



# Mount Calvary Connected

December 15, 2022

*Mount Calvary Connected is a weekly newsletter sent out at the end of each week. Our goal is to keep you connected to your church and your faith with messages from our pastors, information about upcoming activities at Mt. Calvary and more!*

<b>Pastor Scott Klimke</b> Cell-Phone: 570-367-3421 Email: <a href="mailto:sklimke6@gmail.com">sklimke6@gmail.com</a>	<b>Pastor Jonathan Adams</b> Cell-Phone: 412-817-6704 Email: <a href="mailto:revjonoadams@gmail.com">revjonoadams@gmail.com</a>
---	---

---

## LIVE STREAMING WORSHIP SERVICE INFORMATION

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 also stream these services live over the internet. Simply visit [www.mt-calvarylutheran.org](http://www.mt-calvarylutheran.org) and click "Live Radio Broadcast" from the home page on Sunday mornings.

Weekly worship bulletins can be found at: [www.mt-calvarylutheran.org/bulletins/](http://www.mt-calvarylutheran.org/bulletins/)

---

## Readings & Sermon from the Past Sunday

Listen to the readings and the sermon from this past Sunday on our website: <https://www.mt-calvarylutheran.org/sermons/>

---

## A Message from Pastor Scott

Last evening, your Mutual Ministry Committee met to complete its initial work as the Nominating Committee. The Mutual Ministry Committee was formed in the fall of 2018, with direction from then Assistant to the Bishop, Paula Schmitt, who is now our local bishop. Very carefully representing every era of initial involvement at Mount Calvary, and also seeking age and gender balance, members of the Mutual Ministry Committee are appointed by your Congregational Council in consultation with the pastor. For several years running now, your Congregational Council has also appointed your Mutual Ministry Committee to carry out the once-a-year work of the Nominating Committee. This makes sense. The overall purpose of your Mutual Ministry Committee is to keep all of us within the lines of what Christ calls every Christian to do and what will best serve the overall mission and ministry of Mount Calvary Lutheran Church. If this aim is to be accomplished, it will surely require congregational leaders who are on board with it, which is why the work of the Mutual Ministry Committee and the Nominating Committee are a natural fit.

Along with me, current members of your Mutual Ministry Committee are Harold Ashcraft, Shirley Glova, Shari McQuaide, Tom Rohrabough, Debbie Thomas, and Mark Williams. In recent years, Linda Barnhart, Joan Bunnell, and Brian Hiltz have also served on the committee. As the work of the group truly is mutual, and also confidential, there is no chairperson and meetings are not publicly announced in advance. But if you have any constructive suggestions about how to improve our faithfulness to

Christ or to the congregation and its local mission, please free to contact any member of the committee at any time.

The need to keep communities of faith between the lines of what Christ commands and what a local mission field requires is older than the New Testament itself. As the Holy Spirit inspired some of our forebears to write the New Testament, challenges and issues being experienced by the early Church were quite naturally addressed. Reflecting how difficult it can be to keep groups of sinners together and on point, the need to avoid individual agendas is constantly stressed. Also heavily stressed is the need to select words and deeds which are faithful to Christ and most likely to hold the congregation together in its love for one another and in its commitment to the needs of its local community. The texts we've heard this Advent are representative of this hard-to-miss dimension of the New Testament.

On Sunday, James 5:9 reminded us we are to treat one another as beloved siblings in the Lord and to not grumble against one another. The week before, Romans 15:9 called us to live in the harmony that translates into an ability to glorify God with one voice. The week before that, Romans 13:4 called us to lay aside the works of darkness that result in quarreling and jealousy and to put on the Lord Jesus Christ instead. This is all standard New Testament fare. It can and has been treated as pie in the sky stuff, but it's what faithfulness to our Lord and his charter require. Though it sometimes may require us to repent, which is a biblical word for changes of mind or direction, we should be thankful that we have a group within our church who does its best to keep us where Christ and our community want and need us to be.

As to its initial work as this year's Nominating Committee, your Mutual Ministry Committee has compiled a slate of candidates for this year's vacancies on your Congregational Council. Missy Brodt has been nominated to serve a second term on council. Todd Moss, Jeff Penrod, and David Raho have been nominated to serve their first terms on council. Along with these individuals, at its November meeting, your Congregational Council appointed Cindy Solarczyk to complete the remainder of Christine Koshute's term on council in keeping with congregational by-laws.

