

ADVENT 2024 PLANNING GUIDE



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GOD'S WORD IS LIFE

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Introduction

This Advent material invites us into the heart of the Gospel—the proclamation of Christ’s coming for the forgiveness of sins. Advent is a season rich with promise and hope, as we focus on what God is doing for us in Christ. Each week centers on the message that Christ’s coming brings forgiveness and renewal, drawing us deeper into the joy of His presence.

Throughout this guide, we are reminded that Advent is not just about waiting—it’s about receiving. We receive Christ’s love, His forgiveness, and His promises, made known to us through His Word and Sacraments. This guide is enriched with hymn suggestions that reflect the beauty of these themes, Greek word studies that illuminate the Scriptures, and commentary that grounds us in the great narrative of God’s salvation. Every aspect of this guide works together to help us see that Christ’s coming brings grace, life, and forgiveness.

Luther’s *Small Catechism* on baptism is woven into each week, particularly in the final week, where we focus on the joy of Christ’s incarnation and the gift of baptism. Baptism is where God’s promises become personal—where we are joined to Christ’s death and resurrection. As the *Small Catechism* teaches, baptism “works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation.” This promise of new life in baptism is at the heart of Advent, as we remember that Christ comes for us, to forgive, restore, and make us new.

Week by week, this guide leads us into a deeper understanding of what Christ’s coming means. In Week 1, we explore the hope that Christ brings into the darkness, a light shining for all who trust in Him. In Week 2, we reflect on the call to repentance, knowing that God’s grace meets us with forgiveness and mercy. Week 3 brings us to the joy of God’s redemption, a joy that flows from knowing that Christ’s work is complete and that we are His. And finally, in Week 4, we celebrate the love of God made flesh in Christ, a love that is given to us through the gift of baptism.

Every promise of Advent—hope, repentance, joy, and love—is fulfilled in Christ and given to us through His Word and Sacraments.

The Advent season invites us to reflect on the depth of God’s love for us, shown through Christ’s coming. Through the teachings of Luther’s *Small Catechism*, we are reminded that baptism is a means by which God brings His grace to us personally, day by day. In baptism, we are connected to Christ’s work, and every promise of the Gospel is applied to our lives.

The included Greek word studies offer a powerful way to dig beneath the surface of Scripture, revealing the richness of the original language and bringing to light the deeper theological meanings that often get lost in translation. By carefully exploring key terms, we discover the layers of meaning that deepen our understanding of God’s work, especially as revealed through the theology of the cross. Words like “glory” and “elect” take on a whole new depth, reminding us that God’s power is shown in weakness and His grace is given to those who cannot earn it. For preachers and teachers, these studies become tools to open the text, connecting it to the broader biblical story and showing how God works in unexpected ways—through suffering, humility, and ultimately, through the cross. Word studies can help us communicate these truths more clearly, making the radical message of the Gospel more accessible to those listening. It’s all about taking the profound and sometimes complex message of Scripture and showing how it speaks directly to us in everyday life.

The commentaries for each week hit right at the intersection of theology and real life, making them suitable for sermons, Bible studies, or even quick reflections in your church bulletin. They get to the core of what people need to hear: that God's promises, fulfilled in Christ, are for those of us who don't have it all together. They offer a clear path from the Old Testament promises to the surprising way God fulfills them through the cross—an upside-down, unexpected kind of victory that confronts both our illusions of strength and our deep sense of weakness.

For sermons, these reflections are like a roadmap that takes your congregation from the familiar stories of David and the prophets and plunges them into the radical truth of the Gospel: that the King we were promised didn't come to conquer, but to suffer for us. These are words that speak to the exhausted, the disappointed, and the sinner in all of us. They help preachers bring home the idea that Christ's kingdom is founded not on power or success, but on mercy—on what He has done for you, not what you do for Him.

Bulletin inserts can bring these ideas into the everyday lives of your congregation in a way that's both thoughtful and approachable. They offer a short, engaging message that connects the dots between God's promises and their fulfillment in Jesus—perfect for a quick read, but with enough depth to spark reflection. It's a way of reminding people, as they go about their week, that God's work happens not through our victories, but through His grace.

In Bible studies, these commentaries provide a launching point for honest, meaningful conversation about how God works in our lives through weakness, suffering, and unexpected grace. The scriptural references root the discussion in the text, while the theology of the cross invites participants to consider how God's mercy shows up precisely when things seem lost. It's a chance for people to discover that the Gospel is not good advice, but good news for those of us who know we can't fix ourselves.

The Advent candle liturgies serve as a time of reflection and anticipation, guiding the congregation through the key themes of Advent—hope, peace, joy, and love. These liturgies draw us into the heart of Advent, focusing not on what we must do, but on what Christ has already done for us, renewing our faith in the promise of His coming again.

These Advent resources are offered as a guide to help congregations prepare hearts and minds for the coming of Christ. They are designed to reflect the rich themes of hope, repentance, joy, and love, especially through the lens of baptism and God's Word. However, as every congregation is unique, I encourage you to adapt any or all of these materials to suit your own needs, traditions, and the ways that best serve the proclamation of the gospel. Whether you use these activities as they are or modify them to fit your community, my prayer is that they help you focus on the grace of Christ this Advent season.

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WEEKLY PLANNING GUIDE

WEEK 1: THE PROMISE OF HIS COMING (ISAIAH 64:1-9, MARK 13:24-37)

SERMON FOCUS:

Isaiah's call for God to "rend the heavens and come down" is fulfilled in the advent of Christ, who comes into the world for the forgiveness of sins. The imagery in Mark 13 is not a warning for us to be ready but a proclamation that Christ's coming disrupts our self-reliance and brings salvation to a helpless world. The message here is not instruction, but the announcement that Christ has already come for you, forgiving your sins.

HYMN SUGGESTIONS:

- "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"
- "The Advent of Our God"

KEY GREEK WORD STUDIES:

1. ἔσχατος (eschatos) – "Last" or "End"

- *Eschatos* is not just about the grand, triumphant culmination of history, but also about the hidden way in which God brings about His purposes through suffering and humiliation. Jesus' crucifixion, often seen as defeat, is the decisive moment of victory over sin and death. The *eschatos* marks the final revelation of this paradox: that true power is found in weakness and self-giving love. The end times reflect how God turns worldly expectations upside down, revealing that the true King reigns from the cross.

2. ἐκλεκτός (eklektos) – "The Elect"

- The *elect*, or those chosen by God, are not chosen based on their strength, moral superiority, or worldly significance, but because of God's sheer grace and mercy. The theology of the cross emphasizes that God's election often involves suffering, as seen in the lives of the prophets, the apostles, and ultimately in Christ Himself. Being among the *eklektos* means being identified with Christ's suffering, rejection, and death. The gathering of the *eklektos* at the end of the age will be a vindication of God's grace to the lowly, those who have shared in the fellowship of Christ's suffering.

3. δόξα (doxa) – "Glory"

- Rather than a glory associated with earthly power, wealth, or triumph, God's glory is most profoundly revealed in the suffering and crucifixion of Christ. The cross, an instrument of shame, becomes the throne from which Jesus reigns in glory. His return in *doxa* reflects this paradoxical glory, where what the world sees as weakness (the cross) is the greatest manifestation of God's power and love. When Jesus returns in *doxa*, it will confirm the unexpected way in which God's glory has always been displayed—through sacrifice and suffering for the sake of others.

4. θλιψις (thlipsis) – "Tribulation"

- Tribulation, suffering, and affliction are not signs of God's absence or defeat, but of His active presence and work in the world. In Mark 13, the great tribulation precedes Christ's return, symbolizing the birth pangs of the new creation. The theology of the cross teaches that through *thlipsis*, God's people are conformed to the image of the crucified Christ, sharing in His sufferings as part of their participation in His victory. It is precisely in *thlipsis* that God's strength is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).

5. συναγω (synagō) – "To Gather Together"

- The gathering of the *eklektos* is a powerful image of the final act of God's salvation. This gathering is not of the powerful or self-reliant, but of the baptized, those who have been humbled, broken, and crucified with Christ. The *synagō* reflects the way in which God gathers His people from their tribulations and afflictions, calling them out of death into life through the cross and resurrection. It is a gathering of those who have nothing to offer but their need, gathered by the God who meets them in their weakness.

