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**Sunday 25 December 2022 to Sunday 1 January 2023**

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Sunday 25 December 2022

# A simple call

by Tom Brennen

**And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn (Luke 2:7).**

Read Luke 2:(1–7) 8–20

May the blessings of Christmas be with you this day as we celebrate the birth of our Lord and Saviour!

When I began my ministry as a lay preacher within the church, my pastor of the time was a former farmer. Luke was his favourite gospel. It was simple, evocative and written for those outside the Jewish faith. Luke offers a simple record of the birth of Christ. But despite this simplicity, there is much for us to reflect on. There is much that brings our minds to the future ministry of this little child.

The simple record brings forth much conversation. The most common image of the site of Jesus’ birth is a stable not too dissimilar to stables today. However, some traditions suggest Jesus was born in the lower room of a crude dwelling where animals were housed, and others say that he was born in a cave. One tradition even proposes that Jesus was born in the open air, for that is where a manger would most likely be. That Mary herself had to wrap Jesus in cloth highlights how alone the family was. This task was usually undertaken by a relative who would be with the young mother at the birth.

The explanation for this situation today is simply that ‘there was no place for them in the inn’.

One commentator sums this up bluntly: ‘There is much we do not know. We only know that everything points to poverty, obscurity, and even rejection.’

In Australia and New Zealand, the lands have been ravaged by bushfires, floods and diseases these past years. Our financial situation has been impacted significantly. In particular, rising inflation is placing many families under increased pressure.

Christmas has always been a time to celebrate and be with family. It is easy for many of us to seek to celebrate in a manner that causes us to forget our troubles and the troubles of others, ‘the reason for the season’, and the humble beginnings of the Lord of our lives.

Among the presents and celebrations on this day, let us not forget the child in the manger who calls us to follow his ministry of caring for the poor and rejected. Many of us will sit at plenteous tables with our infants well-clothed and resting safely. Let us give thanks for our circumstances but also use what we have to help those in need.

**Lord, in our plenty, we give thanks on this day that celebrates the birth of your son. Move us to care for our sisters and brothers in need. Amen.**

Tom Brennen is currently serving as principal of Lakeside College, a Prep to Year 12 Lutheran school located in Pakenham, Victoria. He has served as a missionary in the Middle East and has a passion for bringing Lutheran thinking to issues of social justice. As an educator, he is dedicated to ensuring a transformative Lutheran education is accessible to all families across Australia. Tom holds a Master of Education from Australian Lutheran College, a Graduate Certificate in Educational Leadership from Australian Catholic University and undergraduate degrees in arts, music and education. As an active academic, Tom has written and presented on many diverse topics, such as worship in Christian schools, the interaction between social justice and Lutheran schools, leading staff professional development and cross-cultural schooling.

Monday 26 December 2022

# Comfort ye!

by Tom Brennen

**Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for (Isaiah 40:1,2).**

Read Isaiah 40:1–14

Before I became a school teacher, I studied classical singing at university and was a professional singer for more than 10 years. One of the easy money-earning jobs that would come around every year was the invitation to sing the tenor role in George Frideric Handel’s Messiah.

As a younger singer, I spent hours perfecting the role – the airs, the arias, the recitative. It took many years before my singing teacher would allow me to consider singing the role in public.

I vividly remember the first time I sang the role. It was in a beautiful old church in Adelaide on a hot December evening. We were lucky enough to have a full orchestra and a large choir. The sun was just setting, and a warm glow bathed the church through the windows.

At the end of the overture, I stood and walked to my mark on the stage and focused on the opening bars of the very first song of the piece, a tenor aria titled ‘Comfort Ye’.

As I looked out at the packed auditorium, I felt the privilege it was to share the first words of the masterful libretto that captures the passion of Christ so well. The opening line is simply the words of Isaiah 40:1–4, ‘Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned’.

Lutherans, of all Christians, should deeply feel this pronouncement of God’s grace and be passionate about sharing this news with others. Ephesians 2:8 reminds us, ‘For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God’.

Handel’s Messiah tells the entire passion of Christ – his birth, death and resurrection. It was no mistake that out of all of this, the librettist chose the text from Isaiah to be the first words. It is a powerful reminder that although we are born in sin, God brings us comfort in the physical act of the birth of Christ.

I may not be a singer anymore, but the words of Isaiah 40:1–4 continue to bring comfort and encouragement when I am oppressed by thoughts of self-condemnation. I pray that these words bring you the same comfort.

***Lord, in our sinfulness, remind us of your forgiveness through the comforting knowledge of Jesus' death and resurrection for our sake. Amen.***

Tuesday 27 December 2022

# A majestic God

by Tom Brennen

**Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable (Isaiah 40:28).**

Read Isaiah 40:15–31

Martin Luther relished writing about this passage. He had no problem reminding himself and his people that our sinfulness had reduced us to a truly pitiful state.

This is a great and mighty text. Just as one little trace is nothing alongside the ocean and a little dust is nothing alongside the heavens, so all human plans are nothing … God himself is so great in righteousness, power, and majesty that compared with his power and majesty ours is nothing. It is like a drop from a bucket and like dust.

