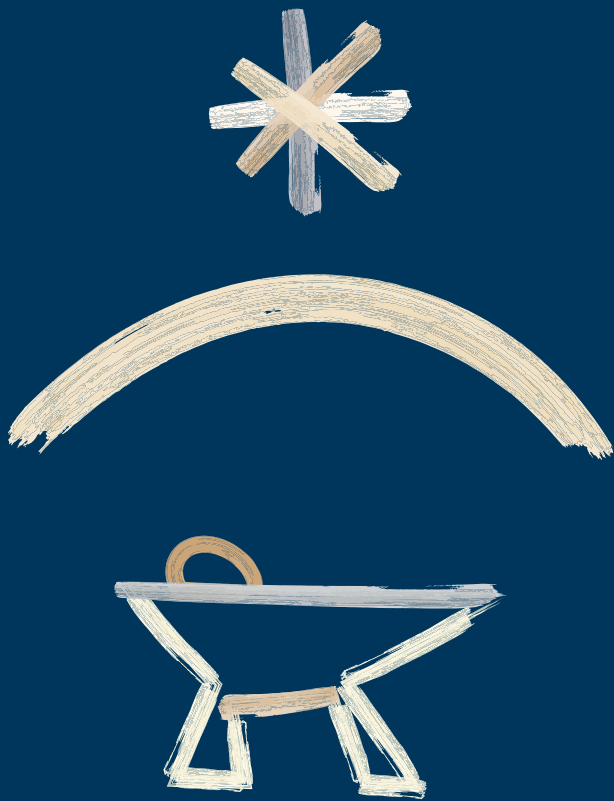


MOUNT OLIVET  
ADVENT & CHRISTMAS  
2021 DEVOTIONAL



*"for unto us a child is born"*  
*Isaiah 9:6*



## SUNDAYS

### **FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT 11/28**

*From the House of David* – Isaiah 11:1-9; Luke 1:26-33

### **SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT 12/5**

*God Gives a Sign* – Isaiah 7:10-17; Matthew 1:18-25

### **THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT 12/12**

*The Prince of Peace* – Isaiah 9:1-7; John 1:1-5, 14, 16

### **FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT & COMMUNION SUNDAY 12/19**

*O Little Town of Bethlehem* – Micah 5:2-5; Matthew 2:1-6

### **FIRST SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS 12/26**

## WORSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

### **IN-PERSON HOLY COMMUNION**

12/1, 12noon, Mpls & West Campuses

### **IN-PERSON SERVICE OF REMEMBRANCE**

12/7, 6:30pm, West Campus

12/14, 6:30 pm, Mpls Campus

### **ADVENT CAROLS WITH PASTOR LOSE**

12/8, 12noon, Mpls Campus

### **CHRISTMAS CONCERT**

12/12, 3 & 5pm, Mpls Campus, and available at [mtolivet.org](http://mtolivet.org)

### **CHRISTMAS CAROLS WITH PASTOR LOSE**

12/15, 12noon, Mpls Campus

### **CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICE 12/24**

2-6pm, West Campus

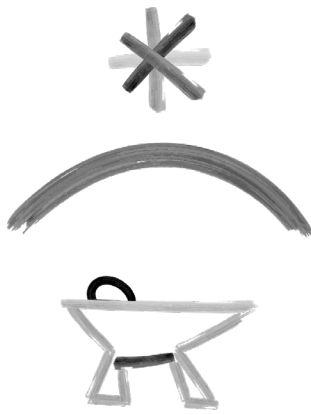
2-11pm, Mpls Campus, and available on the hour at [mtolivet.org](http://mtolivet.org)

### **CHRISTMAS DAY COMMUNION SERVICE**

12/25, 10am, Mpls Campus

### **NEW YEAR'S EVE SERVICE**

12/31, 7pm Worship Service, 7:45pm Potluck, Mpls Campus



*"for unto us a child is born"*  
*Isaiah 9:6*

When we read the prophets of Israel, we read them as Christians. But it's important to remember that the prophets themselves were Israelites, speaking primarily to the situation and circumstances of their people. Why? Because God used the prophets to address words of judgment and hope – both offered out of God's great love – to God's people, and to empty their words of their original import is to disrespect both their message and the One who commissioned them.

Yet while the prophet's words are addressed to their own people, Christians have from the beginning heard a message that stretches beyond their immediate context. In fact, all four Evangelists found in the words of the prophets a message that helped them understand more fully Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection. And so we will read several prophetic passages this Advent, both eager to understand their original import to God's people of Israel and grateful to learn how these same words help us understand, appreciate, and ultimately follow the one born in Bethlehem, laid in a manger, and who grew in wisdom and stature as the very embodiment of God's love for the world. Blessed Advent!