In the coming days, please look for additional information on these individuals. They all received enthusiastic endorsement from either your Mutual Ministry Committee or your Congregational Council and are reflective of a continuing desire to keep your leadership team reflective of overall congregational trends in age, gender, and initial era of involvement. In, by, and through the Holy Spirit, may each of the individuals I have noted begin to work or continue to work with your Mutual Ministry Committee and your Congregational Council to keep us faithful to Christ, faithful to one another, and faithful to the needs of our local community.

Your Partner in Mission and Ministry,

Pastor Scott

## Upcoming Meetings/Events

Children's Christmas Pageant: Dec. 18th at 8:45 a.m.

Last day for sock/toy collection: Dec. 18th

Church Council Meeting: December 20th at 6:30 p.m.

Christmas Eve Services: Dec. 24th at 4:00, 7:00, & 10:00 p.m.

Hymns & Lesson: Dec. 25th at 8:45 a.m.

---

## Help Wanted

The Property Committee is looking to recruit a number of small job volunteers. Tasks might include replacing light bulbs, changing hardware on a commode, getting a lawnmower or snowblower ready for use, etc. The Committee believes we have a lot of talent in the congregation and wants to make greater use of it. Every small job handled by a member equals one less call that needs to be made to a vendor who may have a minimum visit charge or an hourly rate of \$50 or more. Volunteers who can be available on short notice are needed to help with set-up, serving, and tear-down after funeral luncheons. Interested parties should contact Mark Rychak or one of the pastors. A message could also be left with the church office at 814-266-4859.

---

## Scheduled Worship Help

### Ushers:

**Saturday, December 17:** Dave and Stacey Saloka

**Sunday, December 18:** Todd and Jill Moss

### **Saturday, December 24:**

4:00: Mark and Deb Rychak

7:00: Kevin and Chris Oleksa

10:00: Todd and Jill Moss

**Sunday, December 25:** Todd Moss and helper

### Readers/Communion Assistants:

**Saturday, December 17:** Courtney Haluska and Kevin Oleksa

**Sunday, December 18:** Deborah McQuaide

**Saturday, December 24:**

4:00: Pastors

7:00: Kadiya Lingenfelter and Deborah McQuaide

10:00: Hayden and Mari Grace Lingenfelter

**Sunday, December 25:** Ray Leverknight

Those interested in volunteering may contact Pastor Scott to sign up.

---

**Children's Sunday School**

Children's Sunday School for youth in preschool, elementary, and middle school is ongoing! See Pastor Jonathan for more information.

---

**Choir Reorganization**

Several people have been asking about starting up a new choir! Between time lost over COVID and losing a couple of longtime choir members, we will be needing to start fresh! Over the years at Mount Calvary, we have sometimes worked with small numbers and sometimes included large groups of over twenty singers. Some have been strong musicians and others of modest ability. We have sung in unison and in parts. We have occasionally included ambitious music such as that of Mozart and Handel, and even sung significant portions of the Messiah! The one constant is that we have worked with people who are available and are willing to give freely of their time.

This is an opportunity where anyone can participate. By singing in the choir, you yourself become a stronger musician. Singing is a form of prayer. Singing touches our souls. Singing in a group connects us in a spiritual way. For this September, it might be nice to tiptoe gently into a new season. I am thinking of beginning with some rounds and two-part singing. If this takes off, we certainly can be more ambitious!

Peoples' schedules are busy. In recent years, we have done Wednesday evening rehearsals for those who can make it. Sometimes I meet people individually. Sometimes people join in last minute at the choir warmup before the service. I often record parts and, these days, can send an audio text to help people be better prepared. Since I do not know everyone in the congregation and may not have invited you to sing, let me know if you would like to give it a try! Thanks so much! Talk to Dan Gresh after any church service or text or call at 814-659-5109.

---

**Giving Tree**

December contributions will go towards the Helping Hands ministry. Several families are being helped. There are paper ornaments on the narthex table with suggestions for donations. Please return items or money by December 18th so gifts can be delivered.

---

## **“When your Advent calendar is broken”**

by Tim Brown

I remember one Sunday in church when my father was preaching.