One great advantage of those who lived well before us was the amount of time they spent outside. With our air conditioning and heating, our endless entertainment subscriptions and convenient food and drink, it can be hard to recall the majesty of God. But all these things we have created are indeed dust that will be blown away in the end.

Today, this reflection is an encouragement to get outside and into God’s creation as much as you can. Allow yourself to marvel at the intricate nature of a flower, the sun’s warmth on your (sunscreen-protected) skin, the endless differences between the shapes of gum leaves, and the feeling of cool water as you jump into a pool, sea or lake.

The Lord who created all of these things works on a scale so much larger than us and projects of far greater import. My weekend project of painting my bathroom pales into insignificance when compared with creating the heavens or saving all humankind.

But …

Luther also reminds us that we are God's special creation in whom he takes great delight. This passage offers such lovely encouragement as we consider God’s majesty in his works: ‘God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless … they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.’

What a blessing it is to be a child of God and live in his creation.

**Lord, let us often praise your majesty as revealed in your creation. May your Spirit strengthen us for the works you have prepared for us to do. Amen.**

Wednesday 28 December 2022

# I am with you

by Tom Brennen

**Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand (Isaiah 41:10).**

Read Isaiah 41:1–16

As a school principal, there have been many times I have sat down with a student, staff member or parent and offered consolation they needed to hear. Perhaps the most often-used phrase in my arsenal is, ‘It’s going to be okay’.

In the midst of the many troubles of our lives, it is easy to forget to sit and listen to God, gather with other believers or read his word. Our natural inclination is to work harder or try another approach when things are not going well. It is at this time we need someone to sit us down and make us stop.

God speaks in this vein in the opening of our verse today. He tells his creation to be silent and still! And this is what he says:

I am in control. I am the first and the last. I know what is to be. I have chosen all humankind as my people. Yes, you will face enemies and hardship. But I will be with you. I will help you and strengthen you. I will be with you at all times. I am your God.

God’s message is so much more beautiful, comforting and truthful than any phrase I can offer to my students, staff and families.

Imagine what a difference it would make to our lives and our communities if, when faced with trouble, we immediately stopped and meditated on the words of Isaiah 41:1–16.

As we offer consolation and encouragement to ourselves and our communities, let us turn often to God’s word for the needed reminders that he is the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of us all.

As Lutherans, we hold as core to our faith the power of the written word of God. Let us turn to this precious gift for sustenance.

**Lord, thank you for your word. Let us drink deep from this cup of wisdom. Amen.**

Thursday 29 December 2022

# Water and shade

by Tom Brennen

**When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the Lord will answer them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them (Isaiah 41:17).**

Read Isaiah 41:17–29

As I read this verse, I cannot help but think of my time as a missionary living in Egypt.

Australians and Egyptians have a great deal in common regarding water. There is a scarcity of it, and it is a resource that needs to be managed carefully. While our water situation in Australia calls states into conflict, the water situation in Egypt calls countries into conflict. The main water source, the Nile, flows through Burundi, Tanzania, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia and South Sudan.

We all rely on this precious resource for life. Without water, we perish. In drought, our crops and animals perish. Without water, we are without life.

But the desert traveller needs one more thing for life – shade. In our verse today, God provides this in the form of cedars, acacia, pines and cypress.

And after the Lord has provided the traveller with water and shade, he encourages them to see, know, consider and understand that, through God’s hand, all of this was created.

The pattern that we have seen in our four-day journey through Isaiah is the reminder of the smallness of humanity, the greatness of God, our inability to provide for ourselves, and God’s ability to give in abundance. At the start of our devotional journey this week, we celebrated the provision of a Saviour born to a sinful people who could not save themselves. Christ was the answer to a parched and helpless people.

As we consider the problems of this life – from the smaller considerations of what career one should follow to the larger ones of solving the water-sharing crisis in the Nile River countries – let us sit in the shade that God provides, drink the water he offers, and allow the Spirit to guide our conversations and collaborations.

The Lord is indeed our Lord, and he will not forsake us.

**Lord, as we seek to solve the problems of our world, may we sit in your shade and recall your wisdom. Amen.**

Friday 30 December 2022

# Justice

by Tom Brennen

**Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations (Isaiah 42:1).**

Read Isaiah 42:1–9

There is a popular refrain in the Christian church: ‘Martin Luther had no desire to reform society, only the church’. Resultingly, we do not read much from the founder of our church about addressing social injustices in our society. For many years, we have deprived ourselves of encouragement to continue the work of bringing justice to the world, a work pioneered by Jesus Christ.

As an educator in Lutheran schools, I was taught much about the first Lutheran schools in Australia\*. These schools were not well equipped, but they met the educational needs of the first Lutherans arriving in Australia, focusing on maintaining the faith, teaching the German language and other core areas of study. From these humble beginnings, we find ourselves the education providers to many students across our nation in very well-resourced schools.

