

Happenings at Hope

January – February 2016 ~ Vol. 3 No. 1

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Worship & Study

Bible Class & Sunday School

9:30am

The Divine Service

10:30am

Skype Bible Study

Thursdays at 7pm

Ladies' & Men's Bible Studies

1st and 3rd Saturdays of the month respectively, at 9am

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Evangelical
Lutheran
Synod

From The Pastor

A blessed new year to you, members and friends of Hope Lutheran Church. There sure is a lot going on this time of year, isn't there? It seems that Christmas has just barely come, and we're already celebrating the beginning of 2016. And then, on January 6th, there will be another holiday to celebrate—the festival of Epiphany.

Even if you had been thinking the same thing as me—that this is a busy time of year, I bet that you weren't thinking this to be true because of Epiphany. Epiphany isn't a holiday associated with a certain animal, or plant, or the giving of presents, it is a high point in the Church year. This is especially so for those of us who are not literal descendants of Abraham.

As Pastor David Jay Webber, of our sister church in Scottsdale, AZ explains, Epiphany is Christmas for the gentiles. This is because, if God had never invited people from the other nations of the earth to also come and worship the king of the Jews, then the birth of Christ on Christmas would only apply to the Jews. But, because the star over Bethlehem welcomed all to worship the Christ child, we know that this is something that we are welcome to do too.

Along with the article on the festival of Epiphany, this issue also includes an article produced by our synod on the miracle of Christmas, and then an article on prayer, written by your own Pastor Webber.

May God bless and preserve you all at this festival-filled time of year.

-Pastor Paul Webber



The Festival of the Epiphany of Our Lord is one of the four major festivals of Christ in the church year. The other three are Christmas, Easter, and Ascension. The word “epiphany” means “manifestation.” The theme of the Festival of the Epiphany, which commemorates the visit of the Magi to the boy Jesus, is the manifestation of Christ to the gentiles.

Epiphany

God had established his chosen nation from the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But most of us who read this newsletter are, according to our ethnicity and family heritage, gentiles. The patriarchs of Israel are not our ancestors. But this does not mean that God forgot about our forbears, or about us. When the Messiah of Israel was finally sent, he was sent also for us.

When Jesus was born, the angel announced to the Jewish shepherds outside of Bethlehem that their Savior had been born. And they then walked the few miles that they needed to traverse, to find him and worship him. But Jesus came into the world not only for those who were close to him – religiously, culturally, and geographically. He came also for those who were far away. He came also for our ancestors, and for us.

The story of Epiphany is the story of the star announcing to the Magi in the East – many, many miles from Bethlehem – that also their Savior had been born. And so they launched out on a major trek, traversing deserts and plains, crossing rivers, and exposing themselves to all kinds of danger, so that they could find, and worship, the Redeemer of the entire human race. Epiphany is, in a sense, the Christmas of the gentiles. It is, in a sense, our Christmas.

Those in the world today, who are invited by the story of Epiphany to come and worship Christ today, are indeed often very far away from him when they receive that invitation. Their hearts are enslaved by the fear of death. Their minds are darkened by the satanic lies they believe. Their wills are perverted by a self-destructive yearning after sin. Their consciences are twisted by a hatred for that which is their only hope. But these gentiles of today are nevertheless invited by the star of Bethlehem to come and find Jesus, and to worship Jesus, as he makes himself available to us today in his Word and sacraments. Even if they must come, as it were, from a great distance, they are still invited to come. The star of the gospel draws them, and energizes them, to come. That star invites all gentiles – and all Jews as well! – to receive Christ into their hearts, minds, wills, and consciences. The star offers to all gentiles – and to all Jews! – the liberation, the enlightenment, the purification, and the peace that only Jesus can give.

The visit of the Magi was an important event in the life of Christ on earth. The Festival of the Epiphany is, accordingly, an important observance in the church year for us. Especially if you are a gentile, this is *your* festival! This is your Christmas!

– Pastor David Jay Webber, Redeemer Lutheran Church, Scottsdale, AZ

The Good News of Christmas

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. - Luke 2:1-14



Good news didn't bring Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. Bad news did. They had to go. The Roman emperor had decided he needed to count all his subjects so that he could properly tax them. But instead of the type of census that we're used to, filling out forms in the mail or answering questions at the door, Caesar Augustus wanted a different kind of census. He wanted all families to return to the towns where the male side of the family originated to be counted for the tax.

Can you imagine how difficult that would be for so many? Mary was very far along in her pregnancy. Doctors today would have forbidden her to travel. The journey for this young mother-to-be must have been extremely difficult. But all this was part of God's great plan. Without the census, Mary would not have a reason to travel to Bethlehem. And Bethlehem was the place where the Messiah was to be born according to the prophet Micah: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

The bad news got worse when they finally arrived in Bethlehem. The town was so crowded with travelers coming for the census, all the rooms in town were taken. The only place left was the stable. And now Mary, nine months pregnant and her husband who had traveled so far had to sleep with the animals. And the bad news continued. Mary went into labor and had to give birth in a stable and the only place to lay the baby was a manger, a bin full of food for the animals. What terrible news. Or was it?