6. ἀγρυπνέω (agrypneō) – "Keep Awake" or "Watch"

- To remain awake means to be attuned to God's presence in the hidden, unexpected places—especially in suffering and weakness. Jesus calls His followers to be watchful, not for worldly signs of power or success, but for His coming in humility and lowliness, as He first came. Keeping awake is about being ready to receive God's grace even now amid tribulation and to see His kingdom breaking in through Word and sacrament.

COMMENTARY:

Mark's Gospel was written in a time of profound turmoil, a period of intense suffering under the iron fist of Roman oppression. Roman suppression of revolts, and the pervasive fear of persecution left many wondering where God was in the midst of it all. For early Christians, this wasn't a theoretical concern; it was the reality of life under an empire that seemed to have all the power. Rome's dominance, with its emperor claiming divine status and ruling by force, cast a long shadow over everything.

Into this darkness, Mark speaks a word that cuts against the grain of everything the world holds dear. He doesn't present Jesus as another would-be conqueror, someone who would overthrow the empire by force or establish a kingdom through military might. Instead, Mark offers something far more radical. As Jesus said, "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Here we see the theology of the cross in its most profound form. His victory comes not in crushing His enemies, but in being crushed by them and for them, echoing Isaiah's prophecy of the suffering servant: "He was pierced for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities" (Isaiah 53:5).

For the early Christians facing persecution, Mark's Gospel was more than just words of comfort; it was a declaration of reality as God sees it. In a world obsessed with power, control, and strength, the Gospel of Mark turns it all on its head. Christ's power is revealed in weakness. His glory is found in suffering. His triumph comes through the cross, as Paul later writes, "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18). And that, right there, is the heart of the theology of the cross.

The world would look at the cross and see defeat. And in worldly terms, it is. But the theology of the cross shows us that God works precisely in the places where we think He's absent. It's on the cross that Christ meets the full weight of sin and death, not by avoiding them but by entering into them, fully. God's decisive action against the powers of sin and death happens in the very place where all seems lost. As Jesus cries out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34), He embodies the depth of human despair—and yet it is here that God's salvation unfolds.

Mark's apocalyptic imagery—wars, earthquakes, and suffering (Mark 13:7-8)—wasn't meant to drive the early Christians to despair. Quite the opposite. It was a declaration that even when the world seems to be falling apart, God is at work. Christ's return is not something to fear but the ultimate fulfillment of the victory He's already won on the cross.

The theology of the cross doesn't just redefine the suffering of Christ; it redefines the suffering of His people. For those early Christians—and for us today—it means that God is present precisely in the places where we feel abandoned, broken, and helpless. It's in those moments that the cross speaks the loudest. As Paul reminds us, "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers... will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39). Christ has already borne the full weight of sin and death, and He has come out the other side in resurrection. The tomb is empty. His suffering wasn't the end of the story; it was the path to victory.

Mark's Gospel, with its clear proclamation of Christ crucified, tells us that the victory has already been won. Rome may have the appearance of power, but it's Christ who reigns. The emperor may claim divine status, but it's Christ who is truly God. And this God, this Savior, isn't distant or detached. He's the one who enters into our suffering, who takes on our sin, and who gives us His victory. The theology of the cross tells us that it's not our strength, not our efforts, but Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection that bring salvation.

And that's the heart of Mark's Gospel for us today. In a world still marked by suffering, oppression, and sin, the theology of the cross proclaims that Christ has come. He has borne our sins, suffered in our place, and risen in victory. The cross is not the end, but the means by which God brings new life. Christ's suffering is our salvation, and His resurrection is our hope. The world may still groan under the weight of sin, but Christ has already won the victory. And that victory is for you.

WEEK 2: A VOICE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS (ISAIAH 40:1-11, MARK 1:1-8)

SERMON FOCUS:

John the Baptist's call is not a command for us to change, to repent ourselves, but the proclamation that God's kingdom has drawn near in Christ, who takes away the sin of the world. The wilderness symbolizes the barrenness of human effort, and it is here that God's Word of forgiveness enters. John's baptism points to Christ, the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, who repents us, cleansing us from sin and death.

HYMN SUGGESTIONS:

- "On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry"
- "Prepare the Royal Highway"

KEY GREEK WORD STUDIES:

1. Εὐαγγέλιον (euangelion) – "Good News" or "Gospel" (Mark 1:1)

- In Mark 1:1, *euangelion* refers to the proclamation of the "good news" about Jesus Christ. The term originally referred to announcements of victory or the accession of a new king. In the Christian context, it signifies the announcement of the ultimate victory over sin and death through Jesus. Mark's Gospel opens with this word, signaling that what follows is the fulfillment of God's promises and the arrival of salvation. Theologically, *euangelion* is not just news, but transformative news that changes the reality of those who hear and receive it.

2. Χριστός (Christos) – "Christ" or "Anointed One" (Mark 1:1)

- *Christos* is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *Messiah*, meaning "anointed one." In the Jewish tradition, kings and priests were anointed as a sign of being chosen by God. In Mark 1:1, Jesus is identified as *Christos*, signaling that He is the long-awaited Messiah, anointed by God to bring about redemption. This title sets the tone for the entire Gospel, which reveals that Jesus' messiahship will be defined not by political power but by suffering and sacrifice, aligning with the theology of the cross.

3. Ἀρχή (archē) – "Beginning" (Mark 1:1)

- *Archē* signifies the starting point or origin of something. In Mark 1:1, it is used to describe the "beginning" of the gospel of Jesus Christ, framing the entire narrative as the start of God's redemptive plan coming to fruition. Theologically, *archē* reflects both a historical and cosmic significance—the beginning of Jesus' public ministry is the initiation of the fulfillment of God's promises for the world. This echoes Genesis 1:1, where creation begins, suggesting that the coming of Christ is the start of a new creation.

4. Μετανοέω (metanoeō) – "Repent" (Mark 1:4)

- *Metanoeō* means "to change one's mind" or "to repent." In Mark 1:4, John the Baptist preaches a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Theologically, repentance (*metanoia*) is more than just feeling sorry for sins—it involves a radical transformation of heart and mind, being turned away from sin by God. We are repented, highlighting the urgency and transformative power of the Gospel.

5. Ἀφεσις (aphesis) – "Forgiveness" (Mark 1:4)

- In Mark 1:4, *aphesis* refers to the forgiveness of sins that comes through repentance and baptism. The term carries the sense of being released from the burden or penalty of sin. It underscores the idea that through repentance, God offers a fresh start, a complete release from the consequences of sin. In the theology of the cross, this release comes through the sacrificial death of Jesus, who bears the penalty of sin on behalf of humanity.

6. Βάπτισμα (baptisma) – "Baptism" (Mark 1:4)

- *Baptisma* in Mark 1:4 refers to the baptism of repentance that John the Baptist offered. In Jewish tradition, immersion in water was associated with purification and renewal. John's baptism, however,

marks a unique call for spiritual renewal in preparation for the coming of Christ. This *baptisma* points forward to the greater baptism that Jesus would institute, not just of water but of the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8). Theologically, it signifies both cleansing from sin and a new identity in God's redemptive plan.

COMMENTARY:

John's baptism in the wilderness wasn't just a religious box to check or a "get your life together" pep talk. It was something deeper, tapping into Israel's history of being rescued from slavery and led into freedom. The whole thing was a reminder: salvation isn't about what you can do for yourself—it's about what God does for you. Out in the wilderness, John's baptism stripped away any idea of self-reliance. It was a loud proclamation that God's salvation is for people who know they can't fix themselves. "I will pour water on the thirsty land... and my Spirit upon your offspring" (Isaiah 44:3). John's baptism couldn't repent people repent, but it pointed them to the One who could—God Himself.

The wilderness is where you come face-to-face with your own helplessness. Think about Israel's journey after leaving Egypt. They couldn't survive in the wilderness on their own—God had to provide the manna, the water, everything. "He split the rocks in the wilderness and gave them drink abundantly" (Psalm 78:15). John's baptism picks up on that same theme. He's not in the city where people can rely on wealth or status; he's in the wilderness, where you're laid bare. No more hiding behind self-made security.

