

December 01, 2019 -- Advent 1

BUILDING BLOCKS OF GROWING IN CHRIST

But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.Therefore, you must also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. – Matthew 24:verses 36 & 44)
For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed – Romans 13:11

Today's readings remind us that we have no idea when Jesus is returning. We have been promised that He will return, but the timeline is a mystery to everyone but God the Father. The second coming could be a thousand years from now or it could also be before you finish reading this message. As Paul reminds us in Romans, that day is nearer to us now than it's ever been. In Romans chapter 12, Paul described what it means to live as a Christian here on earth. In Romans 13:11, he gives us a wake-up call that we can't waste time.



Thoughts to Ponder – *Are you ready? Are you living your life as though you will meet Jesus tomorrow or do you think you still have plenty of time to “get it right”?* *If you knew Jesus would return next year or even next week, are there changes you would make in your life? If the answer is yes, the time to start on those changes is now. What first steps can you take this week?*

Resource: Lutheran Study Bible ESV

December 08, 2019 -- Advent 2

BUILDING BLOCKS OF GROWING IN CHRIST

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. – Isaiah 11:6-8

On our Jesse Tree is an ornament that shows a lion and a lamb lying together in peaceful co-existence. In our ordinary life natural enemies do not rest quietly in each other's presence. Verses 6-8 portray the impossible becoming possible. Wolves living with lambs, leopards and goats lying together, calves, lions and yearlings feeding together –these creatures who normally cannot coexist become like family. This passage compels us to hope beyond reason.



God comes to us daily in ways we don't expect and gives us hope for a world we do not know. The belief that harm, violence, and destruction will one day be vanquished is rooted in the coming of Christ who restores all things. In Isaiah's vision the coming of Christ is no ordinary event. We are called to believe and wait for and expect impossible things in the Hope of Advent.

Thoughts to Ponder: *How can you put Isaiah's hope in your heart? How can you work for peace in your church and community?*

– Resources: NIV Bible, Pastor Seamon's teachings on Advent!

December 15, 2019 -- Advent 3

BUILDING BLOCKS OF GROWING IN CHRIST

***"You also, be patient. Establish your hearts for the coming of Christ is at hand"
– James 5:8***

James 5:7-11 instruct us to have patience in our suffering and to remain steadfast in faith. "Do not grumble that you may not be judged." We are given examples of the prophets and what they endured when they spoke in the name of the Lord. Also, the "patience of Job" who not only endured the great loss of his children, his wealth and health, but also suffered greatly as he endured ridicule because his continued faith. Job never lost his trust that he would be delivered from his suffering.



Today we all face times of struggle and suffering. Faith in God will sustain us. He is compassionate and merciful and will not abandon his children. He will carry us through difficult times.

Thoughts to ponder: How do you react in times of difficulty? Do you pray or read scripture for guidance immediately, or wait until all other attempts at resolution fail? God's gifts are promised to the faithful. From today on, how will you seek to more deeply rely on Him and His grace in your life?

Resource: Biblehub.com

December 22, 2019 -- Advent 4

BUILDING BLOCKS OF GROWING IN CHRIST

...⁵ through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations,⁶ including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,
– Romans 1:5-6

Here Paul is writing a letter to Jewish Christians in Rome and precedes his letter's text with first establishing who he is, and whose he is. Then he notes that he himself was called to be an Apostle of Christ by the Spirit of Christ, that is by the Holy Spirit. This is significant because Paul immediately takes the focus off himself to put the focus on believers in relation to Christ. Not only does Paul tell us we receive the Holy Spirit and grace, but that *we* are given the role of passing on apostleship message! Why? To bring about the faith for the sake of His name. To whom? To all nations, meaning our family, our neighbors, and the whole world! The reason? Because as believers we are all called and belong to Christ and Christ Himself has commanded that we tell the world who He is and let the Holy Spirit take it from there!



Thoughts to ponder: Do you believe you are called to apostolic message? If not, why not? From today on, will you pray for the Lord to reveal how you are to fulfill your role as His disciple.

BUILDING BLOCKS OF GROWING IN CHRIST

“But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit; therefore he turned to be their enemy, and himself fought against them.”
– Isaiah 63:10

These words should stop us dead in our tracks. God becomes the enemy of His chosen people and is at war with them. This should strike terror in our hearts when the only one who can save us declares He is against us.



Many people defiantly rebel against the living God. Grieving the Holy Spirit isn't even a thought, much less a worry. But what about those of us who are chosen in our baptisms? Do we fear God when we rebel? Are we concerned about grieving the Holy Spirit? Every time we sin intentionally (which we all do, if we are completely honest), we defiantly rebel against God. We grieve the Holy Spirit. We put ourselves in jeopardy of having God as our enemy.

