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## BE COMFORTED, MY PEOPLE

Isaiah 40:1-5 / Luke 1:5-25

God commands a word of comfort to His people: ***“Comfort, comfort My people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.”*** A word of comfort, pardon, grace, and huge gift. And yet this word from God is often met with scepticism. Can He mean me? Surely not. Not after all I’ve done. Such a word of comfort and grace cannot be meant for the likes of one whose sin is like mine.

There are none who so feel their sin as those who live closest to His holiness – those whom He regards as righteous by their faith and trust in Him. They see their sin and feel its weight in a way that the world never can understand. It takes the nearness of God to bring the weight of sin to bear on the conscience and the heart.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were such. The evangelist tells us that they were *“both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.”* If you asked them, they’d have told you a different description. They’d have said: No, we are poor sinners, who plead the mercy of God and wait for His redemption. But such people who live by faith and who are righteous because they see their own sin and utterly despair of themselves and put all their hope on the mercy of God – they are the ones who above all struggle to believe that God could be gracious and kind to the likes of them.

So the old man stood there attending to his duty, offering the sacred incense and as the smoke began to swirl toward the heavens and the sweet smell filled the darkened room, he became aware of a presence. There at the right side of that altar where he had so lately thrown on the coals the offering of incense, the sign of prayer, stood an angel.

What is the response of a man who knows his sin when he sees such a thing? Does he rejoice and thank God that he is counted worthy of such a vision? No. Zechariah shows his righteousness by his humility. He is troubled and fear falls on him. But the angel was not sent to scare him, but to comfort him. ***“Comfort, comfort My people, says your God.”*** Gabriel was sent to announce the dawn of the redemption for which Zechariah had longed, and in which he would play a key role.



“Do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son.”

“My prayer?” thought Zechariah. “But that was years ago. I’ve long since stopped hoping or even dreaming of such a thing. Why, it’s just not possible.” So his thoughts must have run as the angel went on, heedless of the perplexity on Zechariah’s face. “You shall call his name John, and you will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth for he will be great before the Lord. He must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. He will turn the hearts of the children of Israel to the Lord and will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

Zechariah is blown away that God could be so good, so gracious, so kind to him. He can’t get his mind around it. His unbelief and fear conquer him. “How shall I know this?” he asks. “I am old; my wife beyond the years of bearing a child. How can this be?”

If it is terror to see an angel to those who know their sin, even more terrifying is seeing an angel riled. Gabriel speaks a word of judgment that turns out also to be a word of promise. Not a word can pass from Zechariah’s lips until they open in praise of what God has done, for the words He gave to the angel will come to pass, fulfilled in their time. God’s words cannot and do not fail.

Then the angel was gone, and Zechariah was struck dumb before the goodness and the mercy of the Lord – goodness and mercy unlooked for. That he and his wife would have a child. That that child would be the long awaited prophet to go before the Lord Himself, preparing His way. That their child would be the appointed ambassador of the King of kings to announce the ultimate comfort. That God has come into the flesh to triumph over the enemies of the human race – to make common cause with the flesh He now shares and to raise the fallen sons of Adam to their high destiny as children of God.

Just like Zechariah, we stagger at the promise. Me? Can He possibly mean this comfort for me? That I who fail Him so often every day will be forgiven, made welcome in the home of the Eternal Son, made to sit with Him at His table and to reign with Him over all things? Me? How can it be?

Advent invites us to enter the silence of Zechariah and to wait and see the Words of God come to their fulfilment at the proper time. As he left the temple and couldn’t even give the final blessing because of his sealed lips, his heart was burning with the hope that words of God had given him. He began to see their fruition not many days later. Elizabeth laughed and thought “Why, it’s Abraham and Sarah all over again.” The prayers that they long since had given up on were answered by God in His goodness in a way beyond their imagining.

Being loved by God, your God commands comfort to be spoken to you too. His love for you will indeed astound and silence you, as you behold Him taking flesh from the pure Virgin and coming among you as your own brother to lift you to His glory. The comfort of this message is for you – you who think yourself hopelessly sinful and a failure. He says to you: For you I have come. For you I have sent my messenger to prepare My way. Do not fear. I am your Emmanuel. Watch in silence and see my salvation unfold!

*Zechariah is blown away that God could be so good, so gracious, so kind to him.*



## CHRISTMAS IS FOR SINNERS

Have you ever thought about who Christmas is for? The Gospel of Matthew speaks on the Christmas story saying, "She shall give birth to a Son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He shall save His people from their sins," (Matt. 1:21). The name of Jesus embraces His entire purpose. He is the one who is to be our Saviour. He is the one who came to save sinners.