John's message hit home for people who were at the end of their rope. His call to repentance wasn't about self-improvement or trying harder. It was about realizing how completely dependent we are on God's mercy. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). The whole point? Get ready, because God is coming to save—not you. "Prepare the way of the Lord" (Isaiah 40:3).

But here's the key: John's baptism was never the final word. It was always about preparing the way for something bigger. John knew his role—he was the opening act for Jesus. "I baptize you with water, but He who is mightier than I is coming" (Luke 3:16). John's baptism was just the beginning, a sign pointing to Jesus, the One who would take away the sin of the world.

This is where the theology of the cross turns everything upside down. The world values strength and self-sufficiency, but God works through weakness and helplessness. John's baptism in the Jordan declares that salvation comes to those who know they need it. And Jesus fulfills this by doing what we can't—dying for us, putting our old selves to death, and raising us to new life. "If we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His" (Romans 6:5).

For John's followers, his baptism marked a turning point—it was a sign that something huge was about to happen. John's baptism said, "Get ready, the One who truly forgives sins is coming." And when Jesus showed up, He brought something far greater. John baptized with water, but Jesus baptized with the Holy Spirit, repenting us from the inside out. "I will give you a new heart and a new spirit" (Ezekiel 36:26).

That's the power of John's ministry. It points us to the bigger picture: Christ's baptism, where the real deal happens—complete forgiveness of sins. John's baptism foreshadowed what Jesus would accomplish on the cross. When we are baptized, it's not just water—it's a promise. The Holy Spirit makes us new, joining us to Christ's death and resurrection. "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Galatians 3:27).

So, what's the takeaway? John's baptism wasn't about self-improvement. It was about realizing we're completely dependent on God's mercy. And it pointed us straight to Christ, who does the real saving. "For by grace you have been saved... it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8). In baptism, we are buried with Christ and raised to new life—not because of what we've done, but because of what He's done for us.

That's the Gospel. That's the theology of the cross. And that's why John's message is still powerful today. It's a reminder that God's salvation is for the helpless, for those who trust in the One who came to die for us all.

WEEK 3: REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS (ISAIAH 61:1-4, 8-11; 1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-24; JOHN 1:6-8, 19-28)

SERMON FOCUS:

The joy proclaimed this week is not based on what we do but on the assurance that Christ has come to forgive our sins. Isaiah's good news is that Christ has come to bring forgiveness and freedom, and this is where our joy rests—not in our efforts but in God's action in Christ. The call to "rejoice always" in 1 Thessalonians is not a demand for constant cheerfulness but an invitation to rest in the unshakable reality that Christ has forgiven your sins.

HYMN SUGGESTIONS:

- "Rejoice, Rejoice, Believers"
- "Hark, the Glad Sound!"

KEY GREEK WORD STUDIES:

1. Μαρτυρία (martyria) – "Testimony" or "Witness" (John 1:7, 19)

John's role is not about himself but about pointing others to Christ. The word *martyria* reminds us that John isn't simply delivering a set of religious facts—he's proclaiming what is true, even in the face of opposition. John's entire life serves as a testimony to the One who is coming, and in this, he shows us the heart of Christian witness. We don't proclaim ourselves but Christ, the light of the world, who brings hope into the darkness.

2. Φῶς (phōs) – "Light" (John 1:7-8)

Phōs, the light, is not just illumination—it's life itself, the very presence of God shining into a world that cannot find its way. John was not that light, but he bore witness to it, preparing the way for the true light, Jesus. This light isn't about understanding better or being more religious; it's about the presence of Christ who shines into our darkness and brings us to life. When the light of Christ shines, it brings forgiveness, clarity, truth, and, above all, redemption.

3. Πιστεύω (pisteuō) – "Believe" (John 1:7)

To *pisteuō* is to believe, not just intellectually, but with a trust that reaches deep into your soul. John's testimony was meant to bring people to faith in Jesus, to call them into something more than understanding—to a life lived in dependence on Christ. Faith isn't a box we check, but a way of life, trusting that this light is for you. It's the recognition that in Christ, through baptism's promise, we are brought into a relationship that transforms us, even as we wrestle with our brokenness.

4. Χριστός (Christos) – "Christ" or "Anointed One" (John 1:20)

John was clear: he was not the *Christos*. This title points directly to the one true anointed King, Jesus, the long-promised Messiah who doesn't come in worldly power, but in humility. The title *Christos* captures the fulfillment of all the Old Testament promises, and yet Jesus turns every expectation on its head. His anointing leads not to a throne but to a cross, and His victory is found in sacrifice. This is the Messiah, the Christ, who comes not to conquer, but to redeem.

5. Ἐρήμος (erēmos) – "Wilderness" or "Desert" (John 1:23)

The *erēmos* is where John's voice cries out, and it's no coincidence. The wilderness is where God meets His people in their need. It's a place of stripping away, of preparation, where we're reminded that our strength is not enough. In the wilderness, we are laid bare, and it's there that God comes to us. John's call in the wilderness is a reminder that before we can receive the Messiah, we need to recognize our need for Him. The wilderness is where God's grace meets our emptiness.

6. Βάπτισμα (baptisma) – "Baptism" (John 1:25-26)

John's *baptisma* was a sign of repentance, but it was only a shadow of what was to come. John's baptism prepared the way for something greater—the baptism of the Holy Spirit that Jesus would bring. This *baptisma* pointed to the deeper cleansing that Christ brings through His death and resurrection. Theologically, it's a reminder that in baptism, we are not only washed of our sins but made new, joined to Christ's own death and raised to life in Him.

COMMENTARY:

Isaiah's prophecy wasn't just a feel-good message for a people coming home from exile. It was a word of hope for those who had been crushed—people who had lost everything and needed a sign that God hadn't abandoned them. The Israelites, returning from Babylon, wanted to know God was still with them. Isaiah's words hit home: God wasn't done with them yet. "The LORD will comfort Zion... He will make her deserts like Eden" (Isaiah 51:3). It was a promise that wasn't about what they had done, but all about who God is—faithful, merciful, and full of love. "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions... and remembers your sins no more" (Isaiah 43:25).

But here's where things get flipped. Isaiah's message wasn't just about getting back to normal. It wasn't just about rebuilding a temple or restoring political power. No, the real restoration God had in mind was so much bigger. It wasn't about human effort or religious rituals. It was about forgiveness—about God reconciling broken people to Himself. And the only way that happens? Through the cross. "He was pierced for our transgressions... by His wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

Fast forward to the New Testament, and we see that Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. He's the one who brings restoration—not just for Israel, but for everyone. And He doesn't do it with armies or political power. He does it by laying down His life. "The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost" (Luke 19:10). Jesus didn't come to rebuild walls; He came to break the wall between us and God by dying on a cross.

Let that sink in. The Israelites were hoping for a return to the "good old days"—their land, their temple, their power. But God had something bigger in mind: not just a restoration of their circumstances, but a restoration of

their souls. “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you” (Ezekiel 36:26). And how did He do it? In a way no one expected: through the suffering and death of His Son.

The theology of the cross tells us that God’s greatest work happens where the world sees only failure. The cross? It was a symbol of shame and defeat. But it’s there that God accomplishes His ultimate victory. Christ took on the weight of sin, “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:19). It’s through His death that we are restored.

For Israel, returning from exile was a big moment, but it was only a glimpse of what was coming. The walls of Jerusalem would crumble again, and the temple wouldn’t last. “Not one stone will be left on another,” Jesus said (Mark 13:2). But the restoration Jesus brings? That’s forever. It’s about fixing the real problem—sin. Jesus didn’t come to put a band-aid on things; He came to get to the root. “Christ also suffered once for sins... to bring you to God” (1 Peter 3:18). And He did it by taking it all on Himself at the cross.

Isaiah’s prophecy wasn’t just for exiles longing for home. It was for all of us who feel lost, broken, and cut off from God. And the good news? Christ has already done the work of restoring us. Not by force, but by His Spirit, through His death and resurrection. “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the LORD (Zechariah 4:6). That’s the kind of restoration Isaiah was talking about—the one Christ made possible for you in your baptism. “We were buried with him through baptism... that we too may live a new life” (Romans 6:4). That’s the restoration we receive, not through anything we’ve done, but as a pure gift from the One who loves us enough to die for us.