He was getting all sorts of heated and passionate in the pulpit, you know, totally un-Lutheran in style. Back then sermons had three parts to them—the path was known and well-worn, and if you strayed from the path, it was odd.

He was just a few minutes in, already kind of heated, and a guy stood up in the congregation and said, “Now, hold on a minute!”

It was like all the heads were on a swivel as they turned to see Big Bill stand up in the middle of the congregation as he began to argue back with my father. I remember my 9-year-old self thinking, “Man, I wish I had some popcorn ... finally, something interesting in church!”

There was a guy sitting near Bill who said softly but not too softly, “Be quiet, Bill. Pastor Pete’s on a roll!”

Bill started walking up the middle aisle with a sheet of paper in his hand that he was reading from, and that’s when we all realized it was staged and part of the sermon. Every adult sighed a sigh of relief, and every youth and child was crestfallen because it wasn’t as exciting anymore.

But the sentiment that was shared in the moment was all the same, at least among the adults: “Who is Bill to disrupt everything? Who is Bill to break from tradition?”

Which is kind of how I feel about John the Baptizer every year, beloved. “Who is this guy to interrupt our Christmas preparations?”

This guy doesn’t quite fit with the rest of the nativity scene.

Instead of the peaceful angels, the gentle shepherds and even the hopeful parents kneeling over their peaceful Christ child, John the Baptizer is a madman yelling from the fringes, “Prepare the way of the Lord! Everything that is a problem, God is fixing! Get on the work crew!”

John the Baptizer’s yelling breaks our silent night. He interrupts our festivities every year.

And it happens for good reason, friends.

Because we can get on a roll with this Christmas stuff, and soon the holiday becomes less holy. I’m not talking about a fake “war on Christmas” or anything like that. I’m talking about our human tendency to make things into something they are not.

I think we, especially Christians, tend to make Christmas into this time when we gather up all our hopes and put them into this perfect little scene, this little nativity scene, and it becomes this predictable, overly romantic, sentimental little practice that we do every year.

But if John the Baptizer reminds us of anything, it's that Christmas is not sentimental—it is scandalous.

The baby in the manger is interested not in playing Christmas but in making mountains of shame disappear, valleys of despair into reservoirs of grace. Jesus is interested in calling us to help God make winding breadlines of inequality straight paths to full stomachs, and rough prejudice into smooth love.

And we need John the Baptizer to disrupt our sentimentality, to call us back to this, or else we'll sing, "O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie! Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by; yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light, the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

We'll sing that little carol and totally gloss over the fact that both the hopes (the sentiments) and the fears (the rough realities of life) are met in Jesus.

Both of them. Not just the hopes but also the fears.

And there is plenty of fear to go around.

How do we hold on to hope in these days when prices are rising, political vitriol is on a continued roll, wars rage in Ukraine and Yemen, and for every idyllic Christmas scene there's one of utter despair?

COVID still lingers.

Gun violence wages as it turns out that weapons of mass destruction aren't buried in the sands of the Middle East but are found in hands in classrooms and school hallways.

Clean water drenches lawns in parts of this country, but not a drinkable drop was found in Jackson, Miss., for months.

And this scene I began with, of good old Big Bill interrupting a sermon? I'd never try to do that these days as the scene would be more traumatizing than teachable with our collective nerves as shot as they are.

Yet here comes John the Baptizer again, with his wild-eyed wandering form, disrupting our hopes and our fears.

Every serene nativity scene should have John the Baptizer on the margins yelling at us, reminding us of this important truth: when it comes to God, it's not just about our hopes but also about our fears.

Christmas is not just about hopes. It is about fears too.

The fears of the poor and marginalized.

The fears of the young parents out there, like those Mary and Joseph faced.

The fears of the underemployed and outcast, like those the shepherds encountered.

And even the fears of the magi, who in their wealth had trouble finding Jesus—they looked for him in the halls of power, when he was in the halls of hay.

The fears that you and I have, friends.

Every Advent calendar should be broken in some way, allowing for the radical scandal of Jesus to disrupt our lives just a bit and remind us that God attends to both our hopes and our fears.

And we keep hope by knowing that God in Christ attends to not just the beauty of the world but also the broken places.

Especially them.

