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**Sunday 6 December to Sunday 13 December**

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Sunday 6 December 2020

# A good shepherd

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

**‘He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom’ (Isaiah 40:11).**

Read Isaiah 40:1–11

My dad was a sheep farmer. One of my favourite photos is a view of him walking along, emptying a bag of wheat for a flock of sheep with the sheep lined up behind him eating the grain.

Dad loved his sheep – he loved all animals. He couldn’t bear to see them suffer, be it from footrot or a careless shearer inflicting too many cuts on an animal. It was fun to drive around the farm with him in the ute as he checked on his flock. He would pick up the motherless lambs or the ailing sheep to bring them home so that we could care for them.

Dad’s arms were big and strong. For me, he represented strength, safety and comfort. It is my dad I see in the picture when I read these verses from Isaiah – Dad in his sweat-stained hat with a hand-rolled cigarette hanging off his bottom lip.

I am blessed to have had a good and loving father – a strong man who had the softest heart! Under his big booming voice and large physical presence, he had a heart made of marshmallows. He would help those in need without letting on to anyone else what he was doing. He had the gift of generosity, which oozed out of him whenever someone needed his help.

Now, I know that not everyone is blessed to have had a good and kind father as I did, but all of us are blessed with a Father in heaven who is good, kind and just. He is a Father who gives us comfort and cares for us like a faithful shepherd caring for a flock of sheep. And just like my dad knew where to find his sheep, God knows where to find you so that he can pick you up and carry you to a place of safety.

**Good Shepherd, help us to let you pick us up and carry us to the place of safety you have prepared for us. Please help us to trust that you will look after us even when we feel as though we are in a wilderness. Amen.**

Monday 7 December 2020

# A just king

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

**‘But with righteousness he shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth’ (Isaiah 11:4).**

Read Isaiah 11:1–10

Isaiah is prophesying the coming of a new king. This will be a king who exhibits all of the qualities we believe a king is supposed to have. And as we read further in the text, all sorts of amazing things start to happen – all sorts of reconciliations between the most unlikely of animals: the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, and the calf and the lion. What is more, a little child will lead them.

This is a righteous king – but whatever does that look like? We don’t really use the word very often in our day-to-day conversations. Righteous means moral, good, just, blameless, upright, honourable, honest, respectable, decent. How often do we use those terms to describe our leaders? It seems that our media, and even ourselves on social media and elsewhere, are far more inclined to a more self-righteous approach. An approach that is smug, self-satisfied, complacent, pious, haughty, hypocritical, pretentious, and maybe even holier-than-thou.

The king that Isaiah refers to is not ruled by what he sees and hears, but his rule is all about righteousness with special mention being made to the poor and the meek. I wonder whether there is anything that we can learn from this king? Are we concerned about the poor and how they are faring during these times? How do we regard the homeless people or those with mental illnesses or addictions that we see in the streets or even those who come into our church?

These are not easy questions to answer, but maybe during Advent, we can consider how we can support what the righteous king would want us to do to care for the poor and the meek of the earth. Part of that righteousness is, of course, justice. And justice is the right of not just the wealthy and the privileged but also of those who are stateless and those who live in poverty and degradation.

**Righteous God, open our hearts to the needs of those in our community who are less privileged than we are. Instil in us a generous spirit this Christmas so that we share what we have with the poor and the meek. Amen.**

Tuesday 8 December 2020

# Learning righteousness

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

**‘For when your judgements are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness’ (Isaiah 26:9b).**

Read Isaiah 26:1–9

‘God grows us as his people to a mature faith in Christ – a faith that comes to life through effective witness and ministry so that people everywhere may know Christ and his love’ (from the mission statement of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand [LCA/NZ]).

‘Lutheran aged and community services are an integral part of the Lutheran Church of Australia’s mission and ministry, as we work to transform the lives of those with whom we work’ (from 'Called to transformative action – the ethos underpinning Lutheran aged care and community services').

As Christians, we are the carriers of God’s transformation into the world. Those of us who are members of the LCA/NZ strive to be committed to witness and ministry that will bring the knowledge of Christ and his love to people everywhere. Our aged care and community services are founded on the notion of transforming peoples’ lives through their work.

Do you think about that when you see the LCA and LCNZ logos with the words ‘Where love comes to life’ underneath? I believe that we need to actively seek ways to transform the world, and we can do that by learning to act righteously.

Isaiah writes about judgement and hope. The hope is that God can make everything new. This is a gift to us; however, with the gift of hope comes the responsibility of seeking righteousness in all that we do and say – it is the witness of our actions, thoughts and words that underpin the new world for which we yearn. It’s a world characterised by inclusiveness, neighbourliness and love.