WEEK 4: THE WORD MADE FLESH (2 SAMUEL 7:1-11, 16; ROMANS 16:25-27; LUKE 1:26-38)

SERMON FOCUS:

The incarnation is the culmination of God’s promise—Christ, the Word, becomes flesh for you, to forgive your sins. Gabriel’s announcement to Mary is not about her faithfulness but about God’s faithfulness in bringing salvation to the world through His Son. This is not an exhortation to welcome Christ, but the proclamation that God has already acted for you in Christ, who comes to take on human flesh, bear your sins, and give you life through His death and resurrection.

HYMN SUGGESTIONS:

- “O Little Town of Bethlehem”
- “Savior of the Nations, Come”

KEY GREEK WORD STUDY:

1. Χαριτόω (charitoō) – "Favored" or "Graced" (Luke 1:28)

- When the angel Gabriel greets Mary, he calls her "highly favored" or *charitoō*. This word means "to bestow grace" or "to be graced by God." It highlights that Mary’s role in God’s plan isn’t something she earned; it’s a gift. *Charitoō* captures the essence of grace—God choosing someone not because of their worthiness but because of His mercy. For Mary, this grace marks the beginning of something far beyond

her, the arrival of the Savior for the world. This grace is unearned and unstoppable, reminding us that God works through ordinary people in extraordinary ways.

2. Φοβέομαι (phobeomai) – "Fear" (Luke 1:30)

- Gabriel tells Mary not to be afraid—*phobeomai*. This word goes beyond the simple emotion of fear; it conveys awe, reverence, and sometimes terror. When God shows up in our lives, it's natural to be afraid because His plans often disrupt our sense of control. Yet, *phobeomai* in this context also points to the way God reassures and invites us into trust. Mary's fear turns to awe and trust as she listens to Gabriel's message, reminding us that God's plans often take us beyond our comfort zones but are always wrapped in His grace.

3. Ἰησοῦς (Iēsous) – "Jesus" (Luke 1:31)

- The name *Iēsous* is the Greek form of the Hebrew *Yeshua*, meaning "the Lord saves." This name isn't just a label; it encapsulates the mission of the one who will be born to Mary. Jesus is the embodiment of salvation, God's rescue plan in human form. In the context of Luke 1:31, *Iēsous* is a powerful declaration: this child will bring salvation; a deep, personal, eternal rescue from sin and death. It's the name that will change everything for the world.

4. Πνεῦμα Ἅγιον (Pneuma Hagion) – "Holy Spirit" (Luke 1:35)

- Gabriel tells Mary that the *Pneuma Hagion*, or Holy Spirit, will come upon her. *Pneuma* means "breath" or "spirit," and in this case, it refers to God's divine presence and power. The *Pneuma Hagion* is God's creative force, the same Spirit that hovered over the waters in Genesis and now works a new creation in Mary. This phrase points to the mystery of the incarnation—the Holy Spirit will enable the impossible, bringing life where there was none. It's a reminder that the Spirit is always at work, doing things beyond what we can comprehend or accomplish on our own.

5. Δυνατός (dynatos) – "Powerful" or "Able" (Luke 1:37)

- Gabriel tells Mary that "nothing is impossible with God," using the word *dynatos*. This term is about power, the ability to make things happen. It's the same root where we get words like "dynamite." *Dynatos* speaks to God's unstoppable power—the power to bring about His purposes, no matter how improbable they seem to us. Theologically, this word is at the heart of the passage: God's power is not limited by human limitations. What seems impossible to us is fully within the realm of God's ability, which is why Mary can trust Gabriel's message.

6. Δούλη (doulē) – "Servant" (Luke 1:38)

- Mary's response to the angel is to call herself the *doulē* of the Lord, meaning "servant" or "slave." This term reflects humility and submission, but it's not about demeaning oneself. Rather, *doulē* expresses Mary's obedience to God's plan, even though it will cost her greatly. Mary embodies the faithful response to God's grace—not in passive acceptance but in active, humble service. Her *doulē* response becomes a model for all believers: to receive God's grace through the gift of faith is to trust that His plans are good even when they lead us into the unknown.

COMMENTARY:

God's promise to David was never just about another king sitting on a throne in Jerusalem. It was something much bigger, deeper, and eternal. When God said, "Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever" (2 Samuel 7:16), He wasn't talking about a typical kingdom with palaces and armies. The fulfillment of that promise was never meant to look like earthly power.

Fast forward to the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary. He ties the ancient promise to David straight to the birth of Jesus: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David" (Luke 1:32). This is Israel's long-awaited king! But here's the twist: Jesus doesn't come with military might or political strategy. He arrives quietly, in humility—born in a stable. His kingdom? Built on sacrifice, not conquest. Think about it: His throne isn't gilded in gold—it's a wooden cross. His crown? Thorns, not jewels. This is the theology of the cross, flipping all our expectations upside down.

We're often looking for a leader who can take charge, someone to "fix" things. But God's solution to the mess of sin and death doesn't come through domination. It comes through Jesus' suffering and self-giving love. "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). The kingdom Jesus establishes isn't about borders, armies, or political power. It's about forgiveness—about reconciling us with God.

The world today pushes us to admire strength and success. We crave leaders who can take control and show their power. But the cross offers something radically different. Jesus, the King, didn't rise through conquest. He rose by laying down His life. His power is seen in His sacrifice. "God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong" (1 Corinthians 1:27). His kingdom grows not by crushing enemies but by overcoming sin, death, and the devil through His own death and resurrection.

The promise God made to David wasn't about restoring some glorious kingdom. It was about sending a Savior to deal with the real enemies—the ones we can't defeat on our own. Jesus didn't come to bring Israel back to its former glory. He came to bring us all into a new kind of kingdom—a kingdom where forgiveness reigns and grace is the law of the land. "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).

It's hard to grasp sometimes, especially when we're wired to expect victory to look like domination. But Jesus' victory comes in the most unexpected way—through the cross. That's where His kingdom is built. His reign is not over nations but over the hearts of those redeemed by His love. And that reign? It's forever.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

The theology of the cross, central to the previous commentary articles, reveals that Christ's kingship is not established through worldly power or dominance but through weakness, suffering, and ultimately, the cross. This same paradox is at the heart of Luther's teaching on baptism. Luther's Small Catechism describes baptism as "a washing of regeneration" that "works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe." Baptism, like the cross, is not about human strength or achievement but is entirely a gift of God's grace. Just as Christ's victory comes through His death, baptism brings new life and the forgiveness of sins through the water and the Word, not through anything we do, but through what God has done in Christ.

The promise of a Davidic king in 2 Samuel, fulfilled in Jesus, reflects God's faithfulness, but the fulfillment comes in an unexpected way. Christ's reign, as promised to David, is eternal, but it's a spiritual reign established in the hearts of believers. This is where baptism comes in: it is in baptism that Christ claims us as His own, bringing us into His eternal kingdom. The Catechism emphasizes that in baptism, we are united with Christ's death and resurrection (Romans 6:3-4), meaning that just as Christ reigns through suffering and sacrifice, we too are called to live in the reality of the cross through our baptismal identity. This connection to the Davidic promise shows that Jesus' kingdom is not about earthly power but about the renewal of life, starting in baptism, where we are made new in Him.

Moreover, Luther teaches that baptism is not a mere symbol but an actual means of grace. The commentaries' focus on Christ's sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins align with Luther's view that through baptism, we receive the forgiveness won by Christ on the cross. As we are baptized into His name, we share in the benefits of His death—His victory over sin, death, and the devil becomes ours, not by our efforts, but by God's grace. The cleansing waters of baptism bring about the very forgiveness that was achieved on the cross, fulfilling the promise that through Christ, our sins are washed away (Ephesians 5:25-26).

Christian Vocation

Living out one's baptismal identity is inseparable from living out one's Christian vocation. Baptism shapes not just who we are, but how we are called to serve in this world. As Christ's kingship is expressed through service, humility, and suffering, we are restored to the creation to embody these values in our daily vocations—whether as parents, workers, neighbors, or friends. Luther's Catechism reminds us that baptism gives us new life, not solely for our benefit, but for the sake of others. Through our vocations, we participate in Christ's work, bearing His cross by serving those around us with love and humility. In our day-to-day tasks, even the mundane, we reflect the victory of Christ's sacrifice.