Actually, it's kind of funny: our Advent calendar at home is broken. We have this big one, given to us by a parishioner in Chicago, with hinged doors that open, big enough for little gifts to be put in them. The boys have played with it so much that door No. 18 broke off.

Though we could probably fix it, we haven't.

We won't.

Because it's now this visual reminder that, just steps away from the serenity of Christmas, there is still some brokenness—which is the reason for Jesus in the first place, right?

The eloquent author L.R. Knost has this wonderful quote that spoke to me this week as I was thinking of how John the Baptizer breaks up our Christmas sentimentalism every year. She writes:

*Do not be dismayed by the brokenness in the world.*

*All things break.*

*And all things can be mended.*

*Not by time, as they say, but with intention.*

*So go.*

*Love intentionally, extravagantly, unconditionally.*

*The broken world waits in darkness for the light.*

*that is you.*

John the Baptizer stands up in the middle of our Advent calendars, breaking their silent night, reminding us that hopes and fears are gathered together in Jesus, and points us back today away from the serenity of the nativity sets and the wonder of the sparkly lights to the broken world, not to bring us dismay—all things break—but to remind us of why God in Jesus shows up in the first place: to heal through intentional, extravagant, unconditional love.

And if we take seriously that God shows up in the flesh in the Christ child, we need to take seriously that Jesus, the light of the world, still shows up in that same way, in me and you.

I'm going to keep my Advent calendar broken.

Let's all keep our Advent calendars broke enough, beloved, to keep us awake to the reason that Jesus shows up at all: to tend to our hopes and our fears. No, not just our Advent calendars, all our calendars.

God still answers the pain of the world, not with a war cry but with a lullaby.

A baby's cry.

And let's get started with that intentional, extravagant, unconditional love thing.

No need to wait until Christmas. The calendar is broken, anyway, which makes every day Christmas and every day a moment for God to attend, yes, to our hopes but especially to our fears.

And that, ironically, gives some hope.

*Tim Brown is a pastor, writer, and ELCA director for congregational stewardship.*

---

### **Backyard Ministries Socks/Toys Collection**

Please take a labeled bag, fill it with a pack of socks and a small toy, and return it to the bin in the narthex before December 18th. Thank you for your continued support!

---

### **Updates from Our Members & Community**

#### **Johnstown Campus Lutheran Home - Christmas gifts for residents**

Name Angel tags are available if you want to buy a gift for a resident of the Johnstown Campus. Please call Lois Galus at 814-242-3470 to request a name for gift buying if you do not see her. Help make someone's Christmas special this year by giving a gift to a Johnstown Campus resident. If you have any questions, please call Lois at the above #.

---

#### **2023 Offering Envelopes Available in the Narthex**

The envelope numbers have been changed from the prior year. Those who donate apart from an envelope should make note of their new number once the new year begins. Those who presently don't have envelopes, but desire them, should contact the church office.

---

#### **Altar Guild**

We are reorganizing for 2023. We can never have too many helpers for this important service, so if we haven't approached you yet, please tell anyone you see cleaning up after services that you'd like to help. Join us any time. We'll show you what to do!

### **Communion Bread Sign-ups**

Communion bread sign-ups for 2023 are low. Though a number of families have signed up for a month at a time lately, this is not necessary. Please sign up to donate bread for even a week so we might be reminded of how there is one bread for the one Body of Christ.

---

### **Give Now for Eastern Europe Crisis Response**

Lutheran Disaster Response is accompanying our companions in Ukraine, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Romania, and Moldova, as well as such ecumenical partners as Lutheran World Federation and Church World Service, in their humanitarian responses to the crisis. These partners provide refugees with immediate support and supplies such as food, blankets, water, and hygiene kits. Your gifts designated for "Eastern Europe Crisis Response" will be used entirely (100%) to provide support for people impacted by conflict in the region.

---

### **Financial Update**

When the council gathered to review financial reports through the end of October, there was once again much good news to celebrate. Due to fluctuations in the financial marketplace, our overall financial holdings are down for the moment. But eventually, we'll find ourselves ahead of where we were a year ago. As for income, it's tracking slightly ahead of budget, with expenses under budget by an even greater degree. Thanks to the fine work of Mark Rychak and members of our Property Team we recently received an insurance reimbursement for much of the damage done by inconsistencies in our electrical supply.