This narrative forgets that the first Lutheran school in Australia was not for ‘Lutherans’. Early Lutheran missionaries set up schools for Indigenous Australians – an act that would bring them into conflict with local authorities. These missionaries rejected the government’s desire to ‘civilise’ the Indigenous people and ‘amalgamate’ them into the colony as workers, which meant taking away their land, breaking up their communities, suppressing their languages and culture, and separating children from their parents. They protested against the unjust colonial desire that failed to honour the God-given rights of the Australian Indigenous people.

Martin Luther wrote:

As love and support are given you, you, in turn, must render love and support to Christ in his needy ones. You must feel with sorrow ... all the unjust suffering of the innocent, with which the world is everywhere filled to overflowing. You must fight, work, pray …

In the footsteps of Jesus, who ‘brings forth justice to the nations and will not grow faint until he has established justice’, and in the footsteps of our mothers and fathers of the faith who followed this calling, let us continue God’s work of bringing justice to the nations.

As Lutherans, we preach that the gospel has the power to change us, both in eternity and right now. May the Holy Spirit empower and guide us as we seek to care for our sisters and brothers in situations of injustice.

**Father God, send us your Holy Spirit so that we may join your Son, Jesus Christ, in your work of bringing justice to the nations. Amen.**

\*We are indebted to the work of Dr Christine Lockwood for bringing knowledge of these early South Australian missionaries to greater light. Consult her PhD thesis, ‘The two kingdoms: Lutheran missionaries and the British civilising mission in early South Australia’, for more information.

Saturday 31 December 2022

# We all need encouragement to praise

by Tom Brennen

**Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights! (Psalm 148:1)**

Read Psalm 148

I was recently reminded that God knew what he was doing when he created us to live in community.

I had been going through a rough patch spiritually. So much so that I jokingly would tell my Christian friends that God and I were not speaking. It was a blessing to hear that my friends, too, had been through periods when they struggled to continue their desire to pray and praise God.

It is said that there are many ways to learn something, but sadly, it is only through bitter experience that our sinfulness can be broken. This happened to me when my wife experienced a sudden and significant illness.

My wife works in health and is not one to raise the alarm without need. She had never asked me to take her to hospital quickly before, so when she did so, I was alarmed and worried. To cut a long story short, an inflamed appendix had burst, leading to emergency surgery to address it. Through the blessing of our health system in Australia, she has since returned to health. Praise God!

With the crisis over, my thoughts turned again to frustration with God for the way things were in my life. Having had enough of this, my beloved wife lost her cool with me one day while driving along in our car and said, ‘Really? I’m alive, and you can’t thank him for that?’.

Well said.

Our reading today records creation joining in praising God – the mountains and hills, the heavens and depths, the kings and rulers, and even the angels.

We all need encouragement to praise God. Our sinful nature means it is not our natural disposition to want to. But God has given us help to join in this work, particularly in creating us to live and worship in community. Let us thank God for giving us sisters and brothers to hold us up when praising God is the last thing on our minds.

**Lord, forgive us when we neglect to give you thanks and praise. Grant us sisters and brothers to gather as your people and praise you. Amen.**

Sunday 1 January 2023

# Trust in God and focus on Jesus

by Maria Rudolph

**Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him (Matthew 2:13).**

Read Matthew 2:13–23

Happy New Year! What might this new year hold for you?

Consider Joseph of Nazareth. I wonder if he asked himself the same question after the sensational birth of Jesus. Joseph and his family were away from home in a makeshift ‘bedroom’ in a stable, visited by shepherds and, later, Magi with precious gifts. But there was also the looming threat of the murder of this newborn baby. What an unsettling time!

When Jesus entered Mary’s and Joseph’s life, Jesus became their focus. Their life choices became guided by his existence. If it were up to Mary and Joseph, they would have returned to Nazareth to live a quiet life after the census. But Herod was out to kill their baby, and they needed to sacrifice their comfort and stability for Jesus’ sake. They stepped into unknown territory and fled to Egypt. God spoke to Joseph in dreams, first reassuring him to marry pregnant Mary (Matthew 1:20), then guiding him to bring his family to safety in Egypt, and later back to Nazareth.

Admittedly, I wish God would clearly direct me in dreams too, so I could be sure of my next step. Do you? But was it really that straightforward for Joseph? Maybe God is already speaking to us through his word and Holy Spirit if only we have eyes to see and ears to hear. If only we have the courage of faith to follow God’s lead.

Be courageous like Joseph this year and step out boldly in faith. This new year will bring new challenges to your personal life, profession and church. I think it will involve stepping into unknown territory. And just like Joseph and his wife Mary, in all these situations, trusting God wholeheartedly and focusing on Jesus is all we need to do.

What new territory do you see ahead that you can intentionally pray into so that you might trust in God and focus on Jesus?

**Loving Jesus, I pray for your guidance and blessing over each moment of 2023. I pray that you can help me trust and focus on you. Use me as your hands and feet and your eyes and mouthpiece wherever I go and whatever I do. When I enter unknown territory, reassure me with your presence. Help me to step out boldly in your name. Amen.**