Understanding baptism as a gift of grace reframes how we engage with our vocations, especially in moments of struggle, doubt, or failure. We are not called to rely on our own strength or achievements in fulfilling our vocations. Instead, baptism assures us that we belong to Christ, and through His grace, we are equipped for the tasks at hand. The theology of the cross teaches us that God's power is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9), which means that in our vocational callings, it is not our competence or success that matters most, God's work through us. Baptism gives us the confidence to serve without fear of failure, knowing that our value and purpose come from Christ's mercy, not our performance.

The connection between the Davidic promise and baptism helps us see our vocations as participation in Christ's eternal kingdom. Whether we are caring for children, working in an office, or simply showing kindness to a neighbor, we are living out our baptismal call. It is in these ordinary acts of service that we manifest Christ's reign, a kingdom built not on power or success, but on grace, mercy, and forgiveness.

In this way, Christian vocation becomes a daily expression of our baptism, where we live out the calling to serve others in the name of Christ, trusting that even in our weakness, God is at work.

ADVENT 2024 WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Advent is both a season of waiting and of receiving. And what are we receiving? God's promises—promises fulfilled in Christ and made ours through baptism. Baptism isn't just an event in the past; it's a present reality, grounding us in Christ's death and resurrection. Luther's *Small Catechism* makes this clear: baptism "works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation." So, as we journey through Advent, we'll integrate these baptismal promises into each week's study—showing how baptism connects us directly to Christ's work on the cross, where the hope, repentance, joy, and love of this season find their ultimate fulfillment.

WEEK 1: HOPE IN THE DARKNESS

ADULTS

- **Scripture Focus:** Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:24-37
- **Key Theme:** Our deep need for God's intervention due to our total helplessness under sin, contrasted with the promise of God's gracious action in Christ, especially in times of suffering and darkness.

Discussion Questions:

1. **How does the theology of the cross reveal God's true presence in suffering?**
Discuss how God chooses to reveal Himself not in power or glory, but in the humility and weakness of the cross. Reflect on how this changes our view of God's presence in the darkest moments of life.
 2. **In what ways does Advent expose our helplessness and our need for God's redemption?**
Consider how Advent teaches us to wait passively, emphasizing that our salvation comes entirely from outside of ourselves—through Christ alone—just as we await His return in the same way.
- **God's presence in suffering:**
Focus on how, according to the theology of the cross, God doesn't operate according to our expectations of power and victory. Instead, He works through suffering, death, and weakness to bring new life and hope. We don't "overcome" through our strength; God overcomes by grace alone, without our contribution.
 - **Christ's Presence in the Darkness:**
The theology of the cross teaches us that God is most fully present not in power, but in the suffering of Jesus on the cross. This Advent, we learn to wait—not by striving to fix or improve ourselves—but by trusting in the promise that God has already intervened in Christ. The hope of the cross is that God brings life out of death and light out of darkness, even when we feel most abandoned or lost.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

Baptism and Our Union with Christ

Baptism unites us with Christ in His death and resurrection. As Luther's *Small Catechism* teaches, baptism "works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare" (Small Catechism, IV:2). Through baptism, we are joined to the saving work of Christ, receiving the fullness of His grace and redemption. This unbreakable promise is the foundation of our faith.

In the darkness of Advent, we cling to the promise of baptism, knowing that in it, God has already intervened for our salvation. Just as the people of Israel longed for God to “rend the heavens” and come down to save them, we know through baptism that God has indeed come down for us in Christ. As Luther emphasizes in the *Large Catechism*, “*In baptism, therefore, every Christian has enough to study and practice all his life. He always has enough to do to believe firmly what baptism promises and brings—victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sins, God’s grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with His gifts*” (Large Catechism, IV:41).

Baptism is more than a mere symbol; it is the concrete means by which God unites Himself to us through water and the Word. Luther writes, “*Baptism is nothing else than God’s Word in the water, commanded by His institution, or as Paul says, ‘a washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit’*” (Large Catechism, IV:18). In this washing, God has come down to be with us, to forgive our sins, and to raise us to new life in Christ.

As we prepare during Advent, we do so not out of fear or uncertainty, but with the hope and assurance that God has already acted decisively for our salvation. Baptism is the sign and seal of that intervention, where God has joined Himself to us in Jesus. As Luther reminds us, “*Thus faith clings to the water and believes it to be baptism, in which there is sheer salvation and life, not through the water, as we have sufficiently stated, but through its incorporation with God’s Word and the ordinance of God, and the joining of His name to it*” (Large Catechism, IV:22).

In this promise, we find our hope: that in baptism, God has truly come down to rescue us, giving us the sure and certain hope of eternal life in Christ.

CHILDREN

- Bible Story: "The People Walking in Darkness Have Seen a Great Light" (Isaiah 9:2)
- Key Theme: Jesus is the light who comes into a dark world.
- Activity: Create paper lanterns or Advent wreaths to symbolize light in the darkness.
- Hymn Suggestion: "This Little Light of Mine"
- Teaching Point: Even when things feel dark or scary, Jesus is with us, shining His light of love

WEEK 2: REPENTANCE AND GOD'S PROMISE

ADULTS

- **Scripture Focus:** Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8
- **Key Theme:** John the Baptist’s call to repentance highlights the confrontation with our sin and helplessness, while pointing to God’s grace in Christ. In repentance, we come face to face with the reality of our brokenness, and we receive the gift of forgiveness entirely by grace.

Discussion Questions:

1. **How does repentance relate to the theology of the cross?**
Repentance is not something we achieve through effort or self-discipline. According to the theology of the cross, it is a recognition of our helplessness under sin. The cross exposes our brokenness, and repentance is God’s work in us, where we are confronted with our sin and drawn to the cross for

forgiveness. Discuss how this changes our understanding of repentance from something we do to something God does in us.

2. What does it mean to be repented by God, and how does this impact daily life?

Repentance is not a one-time event but an ongoing reality in the life of a believer. To be "repented by God" means to be continually confronted with both the depth of our sin and the breadth of God's grace. In daily life, this means living in a state of humility and dependence on God's mercy, constantly dying to our old selves and rising anew in Christ's forgiveness. Discuss how this impacts your relationships, decisions, and view of yourself.

Activity:

- **Group Confession and Absolution Service:**

Lead the group through a structured confession and absolution service. Begin with a brief teaching on how confession is not merely admitting our mistakes but acknowledging our complete need for God's grace. During the confession, invite participants to recall specific areas of sin or struggle from their daily lives.

After a period of silent reflection, lead the absolution with these words: "In Christ, your sins are forgiven. You are made new by His grace alone. Hear the words of the Gospel: 'I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.'" Emphasize that this declaration isn't a formality—it is Christ's actual word to us, delivering His forgiveness here and now.

- **Teaching on Repentance and Forgiveness:**

Teach that repentance is not about earning forgiveness or improving our behavior—it is about being brought to the end of ourselves and recognizing that God does all the work of forgiving and restoring us. In the absolution, Christ meets us with the very thing we need: His word of forgiveness. Point out how this pattern of repentance and forgiveness is lived out daily as we face our weaknesses and trust in God's grace.

Hymn Suggestion: "On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry"

This hymn reflects both the call to repentance and the anticipation of God's grace, as John the Baptist prepares the way for Christ's redeeming work.

Teaching Point:

- **Christ's Sacrifice and Our Sin in Daily Life:**

The cross reveals the depth of our sin, but more importantly, it shows us the extent of God's grace. John the Baptist's call to repentance doesn't just call us to moral self-improvement; it brings us to the point where we realize that we are entirely dependent on God's forgiveness. In our daily lives, this means recognizing that we are always both sinner and saint—constantly in need of repentance and yet always forgiven by Christ's work on the cross.

Living this way frees us from the burden of trying to justify ourselves or prove our worth to God or others. Instead, we are free to live in the assurance that God has already acted to save us in Christ, and we can share this grace with those around us.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

John's Baptism and the Greater Baptism of Jesus

John's baptism of repentance pointed forward to the greater baptism of Jesus, who baptizes us with the Holy Spirit. Luther's *Small Catechism* teaches us that in baptism, *"the old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and a new man daily come forth and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever"* (Small Catechism, IV:4). This shows that baptism is not just a one-time event but an ongoing reality in the life of a believer—a daily dying to sin and rising to new life in Christ.