With the holiday season soon upon us, please remember that December is the month that makes or breaks the year. If you have fallen behind in your customary giving, or have not yet made your donation for the year, please do your best to catch up by the end of the year. Thus far, things have been coming along just fine. Let's make sure to keep it that way as the year closes and as large, year end expenses start to appear. Thanks in advance for your faithfulness and your generosity.

---

### **Birthdays and Anniversaries for the Week: December 18 – December 24, 2022**

- Dec. 18** - Karen Bantley
  - Dec. 19** - Jerry Benford & Leighton Williams
  - Dec. 20** - Michelle Mowery
  - Dec. 21** - Jeff Hill
  - Dec. 22** - Nancy Elliott & Jamie McMullen
- 

### **Remember those that prayer has been requested for:**

Linda & Dick, Claudia Plows, Maddie Pierce, Gladys Haupt, Bill & Linda, Jose & Family, Dave, Tom, Lt. Hunter Bergman, and Lt. Dylan Merchant, Harold, Rick, Shirley, Debbie, David, Lauren, Billy, Barb, Sara Solarczyk, Jackie Janak, Jack, Corinne, Joan, Dan, Natalie Zerby, Pastor Scott Custead, Luella Koontz, Al Lindner & Family, Bob, Dawn, Stacy & Josh, Bob Trotter, Bill Layton, Deb Zilch, Bennett, Cassy Sojak, Paul Miller, Keith Mayket, Ruth, Pete, Teplitza Family, Ken, John Nerone, Dane Wisner, Jeff, Irene,

Karen, Erin, Susan Dyers, Bob McMullen, Wyatt George, Larry Hockensmith, Jean Pellon, Mike, Corey, Pastor Jonathan & Family, Roxanne Horner, Miriam Horner, Becky Lilja, Kathy P., Al Johnson, Chris, Donna & Danny, Cheryl, Jennifer & Family, Jaime, Matt & Ashley, Landon, Linda Haberkorn, Lorraine, Joe, Donna, Danny & Family, Becky Jo, Bill, Linda & Family, Mary, Mary Jane, Janice, Rick, Don, Mabel Ann, Betty, Cathy, Cindy, Jill, Theresa & Family, Dean, Madi & Family, Patty & Family, Sydney & Family, Paulette, Ron, Andrea, Mary Ann, Midge, Rayford, Lois A., Nicole, Trent, Kyle, Anna, Beverly, Sondra, El Warshel, Audrey Rubis, Carol, Katey, Janice, Trina & Family, Jake Wissinger, Candi Walker, Dave Brehm, Chrissy-Baby Emma, Wyatt, Gerald Barrick, the Shreffler Family, Louise, Kim, Devin, Laura & family, Dorothy, Jo Ann, John Alt, Jan Mertz, Denny, Jill Lisson, Jaci, Dominic Megia, Jackie Hauger, Sharon, Barbara, Louise & Family, Dennis, Mary M., Joel Penrod, Tim Miller, Cathy T., Paul Brodt, Kim Stayrook, April & Schuyler, Alan, & Pastor David Louder.

---

### **Condensed Worship for Sunday, December 11, 2022**

#### **Prayer of the Day**

P: Stir up the wills of all who look to you, Lord God, and strengthen our faith in your coming, that, transformed by grace, we may walk in your way; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

#### **First Reading: Isaiah 35:1-10**

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. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

P: The word of the Lord,

**A: Thanks be to God!**

**Psalm 146:5-10**

P: Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help, whose hope is in the Lord their God;

**A: who made heaven and earth, the seas, and all that is in them; who keeps promises forever;**

P: who gives justice to those who are oppressed, and food to those who hunger. The Lord sets the captive free.

**A: The Lord opens the eyes of the blind; the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous.**

P: The Lord cares for the stranger; the Lord sustains the orphan and widow, but frustrates the way of the wicked.

**A: The Lord shall reign forever, your God, O Zion, throughout all generations. Hallelujah!**

**Second Reading: James 5:7-10**

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

P: The word of the Lord,

**A: Thanks be to God!**

**Gospel: Matthew 11:2-11**

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

P: The gospel of the Lord.

**A: Praise to you, O Christ!**

## **Sermon by Pastor Scott Klimke**

Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again. This is a Christian's most basic confession. You might even say a Christian's most basic creed. Just think of how traditional churches mark off time. Every year it's: Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.