*"The name 'Jesus' is the hope of the world; it is the radiant dawn over a generation living in the night of sin..."*

Fredrick Wisloff in his little book titled, "Hvil eder litt," states the following: "Had there been no sin on earth, there would have been no Christmas. Had there been no sinners, there would have been no need of a Saviour. For this very reason the Christmas Gospel is a message for sinners. And only those who acknowledge their sins can understand the true meaning of Christmas."

Wisloff goes on to say: "The name 'Jesus' is the hope of the world; it is the radiant dawn over a generation living in the night of sin; it is salvation and victory for the sinner; it is release for him who is in captivity; it is hope, it is a future, it is eternity. Without Jesus the world is hopeless darkness. With Jesus something of heaven comes to earth."

This Christmas as we jokingly ponder who will receive presents from Santa based on our status on the naughty and nice list, we can take comfort that God's Christmas Gift of Jesus Christ is for people on the naughty list. In other words, the Christmas Gift (i.e., Jesus) came not to call the righteous but sinners (Matthew 9:13). Therefore, as we confess that we have sinned in thought, word and deed, we can be assured that the Christmas Gospel is a message for us. God showed His great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. Your gift is Christ crucified for the forgiveness of your sins. Receive Him. Merry Christmas.

## THE LIGHT OF CHRISTMAS

One of my favourite things this time of year is the Christmas lights. It's nice to drive through town, seeing the twinkling lights. Perhaps I like the lights so much because they are a reminder of Jesus, the Light of the world.

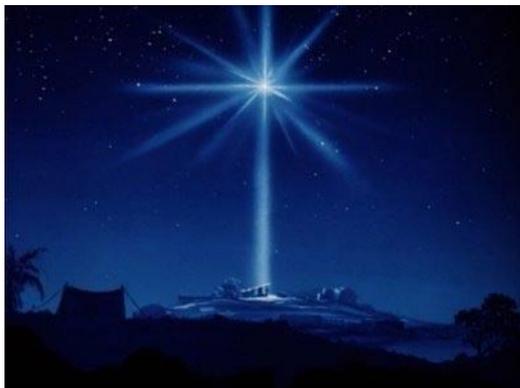


The prophet Isaiah says that "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light," (Is. 9:2). When the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, St. John writes that He is the "True Light coming into the world. The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it." (John 1:5). Later, Jesus says of Himself, "I AM the Light of the World," (John 8:12). Jesus. Light. Dispelling darkness. Making things bright. Brighter than Christmas tree lights. Brighter than Rudolph's nose. A Light so bright it destroys the shadows and darkness even of sin, of despair and of death.

*We live in a dark world. It's dark with sin. People do whatever they want. The selfishness of sinners knows no upper limit.*

We live in a dark world. It's dark with sin. People do whatever they want. The selfishness of sinners knows no upper limit. The cruelty and hatred we exhibit can always sink lower. We live in a world dark with sadness. Suffering. Sickness. The inevitable rush toward death. We live in a world dark with despair. Some people are so hurting that they see nothing but darkness all around them. A darkness they so much want to fall into and maybe, seeing no hope, will try to plunge themselves into. We live in a world glaring with the harsh lights of a holiday that few understand. Outwardly, the world cranks up the wattage until it can match the Griswold's house from "Christmas Vacation" while inwardly it is dying of sadness and gloom with bah-humbugger and disgust at the whole thing.

Into that darkness, angels appear over Bethlehem. Into that darkness, the Word-made-flesh shows His face from a manger. Into that darkness, the Father places a star to guide magi. Into that darkness Jesus walks, head on. To the darkness of Good Friday. To the darkness of a newly cut tomb. Into darkness. To light it up like Christmas lights and candles. To shine the light of Himself to send death and sin scurrying, retreating, fading, wiping out shadows, darkness gone.



Into your darkness too. Whatever that darkness may be. Despair. Doubts. Unbelief. Sins inside yourself. Sin around you. Families falling apart. Death stealing your friends. Hurt and sorrow around you. The great emptiness of the world's Christmas. Into all of it, the Light of Christ shines for you. It's light in your Baptism,

brightening by the absolution and shining forth in the Supper where the flesh and blood of the Light of the World almost glow and radiate forgiveness. Peace. Light. No shadows there. No darkness. Can't be. Those are the gifts of the Light of the World. Jesus is the Light of the World. His gifts bring Light to rescue you from every darkness there is.