Thankfully we don’t need to transform the world on our own. We are part of a much wider community, or communion as it is sometimes called. Hence, when we talk about the ‘communion of saints’, we are reminded that we are working in partnership with our fellow Christians, including those who are alive today and those dear ones who are already in their eternal home. It is not a lonely journey.

Isaiah includes the promise that the way of the righteous is level (verse 7). May we find that level path as we bring Christ’s love to life in our family and community.

**Transforming God, work in us so that we can further the cause of justice in the world. Give us hope that our efforts, which may seem insignificant, are important and for our faith to continue. Amen.**

Wednesday 9 December 2020

# Let’s party! He’s coming!

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

**‘Sing and rejoice, O daughter Zion! For lo, I will dwell in your midst, says the Lord’ (Zechariah 2:10).**

Read Zechariah 2:10–13

How are your Christmas preparations going? Do you even feel like celebrating this year?

This has been a year of challenges and uncertainty. I’m sure we have all made plans that ended up being abandoned. Many have had to re-schedule weddings and funerals, family gatherings and holidays. Things that we have always taken for granted, such as attending the Christmas pageant, footy games, or going to the gym have been disrupted or we’ve missed them altogether. Others may have experienced less impact but may have lived in fear of the virus spreading or of loved ones being infected, or have experienced that undefined fear of the unknown that robs you of sleep in the middle of the night.

And, of course, many have been seriously impacted financially and emotionally. We have seen heroic acts by our first responders to emergencies and by medical staff and those working in aged care. At times, it has seemed that the world has descended into chaos. On the world stage, what was once predictable has become unpredictable.

Things weren’t all that terrific in Zechariah’s time either. Zechariah has several visions about the future restoration of Jerusalem. In the midst of these, there is the exhortation to sing and rejoice and the promise that the Lord will dwell among the people.

We can take on board both the exhortation and the promise. As Christmas approaches, let’s listen to and sing the carols – the ones that tell the story of Jesus’ birth and maybe the old and new favourites that recall former Christmases as well. We can take comfort in the memories of the good times. Even more importantly, we can reflect on the promise that our God is dwelling, and will continue to dwell, among us. No matter what happens.

As Christmas approaches, we can reflect on how we want to celebrate Jesus’ birth this year. The promise of his birth and subsequent death is the heart and core of our faith. They are promises worth celebrating.

**Lord Jesus, thank you for your great love that led you to become human and spend time on earth. Help us to find comfort and joy in this and to find ways to celebrate your birth once again. Amen.**

Thursday 10 December 2020

# Winning the election

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

**‘His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness’ (2 Peter 1:3).**

Read 2 Peter 1:3–11

When I look in the mirror, I see an ageing face with some wrinkles, greying hair, and glasses – an image that continues to change as the years slide by. I know, too, that what I am seeing is God’s image because that is how God has made us. This passage invites us to become part of God’s divine nature – to confirm our call and election to be part of a great mystery that is God’s promise for us on earth.

As Christians, we are called to become participants in this divine mystery and thus escape the corruption that is in the world, to be obedient and to lead a godly life. As Christians, we are participants in God’s divine mystery on earth, and that means we are not alone.

It is by faith that we can seek the path towards the divine: by living godly lives of goodness, understanding, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection and love. We are encouraged to strive to develop these attributes and values. There is no secret knowledge required. Just by living in this way, our faith can grow, and each of us can become more effective and fruitful as we live our life in Christ. Maybe that is what our family and friends who have not accepted their call and election need to see in us.

On reflection, I find that I struggle with every single one of these attributes but the struggle needs to continue as I strive to lead a well-rounded and fruitful Christian life. I often think of Paul’s words to the Philippians where he encourages them to think about whatever is true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent and worthy of praise. That isn’t always easy in a world that seems to have become addicted to all that is negative, to criticism and condemnation of others, to trial by media and social media. (Philippians 4 is worth a read.)

By continuing to strive to lead a holy and godly life, not only will we live in a better world, but God will dwell in us through the Holy Spirit, and we will be given entry into God’s eternal kingdom. Now that is an election worth winning!

**Loving God, help us through your Holy Spirit to claim our call and election into your kingdom. Help us to lead a life that is pleasing to you and of benefit to our community. Amen.**

Friday 11 December 2020

# Our awesome God

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

**‘When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying: “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last”’ (Revelation 1:17).**

Read Revelation 1:9–20

When was the last time you heard or said that something was 'awesome'? Was it about a sporting achievement? Or the fact that there was still toilet paper left on the supermarket shelves in South Australia at the start of a six-day lockdown? Or was it when you were contemplating the wonder, might and majesty of a God who takes the trouble to even count the hairs on your head?

