



Mount Calvary Connected December 10, 2020

Mount Calvary Connected is a weekly newsletter that will be sent out each Wednesday while the church is pressing "pause" on in-person gatherings. Our goal is to keep you connected to your faith and your church with messages from our pastors, health information, and ways to share Christ's love during our current national crisis.

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A Message from Pastor Scott,

Since mid-March, I've been using these columns for some Bible study on the book of Exodus. Quite helpfully, we've now reached a place in the book of Exodus which corresponds with one of the major themes of Advent and Christmas. To start with Advent, when Israel first arrives at Mount Sinai in chapter 19 of Exodus, it waits and prepares for God to come down (Exodus 19:10-11). This is Advent. During Advent in particular we wait and prepare for God the Son to come down to judge the living and the dead and to usher in the Kingdom of God once and for all. But as Advent moves to Christmas so does Exodus chapter 19 move from preparing for God's coming down to God's actual descent. This is Christmas. Beginning on the day of his conception and continuing all the way through his eventual birth and death on a cross, God the Son came down to save God's people from their sins and to begin the earthly advance of God's kingdom. The question is whether it's at Mount Sinai, Advent, or Christmas are all these descents of God gifts or conditional opportunities? Do we have to coax God out of the heavens and into our lives or is this just something God does?

In raising such a question, I'm invoking a topic the Church has struggled with for centuries. Is the Holy Spirit's gift of faith in Christ all that Church membership requires or does one also need to become Jewish in every respect? This was the early Church's dilemma. Does salvation require only the gifts of Jesus and the Holy Spirit's faith-making presence or does it also require obedience to the dictates of Rome and its pope? This was the Reformers' dilemma. Is Christ's presence in the sacraments a gift or do we have to somehow understand what's going on before Christ's becomes fully present? During my own lifetime this has been one of the questions with which the Church has wrestled. Throughout our history, it's plain enough that we have struggled to distinguish between the gifts of God and the requirements of God. If there's ever a time to get better at this, it's now when thoughts and conversations about gifts are so widespread and prevalent.

Unfortunately, parts of Exodus chapter 19 can complicate the effort to distinguish between God's gifts and God's requirements. Prior to God coming down accompanied by fire, smoke, and earthly tremors, God and Moses have a conversation in which God says Israel shall be the most treasured of peoples, a priestly kingdom and a holy nation, IF Israel obeys God's voice and keeps covenant with God (Exodus 19:5-6). Additionally, when learning of this conversation, Israel readily assents to doing whatever God speaks (19:8) and only then do preparations for God's coming and the actual descent of God follow. Taken together this can make it seem as if God's comings are conditional opportunities rather than gifts. The message can seem to be: IF we do this and that, THEN AND ONLY THEN will God come down as we desire. It's a prime example of how answering important questions on the basis of just a couple of verses can cause all kinds of problems.

The fact of the matter is that by the time Exodus 19 comes around, reference has already been made to God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exodus 2:24). Each of these men were sinful and imperfect and yet God's covenant with them continues well after they're dead. So much for God coming down with conditional offers. When God comes down, God comes down with gifts in the fullest sense of the word. In fact, the gift of God's original covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob remains so intact and in force that chapters before Israel gets to Mount Sinai God calls those suffering under the heavy hand of Egypt "my people" (Exodus 3:7, 3:10, 5:1). Again, when read in its entirety, the book of Exodus tells us that membership in God's family,

the experience of God's grace and deliverance, is a gift not a reward for some past or future behavior. The same holds true for Advent and Christmas.

Two thousand years ago Jesus didn't come down because we were perfect. He came down because we were in bondage to sin and unable to free ourselves. He came down because we were in need of the gift that he was born to supply. It will be no different whenever Jesus comes again to judge the living and the dead. Still lifelong sinners incapable of earning or enacting the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting we won't walk into God's kingdom on our own merit. We'll get there because Jesus has made a place for any and all who have been blessed with the Holy Spirit's gift of faith. Again, when God comes down, God comes down with gifts in the fullest sense of the word. In, by, and through the Holy Spirit, way we treasure these gifts and make the most of them always!