That's why I like Christmas lights. They remind me of Jesus, and whether they give you a sense of wonder and peace or not, whether the whole Christmas extravaganza is something you relish or could do without, know this: Wherever there is darkness, the Light of Christ shines. Nothing can put it out. For He shines to bring His Light to you that you may be forever comforted and never afraid of the dark.

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### THE YOUNG AMONGST US

Every so often I hear the following concern: "Pastor, when I was growing up the Sunday School had so many more children." "Pastor, I remember when the church was full on Christmas." "Pastor, there's way more grey hair than not in here. What's going to happen in 20 years when we're all gone?"

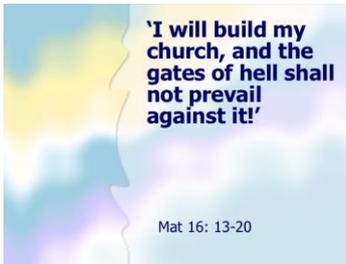
Yes, it is true, we are small church community, but I'm pretty sure the concerns I hear aren't just to be found in small churches. I also see giant churches casting aside everything they were called to hold dear in an attempt to chase down "youth" to stave off the same concerns I hear.

So what about our younger members? Maybe we treat them like a bunch of baby birds in the nest. These are our most important resource, and our only hope. One day, they'll be like us, but not yet. One day, they will be the church. One day, they will take over for us. Wrong.

Our youth aren't the next generation of the church. They're the church right now. Sometimes from the front of the church, I can hear our young joining in with the singing of the liturgy, and the hymns.

Our kids sing because they're not the next generation of the church waiting in the wings. They're the church right now. For all our fear, sometimes we lose sight of this. These kids are the church, and if they are the church, then they need what the whole church needs. They need Jesus. They need the forgiveness He won upon the cross, and they need the Sacraments through which He delivers that forgiveness. Market research doesn't make kids sing hymns. Faith does. This is what the church sounds like.

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I won't pretend that the church doesn't face problems. It's always been the last gate against the gates of hell. It has always stared down sin, death, and the devil. I understand where the concern comes from. I'm not advising you to put your head in the sand. I'm saying fix your eyes on the cross - we're going to be okay.

It's not our job to keep the church going one more generation. It's God's job. This is the point Luther hammers home in his Small Catechism.

It states, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."

We can't save ourselves from sin, death, and the devil. Only Jesus does that. We can't build or maintain a church by ourselves either. Only the promised Holy Spirit does it. The Holy Spirit is at work in the church wherever the Word of God is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly. What gives me hope is that I see God's children of every age gathered around those gifts, which really do something. Through them, the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. I think He's doing a pretty good job.

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### Some personal thoughts on how the AELC is going

As it is almost 25 years since the formation of the AELC I think we need a little reminder of how and why we came it to existence.

As most of our founding members who had the courage to take up their cross and follow Jesus are no longer with us, I think it is time for us remaining members to reflect on what they stood for and to take up the fight on their behalf.

We seem to be developing a rather slack approach compared to when we formed some 25 years ago. There does not seem to be too much enthusiasm shown to anything that is presently happening in the AELC at the moment. We need to be reminded of the enthusiasm and for sight our forefathers had when they left the LCA and formed the AELC. You can't help to wonder in disbelief at people who want to go back to the LCA as if the LCA has improved since we left them nearly 25 years ago.

As Jesus said in Luke 9 v 62 "No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

Just a couple of services we have had to attend back in the LCA because of baptisms and so forth, really make you appreciate what we as true Lutherans have in the AELC. If you need a reminder of where we came from, you just have to attend one of these so called services. You certainly will then cease looking back and instead look forward to serving in the kingdom of God. I personally could never go back to that unless there was a dramatic turnaround in the doctrine and practice of the LCA. Our deceased founding members would be turning in their graves if they knew we were not prepared to take up the fight as they did and follow their example.

I would also like to remind members, that the AELC was set up with no hierarchy and that every recommendation of the COC meetings is supposed to come back to congregations for ratification. As there is to be no hierarchy or decrees of status and superiority either among the laymen or among the Pastors of the AELC, the laymen in particular must take an active interest in the functions of the AELC, because if they don't they will soon have decisions made for them which is completely contrary to how the AELC was set up. We must make sure that in the congregations any recommendations coming

from the COC meetings are dealt with within 6 weeks for approval or disapproval, and not just left unattended to, as if we are not really that interested.

After our recent trip to America which was very encouraging, I know our Pastors are communicating with the Pastors from America which is good, but according to how the AELC was set up, lay people should also be involved in these discussions. If we as lay people don't get involved and show a greater interest, how can we make an informed decision as to whether or not we can extend altar and pulpit fellowship to any of these congregations. There has to be unanimous acceptance of all congregations for this to take place.