In baptism, we are not only forgiven but also renewed daily by God's grace. As Luther explains in the *Large Catechism*, *"Baptism signifies that the old Adam is to be drowned and destroyed by daily repentance, and that, on the other hand, the new man is to come forth daily and rise up, cleansed and righteous, to live forever in God's presence"* (Large Catechism, IV:65). This daily renewal is the work of the Holy Spirit, who continually brings us back to Christ and His promises.

Advent reminds us that our preparation for Christ's coming is not something we accomplish through our own efforts. Instead, it is entirely God's work, done through baptism, where He grants us forgiveness of sins and new life every day. As Luther writes, *"We are brought into the Christian Church through Baptism. There, through the Word and sacraments, He offers and gives us all that belongs to Christ and the Holy Spirit, as the Word promises: 'He who believes and is baptized will be saved'"* (Large Catechism, IV:25). Through baptism, God continually prepares us for the coming of Christ by forgiving our sins and making us new, not by our merit but by His grace alone.

This is why Luther emphasizes that baptism is not a mere ritual or symbol, but the ongoing work of God in our lives. *"Thus, a Christian life is nothing else than a daily Baptism, once begun and ever to be continued. For we must keep at it incessantly, always purging whatever pertains to the old Adam, so that whatever belongs to the new man may come forth"* (Large Catechism, IV:65). As we journey through Advent, we trust that this preparation is God's work, carried out through the power of baptism.

CHILDREN

- Bible Story: "John the Baptist Prepares the Way" (Mark 1:1-8)
- Key Theme: Getting ready for Jesus by saying we're sorry and trusting God's love.
- Activity: Make a "path" for Jesus using stones, twigs, and greenery to signify preparing our hearts.
- Hymn Suggestion: "Prepare the Way, O Zion"
- Teaching Point: Just as John got people ready for Jesus, we prepare our hearts by confessing our sins and receiving God's forgiveness because of Jesus.

WEEK 3: JOY IN GOD'S REDEMPTION

ADULTS

- **Scripture Focus:** Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, John 1:6-8, 19-28

- **Key Theme:** True joy comes not from human strength or external circumstances but from Christ's redeeming work on the cross. This joy persists even in suffering because it is grounded in God's unchanging promise of salvation.

Discussion Questions:

1. **How does the joy we experience in Christ differ from worldly happiness?**

According to the theology of the cross, joy in Christ is not the same as the fleeting happiness the world offers. Worldly happiness is often tied to circumstances, accomplishments, or success, but Christian joy is rooted in God's work of salvation through the cross. Discuss how this joy is passive—it is something given to us by God, not something we create or control.

2. **What does it mean to experience joy even amid suffering, according to the theology of the cross?**

The theology of the cross teaches that God meets us in suffering, not by removing it but by being present in it. Discuss how this transforms our understanding of joy. Instead of joy being the absence of suffering, it becomes the assurance that God is at work even in the midst of pain, bringing life out of death. This joy is grounded in Christ's victory over sin and death, not in our ability to avoid hardship.

Activity:

- **Group Reflection and Testimonies:**

Encourage participants to reflect on a time when God's grace brought unexpected joy during difficult circumstances. In small groups, invite them to share testimonies of how they experienced God's presence and peace even when life was challenging. Teach that this is an example of the theology of the cross—joy that comes not from avoiding suffering, but from Christ's work in and through it.

- **Teaching on Joy and the Cross:**

Emphasize that, according to the theology of the cross, our joy doesn't come from our circumstances or feelings. Rather, it is rooted in the certainty of God's promises. The cross teaches us that God works precisely in weakness and suffering to bring about His saving work. True joy comes from knowing that Christ has redeemed us, and nothing—not even suffering—can take away the assurance of His grace.

Hymn Suggestion: "Rejoice, Rejoice, Believers"

This hymn emphasizes the Christian call to rejoice in the hope of Christ's return and the fulfillment of His promises, even as we wait in the midst of a broken world.

Teaching Point:

- **Christ's Work on the Cross and Our Joy:**

The cross reveals the depth of human sin and suffering, but more importantly, it shows us where true joy comes from: God's saving work in Christ. The joy we experience is not the absence of hardship but the presence of God's promise in the midst of it. In Christ's death and resurrection, we are given new life and hope that transcends our present struggles. This joy is not something we achieve; it is a gift given to us by God through faith in Christ, grounded in His work, not ours.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

Baptism and Joy

In baptism, we are given the Holy Spirit and the joy of being made new in Christ. Luther's *Small Catechism* teaches that baptism "*works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare*" (Small Catechism, IV:2). This joy is not based on our personal achievements or the ups and downs of life, but on the sure and certain promises of God given to us in baptism.

Luther emphasizes that baptism is not just a symbol but a real means of grace, stating: "*Baptism is no human plaything but is instituted by God Himself. Moreover, it is solemnly and strictly commanded that we must be baptized, or we cannot be saved*" (Large Catechism, IV:6). The joy we experience through baptism flows from knowing that God has claimed us as His own, washed us clean of sin, and given us the gift of eternal life. As Luther notes, "*It brings about the forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe it*" (Large Catechism, IV:41).

This joy surpasses any worldly happiness because it is grounded in God's unbreakable promise. Baptism is not based on our feelings or actions; it is entirely the work of God. Luther stresses the importance of trusting in the promise of baptism, writing, "*Our baptism abides forever. Even though someone should fall from it and sin, still we always have access to it so that we may again subdue the old man*" (Large Catechism, IV:77).

In baptism, God assures us that we are His children, and nothing—not even suffering or hardship—can separate us from His love. As Luther explains, "*To be baptized in God's name is to be baptized not by men but by God Himself. Although it is performed by human hands, it is nevertheless truly God's own act*" (Large Catechism, IV:10). This brings deep and lasting joy, as it is a joy that rests not on our own abilities but on God's action and promise, which cannot fail.

CHILDREN

- Bible Story: "Mary's Song of Joy" (Luke 1:46-55)
- Key Theme: Mary sings about how God helps and saves us.
- Activity: Create Advent decorations showing symbols of joy (hearts, crosses, stars).
- Hymn Suggestion: "Joy to the World"
- Teaching Point: Even when things are tough, we can still find joy because Jesus is coming to save us.

WEEK 4: LOVE THROUGH CHRIST'S SACRIFICE

ADULTS

- **Scripture Focus:** 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16, Luke 1:26-38
- **Key Theme:** God's promises to David find their fulfillment in Christ's incarnation and His ultimate sacrifice on the cross. Advent points us to the depth of God's love, not in earthly power, but in Christ's humble coming, death, and resurrection for our salvation.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does Advent remind us of God's love revealed through Christ on the cross?
Advent is not just about looking forward to Christ's birth but about anticipating His work on the cross. The theology of the cross teaches us that God's love is revealed most fully in Christ's sacrifice, where He bears our sins and gives us life. Discuss how Advent points us beyond sentimental feelings of love to the concrete reality of God's love in Christ's suffering and death.
2. What does it mean to live out the love of Christ in our vocations?
The theology of the cross shows us that living out the love of Christ is not about striving for success or recognition, but about humble service, reflecting the way Christ served us through His death. Explore how, in our daily vocations—whether in our families, workplaces, or communities—we are called to love in a way that reflects Christ's self-giving love on the cross, not seeking reward but serving out of gratitude for what God has done.

Activity:

- Service of Praise and Reflection on God's Love:
Begin with a service of praise and reflection, focusing on Christ's sacrifice as the ultimate revelation of God's love. Incorporate the Lord's Supper into this time of reflection, teaching that in communion, Christ continues to give Himself to us in love. The bread and wine are not just symbols, but Christ's body and blood given for us, reminding us that His love is a present reality, poured out for our forgiveness.
- Teaching on Christ's Love Through the Cross:
Emphasize that according to the theology of the cross, God's love is not shown through worldly success, health, or prosperity. Instead, it is revealed in Christ's humble birth, His life of service, and ultimately, His death on the cross. This is where we see the depth of God's love—a love that comes to us when we are most helpless, broken, and in need. Emphasize that God's love is not conditional on our performance but is given freely in Christ.