In God's amazing grace,

Pastor Scott

2021 Offering Envelopes can be picked up in the narthex.

Envelopes are renumbered so they are in alphabetical order. Your number may have changed from last year. So, beginning Jan. 1, throw away your 2020 and start using your 2021 envelopes. If you have received envelopes and choose not to have them, OR if you did not receive envelopes and would like to have them please call the church office. Also, please help deliver envelopes to your friends and neighbors. Thank you!

Hearing Aid Batteries

If you have hearing aids that use 312 batteries. Please call the church office. A parishioner has new hearing aids and would like to give the batteries to some one who could use 312 in theirs.

Year Round Giving Tree

Beginning in January, there will be a new Giving Tree in the narthex that will be up for all of 2021. Each month a different group/organization will be selected to receive the donations from the tree. For January, all proceeds will go to Pro Papa Missions to help the country of Honduras which has been hit hard by hurricanes and COVID-19. On the tree you will find an envelope attached to a handmade face mask. The suggested price on the envelope is \$3, however, any amount will be accepted. Envelopes can be returned to the collection plate or dropped off at the church office. Thank you!

CHRISTMAS EVE WORSHIP SERVICE

4:00 pm Children Service/Candlelight
7:00 pm Candlelight
10:00 pm Candlelight



Reminder that these services are subject to change due to uncertain health situation.

WEBSITE

Our website has been updated and redesigned. Please check it out at <https://www.mt-calvarylutheran.org>. If you have any feed back, please call the church office (814-266-4859) or let the pastors know.

LIVE STREAMING WORSHIP SERVICE INFORMATION

At Mount Calvary Lutheran church, we strive to spread the good news of the gospel by any means available. Today's technology allows us to provide alternatives to in-person worship. This includes social media such as Facebook, internet live streaming, recorded sermons, and through FM radio broadcasts.

Mt. Calvary hosts live broadcasts of the liturgy at 8:45 AM Sunday mornings. The broadcast can be heard by tuning your radio to 88.3 FM if you are near the church. We can also stream the service live over the internet. By clicking the following link, you can gain access to the live stream audio. <https://streams.radiomast.io/96172026-6cba-407b-9090-e150b471ae0e>

We want you to stay connected to Mount Calvary, even if you cannot be here in person. Help us spread the good news of the gospel by inviting friends to tune in, as well. Everyone is welcome to use any of these methods to join us and hear the message and teachings of Jesus Christ. Facebook Live versions of the service will be made available on Wednesdays most weeks, but on other days as well depending upon the schedule of the preaching pastor. Our Facebook page is found at Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church of Johnstown, PA.

Salvation Army Bell Ringing

Mt. Calvary will be volunteering to ring bells for The Salvation Army's Red Kettle Collection. This year we will be doing it on **Saturday December 12 from 10-5** at Market Basket. A sign up sheet is on the table in the narthex if you would like to volunteer. If you are unable to attend services, but still would like to sign up for a block of time, please contact Mike Kozak at 244-6880. Thank you!

Harvest Home Food Collection

We will be collecting much needed non-perishable food items now through **December 13** to be distributed to a local Food Pantry. A table will be set up in the narthex for your generous contributions.

Backyard Ministries Socks and Toy Collection

As we enter the holiday season, they are asking that we once again collect a pack of socks and a \$1 toy for the children of Coopersdale. Just like the hats and gloves, labeled bags (size and gender) will be in the narthex. Once you have the items, you can return them in the bag to the blue bin outside the church, or the labeled bin in the narthex. All donations must be in by **Wednesday December 16**. If you have any questions, please contact Mike Kozak at 244-6880. Thank you for your continued support!

Family Kitchen Christmas Collection

Each year the Family Kitchen has a Christmas dinner where they give the attendees a gift basket. This year Mt. Calvary is responsible for providing boxes of cereal for the baskets. If you would like to donate a box of cereal, you can place it in the blue bin outside the church, or the labeled bin in the narthex. All donations must be in by **Wednesday December 16**. If you have any questions, please contact Mike Kozak at 244-6880.