Disciples of Jesus are grieved when they realize they have grieved the Holy Spirit. God will indeed be our enemy doing his alien work (*Isaiah 28:21*) in those moments, driving us in fear to seek mercy from the only one who can save us – Jesus.

Thoughts to remember: *Pause in your daily devotions and prayer to ask, “Heavenly Father, in what ways have I grieved your Holy Spirit?” Listen. Let His Word thoroughly examine your heart. Pray for mercy. Thank God for doing His alien work to save you.*

BUILDING BLOCKS OF GROWING IN CHRIST

“And he said to them, ‘Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?’”
– Luke 2:49

Joseph, Mary and Jesus were on their annual Passover festival pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Jesus ended up “missing.” Since extended family and neighbors often traveled together his parents thought he was with them. If he had been a regular child, we could imagine a curious boy getting distracted and staying behind. Most parents experience that sense of panic when not seeing their child right beside them in a store. Can you imagine searching for three days? No wonder Mary had such a strong reaction: “Son why have you treated us so?” Jesus basically responded saying: “I have been busying myself with my Father’s work.” This is an important declaration; He is the Son of God and the Lord of the Temple. While always being submissive to his parents, Jesus was not a regular child. Engaging the rabbis in profound thinking, listening and asking questions at the Temple this twelve year old astonished them. Christ is the Temple: where God and man meet. He had made it possible for us to be the Church, gathered by Christ to be and make disciples.



Thoughts to ponder: *Take time to meditate on who Jesus is and who he called you to be. How do you get busy with your Father’s work and immerse yourself in discipleship?*

- Sources: “*Luke for Everyone*” by Tom Wright; “*Luke*” by Robert A. Sorensen

JANUARY 12, 2020 — BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

BUILDING BLOCKS OF GROWING IN CHRIST

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.
— Romans 6:4

In Paul's day, immersion was the usual form of baptism – that is new Christians were “buried” in water. People understood this form of baptism to symbolize the death and burial of the old way of life. Coming out of the water symbolized resurrection to new life with Christ. If we believe our old sinful life was dead and buried, we have a powerful motive to resist sin. We can treat desires and temptations of the old nature as if they were dead. Then we can enjoy our wonderful new life with Jesus.



The idea that Christians need to be baptized should be no surprise. What may be surprising is that Jesus was baptized which does not seem to fit because He was God's virgin-born, sinless, perfectly obedient, and was fully pleasing to the father.

Thoughts to ponder—*Jesus fulfilled His role as obedient Son of God, practicing the righteousness of submitting to the Father's will, living wholeheartedly in the world devoted to God. With your baptism in mind, each day reflect on how sin resonates in your life, then confess that sin so that you may be devoted to God in this world and the next.*

— Resources: *The Living Bible Encyclopedia; Life Application Study Bible*

JANUARY 19, 2020 — EPIPHANY 2

BUILDING BLOCKS OF GROWING IN CHRIST

The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, "What are you seeking?"
— John 1: 35-38a

John had baptized Jesus and witnessed the Spirit descending like a dove and proclaiming "This is my Son in Whom I am well-pleased." He was so taken with the experience that he could not help referring to Jesus as the Lamb of God whenever he saw Him. John's own disciples were familiar with the term 'lamb' in the scriptures to mean a sacrifice, often a willing sacrifice as in Isaiah 53:7. It is not surprising that some of John's disciples would transfer their loyalty to Jesus. Knowing they did not fully understand His mission on earth, it is not surprising that Jesus asked them what they were seeking. If seeking glory, power and honor, they would only be disappointed. If seeking the sacrificial Lamb of God, then they too needed to understand they too would be persecuted in His name.



Thoughts to ponder: *What are you seeking? Are you spending time in God's Word regularly seeking to know and understand more about Jesus and His promises? Take time this week to examine your own devotional life. Seek ways to strengthen your relationship with Him?*

— Sources: *Lutheran Study Bible, Biblehub.com*

BUILDING BLOCKS OF GROWING IN CHRIST

And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

– Matthew 4:19

The brothers Simon (also called Peter) and Andrew were casting fishing nets into the Sea of Galilee. Imagine their surprise as they heard a man walking by making the bold and unusual request above? Nothing indicates they knew who Jesus was or beginning His active ministry on earth. You probably think there is more to the story than this brief account because the very next verse says, "*Immediately they left their nets and followed Him.*" (Matthew 4:20) What an impact Jesus must have made upon them to leave their nets behind and follow Jesus. He then also called others to be disciples who would travel with Him throughout his earthly ministry.