Hymn Suggestion: "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling"

This hymn celebrates God's perfect love in Christ, reflecting on His self-giving love that redeems and transforms us, and calling us to live in that love.

Teaching Point:

- God's Love Revealed in the Cross:
The theology of the cross shows us that God's love is not about power or worldly achievement. Rather, God's love is revealed most clearly in Christ's humility and sacrifice. His incarnation—the Son of God becoming flesh—points us to the ultimate act of love on the cross, where Christ dies for us. This love is not something we can earn or repay; it is a gift given freely to sinners. Our response is to live out this love in our vocations, serving others in the same humility and grace with which Christ has served us.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

Baptism and the Incarnation:

The incarnation of Christ, announced to Mary, is deeply connected to the promise of baptism. Luther teaches that in baptism, we are joined to Christ's death and resurrection. Just as Christ took on flesh to bear our sins, in baptism we are brought into this same promise. Luther writes, *"To put it most simply, the power, effect, benefit, fruit, and purpose of Baptism is to save."* (Large Catechism, IV:23) In baptism, this salvation is made real for us personally.

Luther's Small Catechism reminds us that baptism is *"not just plain water, but it is the water included in God's command and combined with God's Word"* (Small Catechism, IV:1). It's not a distant or abstract love, but a tangible reality poured out for us in the water and the Word. Just as Christ became flesh to redeem us, God meets us in baptism with this concrete promise: we are washed clean of sin, made new, and united with Christ's death and resurrection.

Luther highlights the certainty of this promise when he writes, *"Baptism is a very different thing from all other water, not by virtue of the natural substance but because here something nobler is added. God Himself stakes His honor, His power, and His might on it. Therefore, it is not simple water, but water impregnated with the Holy Spirit"* (Large Catechism, IV:16).

Through baptism, God assures us that we are His: *"It signifies that the old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever"* (Small Catechism, IV:4). This is where God's love becomes real for us—through baptism, we are claimed as His children, cleansed of sin, and made new. *"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved"* (Mark 16:16), and nothing can separate us from that promise.

CHILDREN

- Bible Story: "The Angel Visits Mary" (Luke 1:26-38)
- Key Theme: God's love comes to us through Jesus, who was born to save us.
- Activity: Create angel ornaments or color pictures of the nativity to take home.
- Hymn Suggestion: "Away in a Manger"
- Teaching Point: Just like the angel told Mary, Jesus came because He loves us and wants to be with us forever



HANDS-ON ACTIVITIES

WEEK 1: HOPE IN BAPTISM'S PROMISE

- **Scripture Focus:** Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:24-37
- **Key Theme:** Baptism, through God's Word, gives us hope as we are joined with Christ in His death and resurrection.
- **Small Catechism Reference:** "Baptism... works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare." (*Small Catechism* on Baptism, Part 2)
- **Activity for Adults:** "The Word That Makes Us New"
 - Materials Needed: Large Bowl of water, paper, erasable markers.
 - Instructions: Participants write symbols of brokenness on paper. As the Word from Romans 6:3-4 is read, they place the paper in the bowl of water.
 - Reflection for discussion: Baptism connects us to Christ's death and resurrection, giving us hope. It's not just the water, but the Word of God that removes our sin and makes us new.
- **Activities for Children:** "Planting Seeds of Hope"
 - Materials Needed: Small pots, soil, seeds, water, markers.
 - Instructions: Children plant seeds in pots labeled with the word "hope," symbolizing how baptism grows new life in their hearts.
 - Reflection: Just as we water seeds, God's Word in baptism nourishes our hearts with hope.

ADVENT POEM FOR CHILDREN

A Light is Shining, Small but Bright (*To the tune of "Jesus Loves Me"*)

Pastor Mark Anderson

A light is shining, small but bright, In the middle of the night.
Jesus comes with love so pure, Bringing hope that will endure.

Refrain: Yes, He is coming, Jesus is coming.
Yes, He is coming, His grace will overflow.

A voice is calling, loud and clear, "Turn around, the Lord is near!"
Word and water make us new, Jesus' love for me and you.

Refrain:
Yes, He is coming, Jesus is coming.
Yes, He is coming, His grace will overflow.

Joy is dancing in the air, Jesus coming everywhere!
New life blooms, so fresh, so bright, In His love, we find delight.

Refrain:

Yes, He is coming, Jesus is coming.
Yes, He is coming, His grace will overflow.

Love comes down, so soft and warm, In a baby, safe from harm.
Jesus is here, God's gift so true, To bring His love to me and you.

Refrain:

Yes, He is coming, Jesus is coming.
Yes, He is coming, His grace will overflow.

Note: This simple poem is an interactive, weekly prayer to be used with children during Advent, incorporating movement, repetition, and sensory elements to engage their hearts and minds. Here's how it may be used:

WEEK 1: HOPE

- Action: As the prayer is read, have the children hold small candles or glow sticks. When you say, "A light is shining," they can lift their candles, symbolizing hope in the darkness.
- Reflection: After the verse, ask the children where they see hope around them and how Jesus brings hope to the world.

WEEK 2: REPENTANCE

- Action: Give each child a small bowl of water or use one large bowl. As you read "Word and water make us new," invite them to remember their baptism by dipping their fingers in the water, symbolizing their baptism and God's forgiveness.
- Reflection: Ask the children how it feels to be new. Talk about how Jesus loves them no matter what.

WEEK 3: JOY

- Action: While reading this verse, invite the children to gently jump or dance in place when you say, "Joy is dancing." Encourage them to smile and celebrate the joy Jesus brings.
- Reflection: Ask the children to share what brings them joy, especially during Advent, and remind them that Jesus' love is the source of our deepest joy.

WEEK 4: LOVE

- **Action:** Have the children make a circle and hold hands. When you say, "Love comes down," encourage them to gently squeeze each other's hands, representing God's love flowing between them.
 - **Reflection:** After the prayer, talk about how Jesus' love connects all the baptized as God's children, and encourage the children to share that Good News of Jesus with others.
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WEEK 2: REPENTANCE THROUGH GOD'S WORD IN BAPTISM

- **Scripture Focus:** Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8
 - **Key Theme:** Baptism repents us through God's Word, which promises forgiveness in Christ.
 - **Small Catechism Reference:** "Baptism signifies that the old Adam in us, with all sins and evil desires, should be drowned by daily contrition and repentance, and die." (*Small Catechism* on Baptism, Part 4)
 - **Activity for Adults:** "Cleansed by the Word"
 - Materials Needed: Small stones, water basins, towels, markers.
 - Instructions: Participants write a personal confession on a stone, wash it in water, and hear a passage like Acts 2:38. They keep the stone as a reminder of God's grace in baptism.
 - Reflection for discussion: Baptism is not just about the water but about God's Word of forgiveness and the daily return to baptism, which continually washes away our sins.
 - **Activity for Children:** "Washing Our Hearts"
 - Materials Needed: Washable paper hearts, water basins, markers.
 - Instructions: Children write sins on hearts, then wash them in water, symbolizing how God's Word in baptism washes away sins.
 - Reflection: Baptism is God's promise that He forgives us because of Jesus.
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WEEK 3: JOY IN THE NEW LIFE GIVEN THROUGH GOD'S PROMISE IN BAPTISM

- **Scripture Focus:** Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, John 1:6-8, 19-28
- **Key Theme:** The joy of baptism comes from God's promise of new life in Christ through His Word.
- **Small Catechism Reference:** "It indicates that the new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever." (*Small Catechism* on Baptism, Part 4)
- **Activity for Adults:** "Seeds of Joy"
 - Materials Needed: Small pots, soil, flower seeds, water, Scripture cards with Romans 6:3-4 or Titus 3:5-6.
 - Instructions: Participants plant seeds, symbolizing the new life baptism promises. As they water the seeds, they reflect on the new life and joy that baptism brings through God's Word.

