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**Sunday 10 December 2023 to**

**Sunday 17 December 2023**

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Sunday 10 December 2023

**Getting ready for Christmas**

by Pastor Mark Lieschke

***And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4).***

Read [Mark 1:1–8](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+1%3A1%E2%80%938&version=NRSVUE)

We can get a lot of encouragement, instruction and advice from many individuals and groups around us – Christians and non-Christians alike – about keeping the law, being fair, and loving our neighbour. Most groups concerned about the wellbeing of society can tell us that. And that's fine – there is nothing wrong with that at all.

But there's no other place than the Christian church that calls us to repent from our sins, and there's no source of freedom from our sins other than Jesus Christ. That's what makes Christianity unique. And that's why the message of the forgiveness of sins is so important.

Part of the purpose of God's word is to make us realise our condition – our utter hopelessness and helplessness because of our sin. But that's not the end purpose.

The law does cut us down to size. It makes us see the rotten nature we're born with and the sin we continue to do every day. But its ultimate purpose is not to condemn us but to point us in the direction of God’s saving grace through Jesus Christ.

The word of God calls us to repentance and comforts us with the forgiveness of Christ. We have that word. And, because of it, we have the assurance of being at peace with God.

We repent by admitting and confessing the abhorrence of our sin – then letting Christ take over from there, trusting that he can do – and, in fact, already has done – something about it.

It’s not long until Christmas. But before it comes, and before we can really enjoy celebrating it to the fullest, we need to hear those words: ‘Sinner, repent'. If there's no acknowledgement and repentance from sin, then we may feel no need for a Saviour and have no great joy in celebrating his birth.

But as we go to our Lord and say, ‘Jesus, be merciful to me, a sinner’, we can be assured that we will once again hear his words to us: ‘Your sins are forgiven you. Go in peace.’

***Jesus, be merciful to me, a sinner. Assure me that, despite my sinful nature and daily falling short of your expectations, you are gracious and compassionate, and you have come and continue to come to wash me clean and give me a new start every day. Let me go in peace again today. Amen.***

*Mark Lieschke is a retired pastor living on the Sunshine Coast, Queensland. He served in parishes in Adelaide, Palmerston North and Marton (New Zealand), and Wagga Wagga (school and congregation), before being elected as bishop of the NSW District of the LCANZ. He and Meredith have four children (two live in Canada) and two grandchildren. Mark enjoys spending time with family and friends, travelling, walking on the beach and resting.*

Monday 11 December 2023

**One in Christ**

by Pastor Mark Lieschke

***So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith (Galatians 3:26).***

Read [Galatians 3:23 – 4:11](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Galatians+3%3A23+%E2%80%93+4%3A11&version=NRSVUE)

Because we are one in Christ, we have the opportunity and responsibility of declaring our unity with those about us – especially those in God's church who are different from us.

It is not always easy standing side by side with people who dress differently than us, with whom we have had disagreements, who live different lifestyles, or who do not practise their faith as we do, and then declare they are one with us in Christ.

Our natural reaction can be to want people to become more and more like us. If only people could think, speak, act and serve in the way we do, things would be much smoother in the ministry of God’s church and our own congregations.

If only people would think, speak, act and serve the way we do. No! If only people would think, speak, act and serve in the way God wants them to. And that means accepting that there are a lot of very different people within the unity of the body of Christ.

Whatever differences we have, though, God says we are one in him, and because of him, we can work to overcome that which is unhealthy in the life of the church. And as we grow in our unity, live out what we already are, and become more and more what God has made us to be, we model to the world how God wants all people to live.

The church is a microcosm of heaven. We're here to give a glimpse to others of what it means to live in unity and harmony so that they will want to be part of it and experience our oneness.

Because we are one in Christ, we can give visible examples of Christian love, service and forgiveness. We can show that God is working in and through us. We can be the people of God, serving, encouraging and building each other up. We can be Christlike to each other and the world in all we do and say.

***Lord Jesus, thank you for claiming me to be your own. And thank you that you have placed me in a family of believers you also love and are committed to. Please help us honour and respect each other, celebrate our differences, live in harmony and unity, and so give a glimpse of heaven to those around us. Amen.***

Tuesday 12 December 2023

**Face to face**

by Pastor Mark Lieschke

***My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you (Galatians 4:19,20)!***

Read [Galatians 4:12–20](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Galatians+4%3A12%E2%80%9320&version=NRSVUE)

The Apostle Paul was a well-educated and very intellectual Jew. He belonged to the party of the Pharisees and had the potential to become an influential political and religious leader. But God singled him out and called him to an incredible mission. Paul was called to go out of his safe Jewish comfort zone to preach the gospel to the foreign people he loathed so much.

During one of his mission trips, he ended up in the region of Galatia, where he was welcomed with enthusiasm and warmth. The Galatians readily received and believed his message. Paul had some serious health problems when he arrived, but they took excellent care of him. By the time Paul left the city, there was a special bond between Paul and the Galatians.