Fast forward to Matthew 28 as Jesus is completing his earthly ministry telling them that they now needed to "*go therefore and make disciples of all nations...*" (verse 28: 19a).

Thoughts to Ponder: *It is from Christ's great commission (Matthew 28:19) that Reformation Lutheran Church formed its mission statement, "Gathered by Christ to be and make disciples." As a fellow follower of Christ, therefore one of His disciples, He calls each of us to follow Him, telling others about Him. Spend time this week thinking about how you're responding to His call by telling others about your relationship with Jesus and the impact He made upon your life. Make a commitment to share Christ with a friend or neighbor today.*

BUILDING BLOCKS OF GROWING IN CHRIST

"He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

– Micah 6:8

God, in the words from Micah, reminds the People of Israel how He is the one who brought them out of Egypt, released them from slavery, provided leaders, protected them from harm, and led them into the Promised Land.



During those times when we may feel burdened by our faith, let us remember that everything has been accomplished for us already by Christ Jesus. The Lord teaches us in His word what is good, to be just and humble with steadfast love. Luther writes: "*God requires no good works from us to Himself; He wants everything to yield to the use and welfare of our neighbor*".

Thoughts to Ponder: *God desires our faithfulness and praise. It is our neighbor who needs our love and kindness. Is there someone in your sphere of life who longs for a loving gesture, a kind word, a fair opportunity? With every interaction you encounter, silently ask God how you can reveal His love to others.*

– The Lutheran Study Bible

BUILDING BLOCKS OF GROWING IN CHRIST

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.
– Matthew 5:13

In these words, Jesus tells His followers they are important to Him and have an important role to play. Salt helps to preserve, and as Jesus' disciples, we have a role in preserving what is true and good in our culture, what God's values are and what God has given us through His son. Salt is effective when on meat or fish to preserve it, or when added as seasoning giving food more flavor. For us to be effective, we cannot withdraw from the world. We need to be involved with others, at work and where we live, sharing the love and truth of Christ, standing up for the truth and beauty of Christ, His teachings, sharing it all with others. This is not easy in our present culture. Jesus has warned us about persecution, but He is reminding us here to retain our "saltiness" and be ready to challenge this world's beliefs when they are not in line with God's truth.



Thoughts to ponder: Are you prepared to stand up for your Christian beliefs? Have you been praying for God to give you courage and wisdom to respond when your Christian beliefs are challenged? Add this request to your daily prayers.

– Sources: Lutheran Study Bible, theologyofwork.org

BUILDING BLOCKS OF GROWING IN CHRIST

“Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.”
– Deuteronomy 30: 19-20 ESV

Moses, in the preceding verses, is preparing his people not only to move into the Promised Land, but also for life without him. The Lord God has given His commandments: His people have a choice to choose either “life and good” or “death and evil.” The Lord God instructs the people to “Therefore choose life!”



Where have we heard this quote before and the end result? Daniel describes how Israel brought a curse upon themselves by departing from God's Law. This choice also reflects beyond our life. Jesus was asked “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus replies, “What is written in the Law ... this do and you shall live.”

Thoughts to Ponder: What do you think of when you hear the phrase “choose life?” Abortion is a hot topic where we are constantly reminded of the rights of the unborn. What about life after this life? Are you able to follow the letter of the Law? Thanks be to God that we have His grace through Jesus to rely upon. How can you hold fast to life this week?
Resource: The Lutheran Study Bible

FEBRUARY 23, 2020 —TRANSFIGURATION

BUILDING BLOCKS OF GROWING IN CHRIST

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.

Matthew 17:1&2

The transfiguration was a revelation of the glory of the Son of God, a glory hidden now but to be fully revealed when he returns. It is also a confirmation of the difficult teaching given to the disciples at Caesarea Philippi and a beneficial experience for the disciples who were discouraged after having been recently reminded of Jesus' impending suffering and death.



St Luke does not use the word transfigured, but describes the change which it implies: "the fashion of His countenance became other than it had been." He adds the profoundly significant fact that this was while He was in the act of prayer. It was in that act of communion with His Father that the divine glory flowed out into visible brightness.

Thoughts to ponder: The transfiguration symbolizes the life to come, and reminds each of us that the vision of God unfolds before us as we grow closer to Him. His splendor and holiness point toward the way that is always filled with grace and joy. Think of this as you go through each day this week.

– Resources: Lutheran Study Bible & Biblehub.com