Sometimes God allows us to think things can't possibly get any worse before He reveals His plan. Thinking back on this year, we may feel that way. It's not hard to see problems all around us. But what about our own lives? What's happened this year in your life that may have caused you to think things couldn't get any worse? The bad news sometimes takes over our thoughts and we forget about the Good News God has given us.

Life for God's faithful at the time of Jesus' birth was not easy. The Romans had conquered much of the world, including Israel, and God's people had corrupted the true faith to the point where it was almost unrecognizable. A ruler many describe as insane governed the land of God's people. Disease and hunger were commonplace. Things seemingly couldn't get much worse. And it was into this mess that Jesus was born.

The conditions in the world and in that stable were certainly terrible. But the news was not bad news. In fact, the news that Mary had given birth caused one of the greatest commotions the earth has ever seen! Good News that will never be taken away was proclaimed for the first time in history and a peace that will never end was declared.

Some of the first people to hear this good news were shepherds. They were minding their own business, tending their sheep and suddenly events that must have terrified them began to unfold. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. There they were in the middle of nowhere, out in the fields with sheep and a heavenly messenger from God suddenly appeared and "glory of God" was all around them. No wonder they were afraid. Out in the middle of nowhere, dressed in filthy clothing—and suddenly a perfect, holy being appears before them. What went through their minds? Did they suddenly remember all of the sins they had committed? Was the angel here to destroy them? Confronted with the perfect holiness of an angel, any one of us would be

frightened beyond our imaginations.

But the angel wasn't there to destroy them. The angel came bringing a message from God Himself. The shepherds were told not to be afraid: "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. The angel brought a message that would bring nothing but joy! And the message was not only for the shepherds, but for all people. The Christ Child didn't come for a few, but every person ever born.

And the Good News that was declared next is for all of us also: For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. The Savior everyone had waited for had finally arrived. The Christ, the anointed one, the Messiah, was born! And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us... (John 1:14) God-with-us, Immanuel. One of the greatest miracles in the history of time occurred that night. God came down from heaven, was born as a man, to live among His people to save them.

The joy wasn't only on earth, though. Heaven itself couldn't contain the joy, as God began His wonderful plan of salvation. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. "Glory to God in the highest" The glory for this miraculous event belonged only to God. He was one who planned this. He alone carried it out.

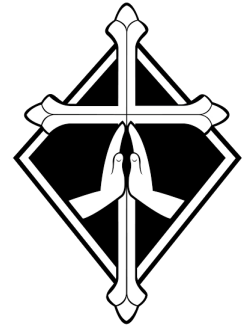
And now there would be peace on earth. Isaiah the prophet foretold this: Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end... (Isaiah 9:7) The peace declared that night is greatest news ever proclaimed. Because of what this child would do—live a perfect life in our place and die for our sins—an eternal peace would come to be. A peace that goes beyond nations, a peace that transcends borders, a peace that we can barely comprehend. There will always be wars and bloodshed, as long as the earth continues. But never again would the peace between God and man be undermined. Jesus would die paying for this peace with His own blood. There would be nothing more for us to do.

The Good News that was proclaimed to the shepherds on the first Christmas is for all people. The Savior, Jesus, came for all. If you have struggled this year with fear of the future, with sickness or the death of a loved one, know that this peace God declared is for you. There is no need to fear the future. God will guide you through His Word and has a home prepared for all who trust in Jesus as their Savior.

By God's grace, through faith in Christ alone as our Savior from sin and death, we can keep the joy and peace of Christmas in our hearts, even as the world around us continues on its path away from God. God loves the whole world. And on Christmas He sent His only-begotten Son to begin the work of conquering sin and death for all time. This Christmas, remember that you have a God who cares so much for you that He became like you to save you. And as the year goes on and more and more bad news is spoken, remember the Good News of Christmas, eternal peace between God and us.

-Rev. Paul Fries, Communication Director, Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by **prayer** and **supplication** with **thanksgiving** let your requests be made known to God – Philippians 4:6*



Prayer is something that happens throughout the divine service. In some of the forms of confession, the pastor says to the congregation: “Let us confess our sins to God and pray.” And then, at other times in the service, the pastor says, “Let us pray,” or, “Let us give thanks and pray.” And finally, right before the sermon, the pastor always prays the words of John 17:17, “Sanctify us by the Truth. Your Word is Truth.”