But soon after, a group of teachers arrived and preached that non-Jews could not be saved unless they converted to Judaism, were circumcised, and followed all the moral and ritual laws of the Jewish religion.

Many Galatians believed what these teachers said and turned away from the gospel. This caused a deep and painful conflict between Paul and the Galatian church. The Galatians felt that Paul had betrayed them with a diluted and insufficient gospel of salvation. On the other hand, Paul felt like a mother whose children had run away. He felt frustrated, abandoned and humiliated.

The relationship between Paul and the Galatians was in danger of being shattered. But Paul continued to love them and serve them. He didn’t give up on them. He wanted them to know he was still committed to them and wished he could be with them to talk face to face.

Our relationship with God has its moments, too. We can be led astray, misunderstand the gospel, and question what God has said and done. But he doesn’t give up on us. He comes to us, face to face in Jesus Christ, to assure us of his love and grace, promises and commitment, and forgiveness and restoration in our relationship with him.

What a great God we have to celebrate and worship.

***Loving Lord Jesus, thank you for your commitment to us. Thank you that when we are led astray, doubt or disbelieve your word and question your actions, you don’t give up on us. Thank you that because of your grace, you come face to face with us and assure us of a special place in your kingdom. Amen.***

Wednesday 13 December 2023

**Children of promise**

by Pastor Mark Lieschke

***Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise (Galatians 4:28).***

Read [Galatians 4:21–31](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Galatians+4%3A21%E2%80%9331&version=NRSVUE)

If the only way we could have a good relationship with God was by achieving or accomplishing certain things, we’d never be able to be completely comfortable about his return at the end of this world, our having eternal life with him, or even being in any kind of positive relationship with him now.

Imagine if God looked at us and said, ‘If you do this for me, then I’ll respond in a certain way or reward you or love you in return’. If God acted like that, we could never be sure about whether we could be blessed, forgiven or loved by him.

We’d never know if we’d done enough for him. We could be worried about whether we’d be living up to his expectations. We’d have no idea about how much we ought to do to get him to respond to our actions.

But he isn’t like that at all. He’s the exact opposite. He says, ‘Because you have sinned, messed things up and need help, I will come to you’.

We don’t have to do anything first. God comes to us, makes us his own, forgives us, picks us up, loves us, makes his promises, and gives us all we need to respond to him.

Knowing this, believing we’re in that kind of relationship, is what we need to serve God with the right motivation so that we can look forward to Jesus’ return without any reservations or fear.

Knowing and believing this motivates us to look for opportunities to serve others. We serve, then, not because we have to but because we want to. We want to show our gratitude to God for what he’s given to us and done for us.

***Faithful Lord, thank you for taking the initiative and making us your own. Thank you that because of your life, death and resurrection for us, we can be confident we will spend eternity with you. Please give us what we need now so that we can show our gratitude for your great gifts. Amen.***

Thursday 14 December 2023

**Set free**

by Pastor Mark Lieschke

***It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery (Galatians 5:1).***

Read [Galatians 5:1–15](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Galatians+5%3A1%E2%80%9315&version=NRSVUE)

We've been rescued. We've been set free from sin and death and the power of the devil. We didn't earn this freedom or get it as a reward for good behaviour. We have received it purely because it is a gift from God.

And we've been rescued so that we can use our freedom to serve the people around us. We’re freed from having to worry about ourselves and our future so that we can concentrate on and be concerned about the needs and welfare of others.

We can very easily acknowledge and accept the fact that we've been set free from all the demands of the law and that we're free to make choices for ourselves and make decisions about how we're to live and act without being hemmed in by a rigid and legalistic set of rules and regulations. But we don't always acknowledge as quickly that God has rescued us so that we can use our freedom to serve others.

We're free – free to make decisions about how we're to live and act. As God's people with his Spirit within us, we're called to make decisions and choices with the best interests of others in mind.

And we can do that. We can serve others because we're free people. We're not slaves to sin, the law, death, Satan, or even ourselves. We're freed from all that. We've been rescued.

We're free to serve, give, love and walk in God's ways – and do so willingly, joyfully and confidently. That's what comes when the good news of Jesus takes hold of us and when we want to show our gratitude for all he's done for us.

Praise God for your freedom. Live in it. And use it so that other people around you will experience God’s love through you.

***Loving Lord Jesus, thank you for the freedom from the demands of the law that we enjoy. Help us to use our freedom in the service of others. Give us strength, wisdom and patience to give to others as you have given of yourself to us. Amen.***

Friday 15 December 2023

**Fruit of the Spirit – not fruits**

by Pastor Mark Lieschke

***But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law (Galatians 5:22,23).***

Through our baptism, the Holy Spirit has blessed us with the fruit of the Spirit. And by God’s grace through Jesus Christ, the fruit of the Spirit is displayed in our lives. We all possess the fruit of the Spirit and display its different characteristics.