The Giving Tree

The Giving Tree will be set up in the narthex. On the tree you will find gift tags with "Bag of Candy" written on them. Take a gift tag for candy and place candy under the tree. Also on the tree will be envelopes marked with different denominations. Return your envelope designated "Helping Hand Mission" in the offering plate or drop o at the Church Office. All donations will go to the Helping Hand Mission in Portage, PA. Mt. Calvary has been reaching out to the Helping Hand Mission for many years. Thank you for being a "Helping Hand"!

Christmas Pageant

A slightly different holiday season calls for "A Slightly Different Christmas Pageant!" This year's Christmas program by the youth of the church is entitled "A Slightly Different Christmas Pageant" and will be social-distance friendly with families contributing pre-recorded segments that will be edited into a video to be shown in worship and online. If you have kids, watch for information from Pastor Jonathan about how to participate!

About Our Members:

Reminder to please pray for our members and their families that are affected by COVID 19.

Given to The Glory Of God.

Flowers: In memory of Beverly Ann Kocis's birthday by loving husband, children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren.

Kid's Corner

with Pastor Jonathan

Each week, Mt. Calvary will be publishing "Kid's Corner" as an offering for our children and families. Kid's Corner is part Sunday school lesson, part children's sermon, and all about sharing God's love. Join us each week for this and other online offerings from Mt. Calvary on our church Facebook page: Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church of Johnstown, PA.

Birthdays for the Week Dec. 13 - Dec. 19.

Dec. 13 – Kenneth Davis, Danielle Walsh, Frank Witsberger

Dec. 14 – Leona Cannarella

Dec. 15 – Nicole Gusmenotti, Austin Leonardis

Dec. 17 – Andrew Evans, Emily Penrod, Morgan Rickley

Dec. 18 – Karen Bantlely

Dec. 19 – Jerry Benford, Barbara Berk, Leighton Williams, Eric Wingard

Remember those that prayer has been requested:

Patti Sliko, Joe, John, Scott, Carlye, Mark, Betty, Lucy's Family, Leslie, Mountain Family, Kim, Tim, Linda & Dick, Kim, Brian, Jamie, Dr. Larry Mastrine, Don, Joanne, Shirley, Don, Joanne, Harold, Chris, Tracy, Dolly & Chis Palm, David, Karen, Lauren, Billy, Brooke, Bob Zahorak, and Jerry.

Support of Mount Calvary

Through the end of November, Mount Calvary's monthly expenses have been averaging about \$17,685. This is in the neighborhood of \$4,225 a month less than budgeted. Thanks to your generosity and the faithfulness of your leadership team, Mount Calvary has not yet had to dip into reserves in spite of all the disruption introduced by the pandemic. We're a team and the entire team deserves a thank you! Now all that's left to do this year is to top things off with another strong and robust December as we have done for many years running.

CONDENSED WORSHIP FOR THE WEEKEND OF SUNDAY, DECEMBER 6TH.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

P: Stir up our hearts, Lord God, to prepare the way of your only Son. By his coming strengthen us to serve you with purified lives; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

A: Amen.

FIRST READING: ISAIAH 40:1-11

In grand, flowing, poetic lines, the prophet announces that the exile of God's people in Babylon is over. God will deliver Israel and will care for her as a shepherd cares for the sheep. This word can be trusted, because the only enduring reality in life is the word of God.

¹Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

³A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

⁶A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. ⁷The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. ⁸The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. ⁹Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" ¹⁰See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. ¹¹He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

PSALM 85:1-2, 8-13

P: You have been gracious to your land, O LORD; you have restored the good fortune of Jacob.

A: You have forgiven the iniquity of your people and blotted out all their sins.

P: I will listen to what the LORD God is saying; for you speak peace to your faithful people and to those who turn their hearts to you.

A: Truly, your salvation is very near to those who fear you, that your glory may dwell in our land.