I mean: To die as Christ has died you have to live first. It's why every year we've got Christmas and Epiphany which remind us of Christ's birth, his childhood, and the earliest signs of how he was something special. Then, we've got Lent which reminds us of the opposition that ultimately led to Christ's death on a cross. And then for the rest of the year, up until late November or early December, we've got Easter and Pentecost which remind us that Christ didn't just live, didn't just suffer and die, but also rose from the dead so that he might live on and through the Holy Spirit at work in his Church. Can you say, "Christ has died. Christ is risen!"

But what of "Christ will come again?" This is Advent. In traditional churches, this is the four weeks before Christmas. When and where the traditional Church calendar is used and observed, the Church year always begins with the reminder that we're still waiting for Christ to come again. As it has quite provocatively the last two weeks, Advent reminds us that we and the rest of the Church are still waiting for swords to be beat into plowshares and for the wolf to live with lamb in peace. And one of the things we've already heard this Advent is that we can't know when Christ shall come again to fulfill all of the promises we treasure, but also still stand unfulfilled. This is not for us to know. It's not even for Christ to know. According to our reading from Matthew two weeks ago, only God the Father knows when Christ will ultimately come again. But this lack of clarity need not disturb us. We can in fact be patient as our reading from James encourages us to be. Because here's the thing. We may not know when Christ shall come again. But we do know where Christ shall be in the meantime. Christ shall be where there's nothing as a prelude to how the last shall be first and the first shall be last.

As I was preparing this sermon, it occurred to me that much of the Bible was written to fight back against misguided notions about where God shall be experienced until God and us live in the same place forever and ever. If I presented all of the evidence for this thesis, we'd be here longer than we want to be here so let me stick with just a few representative texts. Start with the first chapter of the Bible. This chapter was compiled at least twenty-one hundred years before the rise of the scientific method. Its interest isn't scientific. Science as we know it didn't exist in five hundred BC. But then, as now, people wondered about where God is to be experienced as God's plan is still unfolding. And guess what! Genesis chapter one tells us that God shall be experienced where there is nothing. I mean what is there is in the Bible's first chapter before God says, "Let there be light?" There's nothing; a formless void; a darkness as deep and as thick as the deep it covers. But where there is nothing God shows up and brings light and a whole lot more. Genesis chapter one answers what is perhaps the Bible's most important question and that's that God is to be experienced more often than not where there is nothing. But we can and do forget this. It's why so much of the Bible does fight back against false conclusions about where God shall be until the Kingdom of God comes in forever.

Turn now to 1st Kings. In the nineteenth chapter of this book, the prophet Elijah runs from the powers that be who threaten his life. Unlike King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, God doesn't come to Elijah with

bombast and power as we might expect. A great wind comes to Elijah. God isn't it. There's an earthquake. God isn't in it. A fire blazes. God is still nowhere to be found. God comes to Elijah in sheer silence. Again, where there's nothing, no sound, no sight other than a doubt-ridden prophet, God comes. You'd think we'd learn that until Christ comes again God shall be experienced most often where there is nothing. But then we've got today's reading from Matthew about John the Baptist.

At one point today, Jesus has high praise for John the Baptist, but then he says the least in the Kingdom of God shall be greater than the man he's just praised. It's hard to know what to make of this back and forth. But I do know at least a couple of things for certain. Today's text says that John the Baptist knew what Jesus had been up to before he asked if Jesus was the one for whom God's people had been waiting. I also know that eight chapters earlier on the day of Jesus' baptism none of this uncertainty and doubt was found. On the day Jesus was baptized, John the Baptist was so certain about who Jesus was that he either didn't think he was worthy to baptize Jesus or thought Jesus was so holy he didn't need baptism at all. How'd we go from this kind of certainty and faith to today's question about Jesus' identity? It may be that John was just trying to be humble; waiting for Jesus to say what he felt he wasn't qualified to say himself. Or maybe, and I think more likely, all that followed Jesus' baptism, all of Jesus' work where there was nothing, led John the Baptist to doubt if Jesus was of God after all. Harkening back to what I just got done saying about 1st Kings, maybe John was looking for God in winds and earthquakes and fires so much that he failed to experience God among the blind, the lame, the deaf, the dead, and the poor. For students of Scripture who remain mindful of what they've learned, Jesus had been right where God was supposed to be; right where there was nothing. But even someone as significant as John the Baptist likely missed it because of misguided ideas and notions about where God is to be experienced until the Kingdom of God comes in forever.