We each have a different mix of those characteristics. This enables us to grow in the areas we may not be as competent in. And, as we grow into these characteristics, we can increasingly impact the lives of people around us.

Love, joy, peace: Through the expressions of love, joy and peace, we can help re-establish *shalom* in our world. We are given these characteristics as gifts, not for our sake, but for the sake of others.

Patience, kindness, goodness: God, through Jesus, has modelled and extended to us patience, kindness and goodness. By his grace, we can live out these characteristics, displaying them as we interact with others.

Faithfulness, gentleness, self-control: How we choose to live in faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control can significantly impact how others interact with us. It will transform us, too. These characteristics allow us to be at our very best – living our lives for others.

We are gifted with the fruit of the Spirit, and these characteristics of the fruit exist in all of us. We are called to use the fruit of the Spirit in our daily lives to impact the lives of others. And God calls us to continually stay connected to him – the vine – as we grow into the fruit of the Spirit with prayer, worship and a community of faith.

***Thank you, Lord Jesus, for filling us with the fruit of the Spirit so that we can serve others effectively. Please help us to display this fruit in all that we do and say and grow us to become more and more reliant on you for the confidence we need to serve boldly. Amen.***

Saturday 16 December 2023

**Praying Psalm 126**

by Pastor Mark Lieschke

***The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced (Psalm 126:3).***

Read [Psalm 126](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+126&version=NRSVUE)

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed.  
**Then our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.**

Then it was said among the nations, ‘The Lord has done great things for them’.  
**The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy. Restore our fortunes, Lord, like streams in the Negev.**

Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.  
**Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.**

Let us begin the day by rejoicing!  
**Let us acknowledge our Lord’s love and concern and allow our bodies to break forth into happy hilarity!**

The Lord has done such wonderful things for us.  
**Let us be glad!**

The day before us is uncertain.  
**We know not what we will encounter on our way.**

While we rejoice with those who rejoice,  
**We shall also weep with those who suffer.**

While we may be surprised by joy,  
**We may also pass through corridors of darkness.**

Wherever we go, we go forth as sons and daughters of the living God.  
**And we go forth to touch the lives of people with his healing love.**

***O Lord, we confess we have not always rejoiced in your gifts. We have not always trusted in you completely. We have not lived as your children and servants. We have often put ourselves ahead of you and others. We have focused on the weeping and failed to live the joyful, abundant life to which you have called us. Please forgive us these and all our sins for Jesus’ sake and enable us by your mercy and the power of your Holy Spirit to be joyful, knowing we are yours, now and forever. Amen.***

Sunday 17 December 2023

**A lot happens before Christmas!**

by Jo Corney

***There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light (John 1:6,7).***

Read [John 1:6–8,19–28](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+1%3A6-8%2C+19-28&version=NRSVUE)

It is a week until we celebrate Christmas! There’s a lot that occurs before Christmas arrives. Where we live, Christmas lights abound for weeks before Christmas, alerting me to its coming! There are many homes adorned with extravagant displays of colourful flashing lights. While I view Christmas lights, I look for nativity scenes, stars or angels. As I await Christmas, I am on the lookout for these lights to bear witness to the Christmas story where we remember the first coming of Jesus.

Compared to how many light displays I see, there are comparatively few of the traditional symbols of Christmas. However, I see many homes decorated with white lights only. These present differently to the variegated hues. The white is complete in its elegance – I want to gaze on these as I enjoy their impact. They clearly dispel the darkness by their shining, where the coloured lights create a muddy blue tone around them. They are still pretty, but I find they have a different impact than the warm or cool white lights.

As I reflect on our reading for today, I see the preparation for Jesus. We see John the Baptist, who came before Jesus as a witness to testify concerning Jesus, who is known as the ‘light of the world’. We are in the final week of Advent – our time of waiting that comes before Christmas when we remember the first arrival and the promised second coming of Jesus to our earth.

This year, I hope my experience of this time leading up to Christmas will find me ‘bearing witness concerning the light’. I hope to embrace Advent rather than wish it away so that I am encouraged and refreshed in the ‘light’ of Jesus in my personal space of faith. I hope for this so that when Christmas arrives, my experience of it is as full as possible – full because the lead up to it has had witness born in me, to me and by me, concerning the ‘light of the world’ – Jesus.

Every blessing for your Advent journey into Christmas.

***Loving Lord, please refresh in us the sense of you, ever for us and with us, as we journey to Christmas and always. In the name of Christ, Amen.***

*Jo Corney is an active member of the LCANZ in Queensland. She has served over many years in voluntary parish pastoral care, ministry and development and representative roles. Over recent years she has been privileged to serve in the delivery of chaplaincy for Lutheran Services.*