I would urge all lay people to take a keen interest in what is going on in the AELC as we could have some very important decisions ahead of us. If we all work together in Gods service rather than letting the devil get among us and become complacent, with God's help we can defeat the devil and do the work that God has put before us.

Barry Zischke

### **From the Pastor:**

The above letter gives much food for thought. I always welcome any letters or comments that members want printed in the Parish Newsletter.

Although the teaching of the AELC is still the same as it was when formed in the early 90's, membership has declined. It is true that many members have been called home, and for this we thank God for sparing them any more trouble in this sinful world, yet there has been a marked decline in interest in the AELC in general. Even within our own parish, we hold lots of church activities, such things as Bible Studies, Men's Fellowship, and Women's Guild, and all these are poorly attended. True, not all can attend because of work commitments etc., but going through the church records, I can see that attendance to these events could easily be triple what they are now.

About 3 weeks ago, after a lengthy phone call between the pastors of the ACLC and AELC, it was decided that an email chat group would be created to keep discussions on fellowship going. Pastor Stephen Brockdorf of the ACLC went ahead and set up a chat group. The ACLC requested this be a closed group - only available, for the time being, for pastors to participate. However, when the chat group was set up I asked the ACLC if there would be any objections to our laymen reading some of the material we have discussed. There were no objections, so if anyone would like copies of correspondence, please see me. The group has gone quiet for the past couple weeks, mainly because of the busy season we are now entering. At this stage, it is hoped that some representation from the ACLC will visit us in late January, early February.

There are still congregations who have not adopted the recommendations made at the last CoC meeting. I urge those congregations to go through the minutes and either adopt or reject them. At this CoC meeting, discussion was held on the possibility of future students of the AELC to study through the Walther Seminary of the ULMA (United Lutheran Mission or America). The Walther Seminary has been granted a Certificate of Approval and Authorisation by the state of Illinois, simply meaning they are recognised as a teaching authority by the State, and they are now looking into what it would take to provide online training to accommodate students who might come from the AELC. In the meantime, we need to continue to talk to the ULMA. I hope to set up an email chat group with them in the near future. This will be an open chat group, so, if any of our members would like to take part in this chat group, please talk to me.



# December 2014

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<b>30 November</b> <b>1 Advent</b>  9.30am AUB HC Parish Service and Advent lunch	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>7</b> <b>2 Advent</b>  8.30am TMBA HC 8.30am OAK LR 9.00am GRN LR 10.30am AUB HC	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>14</b> <b>3 Advent</b>  8.30am OAK HC 8.30am TMBA LR 9.30am AUB LR 10.00am GRN HC	<b>15</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>18</b>	7.30pm Carols Evening at Oakey	<b>20</b>
<b>21</b> <b>4 Advent</b>  8.30am TMBA LR 9.30am AUB LR  8.30am OAK Children's Christmas Service  <u>10.15am</u> GRN Children's Christmas Service	7.30pm Children's Christmas Service AUB	7.30pm Children's Christmas Service TMBA or     →	<b>24</b>	<b>25 Christmas</b>  8.30am TMBA LR 8.30am OAK HC 9.30am AUB LR 10.00am GRN HC	<b>26</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>28</b> <b>1 Christmas</b>  8.30am TMBA HC 8.30am OAK LR 9.00am GRN LR 10.30am AUB HC	<b>29</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>31 New Year's Eve</b>  7.30pm OAK HC	<b>1 January 2015</b>  New Year's Day 9.30am AUB HC	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>

# January 2015

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<b>4 2 Christmas</b> 8.30am OAK HC 8.30am TMBA LR 9.30am AUB LR 10.00am GRN HC	5	6 Epiphany	7	8	9	10
<b>11 The Baptism of our Lord</b> 8.30am TMBA HC 8.30am OAK LR 9.00am GRN LR 10.30am AUB HC	12	13	14	15	16	17
<b>18 2 Epiphany</b> 8.30am OAK HC 8.30am TMBA LR 9.30am AUB LR 10.00am GRN HC	19	20	21	22	23	24
<b>25 3 Epiphany</b> 8.30am TMBA HC 8.30am OAK LR 9.00am GRN LR 10.30am AUB HC	26	27	28	29	30	31
<b>1 Feb 4 Epiphany</b> 8.30am OAK HC 8.30am TMBA LR 9.30am AUB LR 10.00am GRN HC	2	3	4 Women's Guild 10.00am OAK	5	6	7