If I'm right about this, it would have been completely out of character for John. But then again, falling out of character is what sinners like you, me, and John the Baptist do, right! In today's reading, John the Baptist is associated with a verse from Malachi. More often, and as was the case with last week's reading from Matthew, John the Baptist is associated with a figure we first hear about in the fortieth chapter of Isaiah. This is a chapter that begins: Comfort, o comfort my people, says your God. John the Baptist was to be a comforter. To again pick up the language of the fortieth chapter of Isaiah, he was to comfort those who were in a prison of their own making with terms of parole set twice as high as they should have been. With his words of comfort to these people, John the Baptist was to go where God so often goes and that's where there is nothing. But somehow, somehow, John seems to have lost sight of this. It's a prime example, to quote a country song of some note, of how we can go looking for love in all the wrong places.

Love, as in God who is love, is found not in the warm and comfy inn, but out in the barn. Love, as in God who is love, is found in Jesus dying on the cross. Love, as in God who is love, was found in the witness of simple fishermen from Galilee two thousand year ago and in the witness of simple people like you and me today. Love, as in God who is love, is found in tap water; in grain and grape; among sinners like you and me who are ready to confess their unworthiness; how their nothing with God. Love, that is, shows up where there is nothing and proceeds to make something of the nothing. May

we not forget this as we wait for Christ to come at a time we cannot predict and in a manner that will likely surprise us. Again, God shall come where there is nothing.

And so, if you have nothing or feel like nothing, don't despair. Eventually, you shall meet and experience God as others who have something make too much of it. And if you're one of those who does have something, don't wait until it becomes nothing. Instead, use your something to prove that God comes where there is nothing by helping those who have nothing to come in from their literal or figurative cold. It's what we're called to do as we wait for Christ to come again. In our patient waiting, we're to be the living proof that God comes where there is nothing; turning nothing into something; helping the last to become first. Amen!

### **Prayers of Intercession**

P: As we prepare for the fullness of Christ's presence, let us pray for a world that yearns for new hope.

P: Gracious God, we rejoice in the gifts of your Spirit. Equip the global church to magnify your love and peace in every land. We pray for the work of the Lutheran World Federation and ELCA Global Mission. God, in your mercy,

**A: Hear our prayer.**

P: Abundant God, we rejoice in your creation. Revive lands we have squandered and depleted. Make gardens flourish in cities and neighborhoods. Cleanse polluted air and water so living things may breathe, drink, and praise you. God, in your mercy,

**A: Hear our prayer.**

P: Righteous God, we rejoice in your justice. End racism and oppression. Deliver all who are unjustly imprisoned or persecuted. Reconcile nations and peoples in conflict, especially Ukraine. Help us pray for our enemies. God, in your mercy,

**A: Hear our prayer.**

P: Healing God, we rejoice in your compassion. Comfort any in distress because of worry, illness, or loss (especially). Strengthen and protect health care workers, rescue teams, crisis counselors, and all who risk themselves to keep others safe. God, in your mercy,

**A: Hear our prayer.**

P: Abiding God, we rejoice in your company. Give us calm and patient hearts as we gather with family and friends. Keep us mindful of those for whom this season is not happy. Console the grieving and surround them with loving support. God, in your mercy,

**A: Hear our prayer.**

P: Faithful God, we rejoice with Mary, Mother of our Lord, and with all the saints, that your mercy endures for all generations. Look with favor on those who have died and lead us to joyfully sing of your everlasting promises. God, in your mercy,

**A: Hear our prayer.**

P: God of our longing, you know our deepest needs. By your Spirit, gather our prayers and join them with the prayers of all your children. In Jesus' name we pray.

**A: Amen.**

### **Blessing**

P: May God, who gathers us in love, lead you in pathways of righteousness and justice. May God, who knows us more deeply than we know ourselves, lead you in pathways of forgiveness and freedom. May God, who fills us with good things, lead you in pathways of equity and abundance. The blessing of the holy Trinity, † one God, be upon you and remain with you forever. **Amen.**