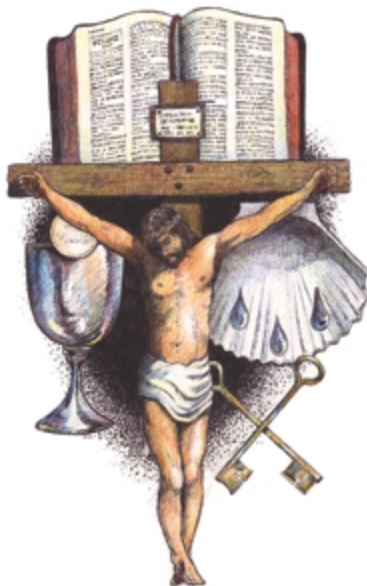
Prayer happens a lot during the service, and it should, because to pray to God, and to have His sure promise that He hears our prayers, is not something to which we are *entitled*. Prayer is a special privilege, which God has granted to those whom He has made his children through faith in Christ. And this is a privilege which we don't exercise only during the Divine Service. We all can, and hopefully do, come to God in prayer at many times every day.

When we pray on our own, or with our families, outside of church, probably our prayers are not as formulaic as those used during the divine service. And this is certainly fine and good. At its essence, prayer is talking to God, and just as a small child doesn't always have to use proper grammar when talking to their mother or father, so also we don't need to worry that we aren't “saying it right” when we pray.

That being said, there are some things to keep in mind when it comes to prayer. First of all, prayer is the way in which God has invited us to speak to Him, with Him promising to hear and answer our prayers. However, we should not expect God to answer our prayers by praying back to us. God speaks to us through His Word.

If you want God's guidance and wisdom, don't expect that He is going to give this to you directly, apart from His already-given, inspired, Word. Of course it isn't impossible that God *might* do this. After all, He has not vowed to never speak to His children directly. But *if* God does do this, and again we should not expect Him to do so, He won't tell us anything different than he has already told us (Malachi 3:6, “I, the Lord, do not change.”). Prayer is the way in which we can reliably speak to God. And through His Word, the Bible, we can always rely on God to speak right back to us.

Another thing to keep in mind when we pray is that God has not promised to answer every prayer with a “yes.” There are some things which God has promised to always give us. These are the spiritual blessings of faith and



forgiveness that have been won for us by Christ. For Christ's sake, through faith, God has always promised to give us these in the blessed means of grace. However, even though we have been promised every spiritual blessing from God, we have not been promised every earthly blessing.

When we are asking God for such things as good health, a better job, or new car, we need to ask for these things keeping in mind that it maybe God's will for us that we not have these things. This is why we ask for earthly blessings “according to God's will,” or, in other words, “if this is what you want us to have.” God's love has been revealed to us and all mankind in Christ, and the blessings of Christ are the way in which God has promised to show you His love.

But, wealth and health may not be part of God's plan for you. Even as God's beloved, forgiven child, who has been promised every eternal blessing in heaven, it may be the case that your earthly life will be one that is largely devoid of comfort. If this is your situation, then rejoice, because you will have a much easier time accepting what the Bible says about this world being a “vale of tears” and “the valley of the shadow of death” than someone whose earthly life seems to almost be heavenly. You will enjoy every comfort, and every imaginable blessing, in heaven.

When you pray, you don't necessarily have to insert “according to your will,” whenever you ask for some material blessing. But you will notice that the prayers that are offered to God in the Divine Service will insert this qualifier, simply because they are prayers offered, not personally, but corporately, as the Church prays together.

This is why the prayers in the Divine Service are nearly always pre-written and so seemingly formulaic. They are not the pastor's personal prayers to which the congregation is listening in. Just as is the case with the Word and Sacraments, the prayers in the Divine Service “belong” to the Church. And, in many cases, the prayers that are offered in the Divine Service are prayers that we have received *from* the Church.

This is another way of saying that many of these prayers are old—centuries old in some cases. Not that something being old means it is automatically good, but there is something neat about joining our voices in prayer using the same words that generations of Christians have already used. And, using these prayers helps to keep us looking at the “big picture” of the Christian faith. Just as the lessons and sermons don't only have to do with current events, so also we don't only pray to God only about what is on our mind. There are times for that during our lives, and even during the service, such as petitions in the Prayer of the Church. But you'll notice that the prayers for the day always reflect the theme for the day, drawn from the appointed lessons.

Hopefully this article has taught you something about the prayers that are offered during the Divine service, and has also encouraged you to keep, or make, prayer a regular part of your day. God, your heavenly Father, has invited you to bring everything to Him in prayer, and has also promised to hear your prayers and answer them according to His good timing. So don't be afraid to pray. You'll never be bugging God, or catching Him at a bad time. He is always with you, and always listening.

– Pastor Webber

Upcoming Events:

January:

- 9 – Men's Study of the *Smalcald Articles*, 9am
- 13-14 – Circuit 12 ELS pastor's Conference
- 16 – Ladies Bible Study on Spiritual Warfare, 9am
- 16 – Utah County Bible Study @ Provo Library, 9am
- 17 - 1st Quarter Congregational Forum, following the service
- 18 – Youth Group, afternoon and evening.

February

- 6 – Ladies' Bible Study on Spiritual Warfare, 9am
- 13 – Men's Study of the *Smalcald Articles*
- 20-21 – Southwest States ELS Ladies Meeting in Scottsdale, AZ
- 20 – Utah County Bible Study @ Provo Library, 9am