P: Steadfast love and faithfulness have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.

A: Faithfulness shall spring up from the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven.

P: The LORD will indeed grant prosperity, and our land will yield its increase.

A: Righteousness shall go before the LORD and shall prepare for God a pathway.

SECOND READING: 2 PETER 3:8-15A

This short letter deals with pressing concerns regarding the final advent of Jesus, especially concerns that could arise over its apparent delay. The author of the letter calls on Christians to anticipate the promised coming of the Lord through conduct dedicated to God.

⁸Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. ⁹The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with

you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. ¹⁰But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

¹¹Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, ¹²waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? ¹³But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

¹⁴Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; ^{15a}and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

GOSPEL: MARK 1:1-8

The Gospel of Mark does not begin with a story of Jesus' birth but with the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord.

¹The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; ³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

SERMON BY PASTOR JONATHAN

ADVENT 2B – DECEMBER 6, 2020 – MARK 1:1-8

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from Christ Jesus our Lord, the one for whom we will clear every path. Amen.

We saw our first real snow of the year this past week. And it was no surprise to see that a large chunk of Western Pennsylvanians who have lived in Western Pennsylvania their entire lives somehow forgot to drive in the snow in the last nine months or so.

Tuesday evening, the evangelism committee at Mount Calvary met at the church, and as the snow had been falling on and off all afternoon, it was slick going to the meeting, and even worse coming home an hour later. When I texted my wife to tell her I was on my way home, she responded telling me to take my time, to be careful, and to take 219 home rather than the backroad shortcut I normally take between Richland and our home in Davidsville.

Frankly, 219 wasn't in great shape at that hour either, but I followed two snowplows working in tandem the whole way from the Scalp Avenue exit to the Davidsville exit. It was slow-going, it took almost twice as long to get home as it normally would, and I listened on my fire department radio as wrecks and disabled vehicles were announced all over the county for the rest of the evening, but eventually I did make it home.

Wednesday morning, a little over twelve hours later, the roads had a few slick spots, but you could tell plow operators had done their work to make the roads safe. And by Thursday, there were plenty of places all around us where you could hardly tell it had snowed it all.

And that is exactly what winter in Western Pennsylvania seems to be most years. A storm that will dump a ton of snow in a short amount of time, and then the snow melts.

I can remember one particular storm in seminary that dumped an entire foot of snow overnight on a weekend where pastors from all over the country were supposed to be traveling to campus. The snow lasted for long enough to cancel the travel plans of most of the visitors, but a warm front coming in right after the storm

melted almost all of the snow in just a few hours. The snow was gone by the start of the event that all of the people were supposed to be coming for.

The same thing happens multiple times each winter when a morning or afternoon storm clogs highways during “rush hour” and creates headaches for thousands of people, only to clear up just a while later.

And in all of these cases, the snowplows are still out working.

Never does someone in an office at PennDOT look at the weather forecast and say “oh, that six inches will melt by tomorrow, we don’t actually need to plow it.” They do the work to clear the path no matter what.

As we enter into the second week of Advent, this season in which we await the coming of Christ, our focus this week found in each of the readings calls us to prepare, to be ready. And not just garden-variety ready, but we hear again and again the image of clearing a path, making a road, ensuring that nothing gets in the way of the arrival of Christ.

And I think it’s worth it to think about what the things are in our lives that clutter the path to Jesus. What are the things that make it more treacherous, more cumbersome, more difficult to connect with our faith?

In the past nine months, as we’ve had to again and again adjust to different ways of connecting with and living out our faith, I think we can all agree that at times, the path between us and God has gotten a little difficult. At times, we’ve allowed the trail to become a bit overgrown. At times, we’ve allowed a bit too much snow to accumulate on the roads.

Maybe that looks like adjusting a bit too much to the convenience of not having to plan to attend worship.

Maybe that looks like allowing a negative outlook on world events to shade our ability to see the goodness in the world.

Maybe that looks like forgetting about the true meaning of Easter a few months back, or the true meaning of Christmas in just a few weeks.