- Reflection for discussion: Baptism brings us joy because it connects us to Christ's resurrection. It's God's Word of promise that makes us new every day.
 - **Activity for Children:** "Baptism Brings Life"
 - Materials Needed: Watering cans, paper flowers, stickers with joyful words (e.g., "love," "peace," "joy").
 - Instructions: Children "water" paper flowers, symbolizing how baptism brings life. They decorate the flowers with joyful words, representing the new life God gives.
 - Reflection: Baptism isn't just water—it's God's promise that makes us new in Jesus.
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WEEK 4: LOVE THROUGH BAPTISM'S PROMISE

- **Scripture Focus:** 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16, Luke 1:26-38
- **Key Theme:** God's love is shown through the promise of baptism, where we are adopted into God's family and become God's sons and daughters.
- **Small Catechism Reference:** Galatians 3:27, "*For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ,*" reflects Luther's teaching in the *Small Catechism* that baptism is more than an external washing—it unites us with Christ and His righteousness. Luther emphasizes that through baptism, we are forgiven, rescued from death and the devil, and given eternal salvation. To be "clothed with Christ" means that our old sinful nature is put to death, and we are continually renewed in His grace. Baptism is not a one-time event but a daily reality where we live out the new life given to us by Christ, reflecting His righteousness.
- **Activity for Adults:** "The Gift of Belonging"
 - Materials Needed: Index cards, pens, small candles.
 - Instructions: Let each person hold an index card in their hand and remember someone who has shown them God's love—maybe a parent, a friend, a teacher, or a neighbor. Write their name on the card. If this is done in a small group setting, each participant could be asked to share something specific about the person they named. Place all the cards in a basket, light a candle, and offer prayers of thanks that God has given us to one another.
 - Reflection for discussion: Baptism makes us part of God's family, where we share His love. Through God's Word, we are adopted as His children, clothed in Christ.
- **Activity for Children:** "God's Family Tree"
 - Materials Needed: Large paper tree, green paper leaves, markers, glue.
 - Instructions: Children write their names on leaves and glue them to a paper tree, representing their place in God's family through baptism.
 - Reflection: Baptism's promise tells us we belong to God, and that makes us part of His loving family.

LIGHTING THE WAY: ADVENT CANDLE LITURGIES

First Sunday of Advent: Hope

(Leader)

As we light the candle of Hope, we remember that our hope is in Christ alone. Our hope does not rest in what we can control but in the victory of Christ on the cross. In the darkness of sin and death, His light shines brightest, bringing us a hope that will never fail.

(Litany)

Leader:

In the dim light of dawn, we wait.
We wait for hope, not built by our hands,
But hope that comes from the deep silence,
From the cries of a child,
From a manger, hidden in the night.

People:

Come, Hope of all creation.
Come, cradle our hearts in Your promise.
Come, shatter the darkness with Your light.

Leader:

In our waiting, You are already here—
Hope eternal, bound to the wood of the cross,
Hope unbroken, risen in glory.

People:

Come, Hope of all creation.
Come, lift our eyes to Your coming.

(Prayer)

Gracious Lord, in this season of waiting, remind us that our hope is not in what we can see, but in Your promises. When life feels uncertain and the world around us is heavy with brokenness, teach us to rest in the sure hope of the cross. You entered into our suffering and carried our burdens, so we may have hope in Your victory over sin and death. Strengthen us in faith to wait patiently, trusting in Your unfailing love, and help us to be bearers of that hope to others. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Second Sunday of Advent: Peace

(Leader)

As we light the second candle, the candle of Peace, we remember that Christ's sacrifice is the source of true

peace. His cross reconciles us to God, tearing down the walls of hostility between us and offering us a peace that passes all understanding. In His wounds, we receive healing, and, in His death, we receive lasting peace.

(Litany)

Leader:

We hear the sound of footsteps,
Not of soldiers, but of a King on a donkey.
He comes not with war,
But with peace, sewn with tears and suffering.
He speaks peace into storms, into chaos, into hearts.

People:

Come, Prince of Peace.
Come, quiet our restless souls.
Come, speak peace into the storm.

Leader:

We wait not for a sword,
But for a hand that breaks bread,
For the One who whispers, "Peace, be still."

People:

Come, Prince of Peace.
Come, bring calm to our troubled minds

(Prayer)

Lord Jesus, You are the Prince of Peace, and yet the path to peace led You to the cross. Help us to remember that your peace is not seen in the absence of struggle, but in the assurance of Your presence in our lives. Calm our restless hearts and still our troubled minds. Through our many vocations make us instruments of Your peace, so that we may share the good news of Your reconciliation with all we encounter. In Your holy name, we pray. Amen.

Third Sunday of Advent: Joy

(Leader)

As we light the third candle, the candle of Joy, we rejoice in the good news that Christ has come to save us. This joy is not dependent on our circumstances but rooted in His victory over sin and death. Even amid sorrow, the joy of the Lord breaks through, reminding us of the sure and certain hope we have in His resurrection.

(Litany)

Leader:

Joy bursts forth from unexpected places—
A barren womb, a quiet night,

A cross planted in sorrow.
And joy sings, even when tears fall.

People:
Come, Joy of all nations.
Come, sing over us with Your Gospel song.
Come, fill the broken places with Your wholeness and peace.

Leader:
We wait for the joy that cannot be silenced,
For the dance that follows the grave,
For the laughter that breaks through tears.

People:
Come, Joy of all nations.
Come, make our hearts sing again.

(Prayer)

God of all life and joy, we praise You for the gift of Your Son, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising its shame. Help us to see that in every trial, hardship, and sorrow, Your joy is still present, unwavering and eternal. Teach us to rejoice not in our own strength, but in the finished work of Christ. May our hearts overflow with the joy of Your salvation, even when life feels heavy, knowing that You have overcome the world. Open our eyes to the joy that comes from Your grace and give us the courage to share that joy with others. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

Fourth Sunday of Advent: Love

(Leader)

As we light the fourth candle, the candle of Love, we are reminded that God's love is not fleeting or sentimental, but sacrificial and steadfast. On the cross, Christ displayed the fullness of God's love for us, laying down His life for sinners, that we might live. God's merciful love compels us to love one another, not out of obligation, but as a reflection of the abundant grace we have received.

(Litany)

Leader:
Love that walks dusty roads,
Love that sits with sinners and weeps with mourners.
Love that stretches out arms on a cross,
And says, "For you."

People:
Come, Love that never ends.

Come, hold us close in Your embrace.
Come, heal the wounds we carry.

Leader:

We wait for love not as a dream,
But as a Savior who came, has come, and will come again.
A love that died, yet lives forever.

People:

Come, Love that never ends.
Come, fill our hearts with Your grace.

(Prayer)

Heavenly Father, Your love was made perfect in the sending of Your Son, who came not to be served, but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many. Christ's love is not a distant ideal, but a reality accomplished for us on the cross for us. As we prepare for Christmas, remind us that Your love has already been poured out fully in the sacrifice of Your Son, securing our forgiveness and life. Through His death and resurrection, bestowed on us in baptism, we are held in Your steadfast love, mercy and grace even when we falter. We give thanks for the love that came down to save us. Keep us steadfast in the grace You freely give. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.



ADVENT HYMNS

First Sunday in Advent

1. **"Savior of the Nations, Come"**
 - LBW 28, ELW 263, LSB 332
 2. **"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"**
 - LBW 34, ELW 257, LSB 357
 3. **"The King Shall Come When Morning Dawns"**
 - LBW 33, ELW 260, LSB 348
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Second Sunday in Advent

1. **"Hark, the Glad Sound!"**
 - LBW 35, ELW 239, LSB 349
 2. **"Comfort, Comfort Now My People"**
 - LBW 29, ELW 256, LSB 347
 3. **"Fling Wide the Door"**
 - LBW 32, ELW 259, LSB 341
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Third Sunday in Advent

1. **"Rejoice, Rejoice, Believers"**
 - LBW 25, ELW 244, LSB 515
 2. **"On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry"**
 - LBW 36, ELW 249, LSB 344
 3. **"Hail to the Lord's Anointed"**
 - LBW 87, ELW 311, LSB 398
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Fourth Sunday in Advent

1. **"Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming"**

- LBW 58, ELW 272
- LSB 359
- 2. **"Of the Father's Love Begotten"**
 - LBW 42, ELW 295, LSB 384
- 3. **"Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus"**
 - LBW 30, ELW 254, LSB 338

Hymnal References:

LBW: Lutheran Book of Worship

ELW: Evangelical Lutheran Worship

LSB: Lutheran Service Book