My granddaughter refers to herself as awesome. I wonder what that means to her? I think that she is excellent, amazing and remarkable. After all, she is my granddaughter. These words reflect part of what we have always considered as awesome. There are other aspects of the word that may have become less meaningful over the years, such as wonder, astonishment and fear. Awe is often accompanied by fear – just think of the biblical encounters with angels that often begin with the words, ‘Do not be afraid’.

So it is with John in his first vision of Christ. John is completely bowled over and falls at Christ’s feet. Christ responds, ‘Do not be afraid’.

And so it is for us, too, when we contemplate that God, the all-knowing, all-powerful God who is always there with us, can care for each and every one of us. God is there for us in the beginning – when we are born, when we are baptised and through to the last when we breathe our final breath and return to our eternal home. Through every moment of our lives, Jesus is with us, watching over us, protecting us and loving us. No matter what we do or say, God’s love never stops.

And if that isn’t awesome, then I don’t know what is.

**Dear Jesus, thank you that we do not have to fear you but that you are always there for us from the beginning to the end. Thank you for being awesome. Amen.**

Saturday 11 December 2020

# A mouthful of laughter

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

**‘Then our mouth was filled with laughter’ (Psalm 126:2).**

Read Psalm 126

Laughter has all sorts of benefits for us physically as well as mentally. I sometimes wonder whether we laugh enough, and some of my corniest jokes are an attempt to help people to have a laugh and receive the benefits. There is even a form of therapy that involves laughter and humour, which is used to relieve pain and suffering. Apparently, even fake laughter can help.

Sometimes I wonder why Christians/Lutherans don’t laugh more. When we consider what God has given us, we have so much to be happy about. We live in a beautiful world. We have people around us who care for us. Here in Australia, we have a lot of freedom to think and act as we please, and we have access to excellent medical care. Many of us have a high standard of living, and we have the best coffee! So why aren’t we laughing and leaping for joy?

Maybe in the next 24 hours, you can share some laughter with a few people and see how good you feel. The people in the psalm have experienced something that seems to have been too good to be true. The response by the psalm writer is that people acknowledged what God had done for them and they rejoiced – just as we will rejoice when we can gather with family and friends who we haven’t been able to see for many long months during the pandemic. Just imagine how good that will feel when we can be with them, touch them, hug them and talk to them without having to go through some sort of electronic device.

There is a Yiddish proverb, ‘What soap is to the body, laughter is to the soul. You wouldn’t want to go without soap, would you?’

**Joyful God, help us to see the joy in life and fill our mouths with laughter. May there be others with whom we can laugh, too. Amen.**Sunday 12 December 2020

# In the wilderness

by Neville Grieger

**‘I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness’ (John 1:23).**

Read John 1:6–8,19–28

For the second week in a row in this Advent season, the Sunday gospel reading focuses on John the Baptist. My first reaction when I initially sat down to tap out some thoughts on this passage was, ‘Here we go again. How can the story about this Middle-Eastern wild-man John fella possibly be relevant to us today in the 21st century?’

But after letting it rattle around for a week or so, I had a different thread emerge. It suddenly dawned on me that this is relevant to us in 2020. John was out there in the wilderness trying to proclaim the good news about Jesus. I was reminded that we have been cast in a similar role, out in the spiritual wilderness of our world, challenged with the task of trying to get a similar Jesus message through to a mass of people that in the main are not listening. We are the John the Baptists (and Joanne the Baptists!) of today. It is our job to encourage people to be receptive to God-stuff and to bring them the good news of Jesus.

There is only one difference. We have the huge advantage of standing on the other side of the cross. We have the benefit of the profound words of Jesus, ‘It is finished’, echoing in our ears. It’s now a done deal, which brings an extra level of excitement to the news. We have been totally set free through the finished work of Jesus. We are free to dance. Let’s celebrate; let’s tell the world – that’s our challenge!

How do we do that? Well, I’m certainly not advocating climbing on a soapbox at our local mall or nearest major shopping centre. It starts with modelling. We can show people Jesus by our actions – and to use the words variously attributed to St Francis of Assisi, ‘Preach the gospel at all times, and if absolutely necessary use words’.

**Dear Lord, we thank you that you got the job done! Amid the uncertainties and anxieties of our world, encourage us and support us in our efforts to show people Jesus. Amen.**