appearing like the rising of a glorious sun. The beams of that rising Son now surround us with light, reaching out to scatter our darkness and guide us safely like a cosmic cheerleader to our home. And though it may be Christmas and about a birth, already in the mention of a "rising" sun, we have been pointed to the coming joys of Easter morning.

God of the sunrise, fill us with the good news and joy of your appearance in the gift of Jesus, your Son. May we indeed rejoice in this season that he has come to guide us safely to our home with you. Amen.

Monday, December 21

Isaiah 9:2–7

In these final days of Advent we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus our Savior. Perhaps more than in some years we may identify just a bit more with the prophet's talk of walking in deep darkness and longing to see some light at the end of the tunnel. We are ready to hear in a new key the prophet's announcement of the birth of God's promised Messiah.

Even so it is good to be reminded that the people of Israel heard these words while they were still threatened by captivity and exile. How ready were they to really believe that the simple birth of a child could be the way of God's deliverance and salvation?

We, too, in this season need to hear again those words of promise—words of hope for God's Messiah, a Prince of Peace, who will come as an agent of justice and righteousness to a world so longing and ready for such good news. We also need to hear the prophet's final promissory reminder that this birth is not ours to control. It is a call to faith and trust: "The Lord of hosts will do this."

God of promise, as we await your coming in this Advent season, help us to hear your words of hope in the gift of your Messiah with power to transform our world in the ways of peace, justice, and righteousness. Amen.

Tuesday, December 22

Psalm 96

In the midst of exile the people of Israel asked, "How can we sing the Lord's song in this foreign land?" In the midst of the pain and uncertainty of so many things in our present-day world, we may echo their expressions of longing and fleeting hopes.

Sometimes it seems we just have to repeat the words of hope often enough until we begin to believe what they promise. Perhaps it is like that with today's psalm. The psalmist begins with a resounding call to join in the song: "O sing to the Lord a new song." It continues with word after word of praise, until the final word of joy and promise: He is coming! He is coming! And he will act for all peoples in the ways of righteousness and truth!

Can you believe it? Try it! Sing the words with the psalmist. Let your body and your whole being begin to trust. Join in the song of praise and celebration!

O God, our salvation and our hope, even when we find it hard to say the words, help us to join in singing the words of celebration. You are coming, and in your coming you promise to be with us in the ways of justice and truth! Amen.

Wednesday, December 23

Titus 2:11–14

In the several brief verses of today's reading we might imagine that we are hearing the outline for a Christmas message. However, this "sermon" has not three, but only two main parts. In the first verse we hear the simple and direct announcement of the good news that we celebrate at Christmas: God's grace has appeared in the coming of Jesus, who has come to bring salvation for all people.

But if the sermon ended there, we might fittingly be left with the question, "So what? What will this salvation look like?" To that the preacher replies, "Jesus Christ has come to prepare for himself a people who are zealous for doing good deeds."

The invitation to celebrate the birth of Jesus has a purpose; it wants to change our lives for the sake of the world around us. God's good news of the coming of Jesus, which we celebrate in this season, has our neighbors in mind. How will that celebration change the kind of good works that you and I do tomorrow for the sake of God's world?

O God my salvation, I give thanks that you have sent your Son in order to redeem my life from the power of sin and evil; now transform my life that I may be empowered to act in ways of justice and mercy for the sake of my neighbor. Amen.

Thursday, December 24 Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1–14 (15–20)

Surprise! We know this story so well, the hardest part is to hear it with all its surprises, to hear it in its simple beauty and imagery, with its unwitting cast of characters and its heavenly scope. An expectant couple arrives in Bethlehem. Even with no fitting place to stay, their baby is born. Shepherds doing their own thing are suddenly interrupted by the glory of the Lord. Great fear meets a message of hope—the very heart of this story: "For you a Savior has been born, the Messiah, by the glory of God."

And what's more, this good news is for you "today," not in some distant future. The shepherds at least seem to grasp this part, and immediately they are on their way to check it out, to see this "word" (not "thing") which has come to pass—literally a fulfillment of the angel's promise that all "words" are possible with God (see also Luke 1:37).

On this eve of Christmas, may we once again hear the promise and join the pilgrimage to Bethlehem to see this good news which is happening among us.

O God of promise, may our ears and hearts once again be open to hear the announcement of the birth of your Son, and join the pilgrimage to honor him with lives that are given to his service. Amen.

Friday, December 25

Christmas Day

"O Lord, How Shall I Meet You?" (ELW 241)

Our Advent theme hymn has invited us to reflect on our journey toward Bethlehem: "O Lord, how shall I meet you aright?" Part of the answer is that we stand this Christmas Day at the side of the manger. We welcome this babe with the simple and profound conviction that here lies the promise that God's steadfast love will never fail.

Because, as this hymn so boldly declares, it's all about love. As if we might somehow miss it, four times in the third stanza the hymn writer reminds us of this love that has reached out to embrace us and the whole creation, because it springs from a God who has such a passionate thirst for our freedom.

Now it is for us to seek ways in which this deep love might be lit like a lamp in our hearts, and that such love might compel us to rejoice and live our lives each day as a reflection of God's love in Jesus, our Savior.

O Lord most holy, kindle within us the lamp of your love, that we might trust in the good news of your salvation, and so be guided to actions of love for all your beloved people and the creation. Amen.

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