Nine months ago when COVID-19 started really effecting the daily lives of people all throughout the country, so many of us thought things along the lines of “if we can just make it through these next few weeks, we’ll be fine.”

So many churches, and businesses, and organizations, and individuals, made short-sighted decisions thinking that this would all be wrapped up in a few weeks. Kind of like a snow-plow driver looking at a weather forecast and saying to themselves “I don’t need to do any plowing today, it will melt by tomorrow.”

But the thing is, for as much as Western Pennsylvania winters often have those short one or two day storms, sometimes there are bigger long ones. Those times where it’s not really a storm, but maybe it stays cold for a couple weeks in a row, and maybe we add another inch or two of snow every other day.

If at the beginning of that cold snap, the snow plow drivers had all simply said, “hey, let’s just wait for this to go away...” A lot of people would be in trouble before too long. People wouldn’t be able to get to work. Kids wouldn’t be able to get to school. Ambulances wouldn’t be able to get to hospitals.

And so as much as the temptation may be there to look at obstacles in our path and say “I’ll wait for that to disappear on its own,” sometimes we have to take the bull by its horns, sometimes we have to do the heavy lifting.

Sometimes we have to clear the path ourselves.

So think back a few minutes. What were those things that you thought of when I asked you to imagine the obstacles in your path? And how can you clear them?

How can you do as much as possible right here, right now, to clear the way for Jesus to make a straight path into your life?

John the Baptizer, John the Baptist, gives us some ideas: we need to repent. We need to turn back toward God and back toward our Baptism. We need to confess to God the things that we have allowed to clutter the path, and then we need to push them right out of the way.

Because the one who is all-powerful, and all-loving is coming.

Even in spite of all the chaos of the world, even in spite of all the stumbling blocks and obstacles and barricades and slippery slopes that we may find along the pathway, the divine son of God is able to navigate all of that. If only we do the work to meet him in the middle.

If only we do the work to not sit back and wait for the world to change, but rather blaze a new trail.

THAT is what Christ would want us to do in a time like this. Clear a path, not just to connect ourselves to God, but to ensure that as many others can be connected as well.

So, let's put on our boots, let's go out into the cold and clear the path so that all can welcome Jesus into their hearts and homes this Advent. Thanks be to God. Amen.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

P: God of power and might, comfort your people and come quickly to this weary world. Hear our prayers for everyone in need.

P: Faithful God, you teach us to wait for you with faithfulness and patience. Sustain and support us in our doubts and questions. Nurture our faith as we discern and enact your mission. Hear us, O God.

A: Your mercy is great.

P: Loving God, you set the stars in the sky and breathe life into the earth. Renew the face of creation where it is in need of your healing touch. Mend the wounds of environmental damage and restore balance to ecosystems so that all creation can declare your praise. Hear us, O God.

A: Your mercy is great.

P: Steadfast God, you never tire of seeking justice. Where people suffer from discrimination, judgment, and injustice, speak words of truth and comfort. We pray especially for . . . (*current local, national, or international issues of peace or justice may be named*). Lead us toward a world where faithfulness will sprout underfoot and righteousness rain down from above. Hear us, O God.

A: Your mercy is great.

P: Leading God, you ask us to make uneven ground smooth. Make even the disparities between your people. Sustain and support people with physical and intellectual disabilities. Accompany disability advocates who work for a world accessible to all. Teach us to celebrate the great diversity in our midst. Hear us, O God.

A: Your mercy is great.

P: Tender God, you know sorrow and joy alike. We pray for those in our families and congregation who are not joyful in this holiday season. Comfort those who grieve, be a companion to all who are lonely, tend those who are sick or struggling with depression, and gather all people in your healing embrace. Hear us, O God.

A: Your mercy is great.

P: We give thanks for the lives and witness of those who died while waiting for justice, peace, or healing, those whose names we know and those whose names are known only to you. Sustain all who still yearn for the completion of your redeeming work. Hear us, O God.

A: Your mercy is great.

P: Draw near to us, O God, and receive our prayers for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

A: Amen.