*Pastor Lose*

**DAVID J. LOSE, SENIOR PASTOR**



# First Sunday of Advent

NOVEMBER 28, 2021

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURES:

*ISAIAH 11:1-9, LUKE 1:26-33*

*“FROM THE HOUSE OF DAVID”*

*Dear God, you have promised grace, redemption, and peace through your Son. Let us live in the light of this promise, committed to working for a world where peace is achieved through equity, where the strong protect the weak, and where all are accorded dignity and grace.*

*In Jesus' name, Amen.*



MONDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 2021

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*Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day. Rather, the Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.*

2 SAMUEL 7:5-6, 11-13

**T**he story of Jesus' birth begins with God's promise to David. A little background may help. David is the shepherd boy who defeated Goliath and served King Saul. Over time, Saul grows jealous of David's popularity and plots his death. With the help of Saul's son, Jonathan, David escapes. After Saul's death, David becomes King and inaugurates Israel's "golden era," defeating many of Israel's territorial rivals. But David's reign is far from perfect, marred by his own dishonesty and failures that led to family discord, infidelity, dishonesty, and murder. Yet despite David's failings, God remains faithful, and we pick up his story at a moment of peace.

Now that his kingdom is established and secure, David desires to build a permanent home for the Lord. Since the time of Israel's wandering, God's presence has been centered in the ark of the covenant, the transportable, gold-covered, wooden box containing the tablets of the law. Now, David desires to build a Temple—a "house"—to be the permanent dwelling place for the ark. But God says that task will fall to David's heir, Solomon. Instead, God will honor David once more by building him a "house"—a dynasty—that will last forever.

Discord and peace, infidelity and faithfulness, failure and success—this is David's story. And, when you think about it, it is our story, too, the story of wayward humanity. And it is into just this story that Jesus is born in order to bear witness most powerfully to God's abiding love.

*Dear God, draw us into the story of your love for us and all the world as we anticipate the birth of your Son, Jesus our Lord. Amen.*



TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 2021

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*Then King David went in and sat before the Lord, and said, “Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far? Who is like your people, like Israel? Is there another nation on earth whose God went to redeem it as a people, doing great and awesome things for them?”*

2 SAMUEL 7:18, 23

In response to God’s promise, David can only marvel: “Who am I, O Lord, that you have brought me so far?” Who is David, indeed? The seventh son of Jesse and shepherd to his father’s flock, he seemed unlikely material to become Israel’s leader. In fact, when the prophet Samuel went at God’s command to the home of Jesse to anoint the next king, even he seemed surprised that God chose David rather than any of David’s brothers. Moreover, David, was far from perfect. Yet God chose David and remained faithful. And now, as God promises to establish a dynasty from his house, David is simply astonished.

But David’s wonder goes even deeper. Because it is not just David that God has blessed, but all of Israel. Israel, too, is far from perfect, as the history of God’s people is one of regular infidelity and betrayal. Yet as David confesses, God not only blessed Israel, but sought them out, delivered them from Egypt, gave them the law, and established for them a kingdom among the nations. Why? Who can say, except to confess in wonder that that seems to be God’s nature – to bless beyond measure, to love unconditionally, and to redeem and save unrelentingly.

David marvels at God’s graciousness, and in doing so offers us an example of how we might respond to Jesus’ birth, as God comes once again, unbidden and unlooked for, to bless us beyond measure by taking on our lot and our life that we might live with hope.

*Dear God, who are we that you would come amongst us clothed in our flesh and bearing your divine grace? We may not understand, but we can give thanks by sharing your love with others. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*



WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2021

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*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.  
And the spirit of the Lord shall rest on him.*

ISAIAH 11:1-2a

**T**his verse shapes the second stanza of *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*: “O come strong branch of Jesse, free your own from Satan’s tyranny.” It’s a carol both dark and beautiful, not shying away from the harsh realities of human limitation, yet trusting in God’s power to save. A similar tension animates this passage from Isaiah.

Isaiah writes a little more than two hundred years after God’s promise to David, and the house of David has fallen on hard times. Besieged by enemies on its borders, and weakened internally by the infidelity of its kings, Israel’s prospects appear dim. The prophet realizes this, suggesting that the dynastic tree of David, youngest son of Jesse, has been cut down and left to shrivel.

Yet from the beginning, Israel’s fortunes never depended on their own merit or faithfulness. Abraham, the patriarch of Israel, while famed for his trust in God, yet broke trust on several occasions. Moses, the one who faced down Pharaoh and led the Israelites to freedom, regularly faltered and gave into fear. David, Israel’s greatest king, betrayed both his family and nation.

Acknowledging this, the prophet both shares the bad news: Israel is little more than a dead stump, while also announcing the good news: God will cause a living shoot to spring from that stump, signifying the renewal of Israel. Not because of anything Israel is or anything Israel did, but instead because of who God is and what God has done.

And suddenly David’s awe and wonder over God’s favor seems appropriate yet again: who is Israel, that God did such great and awesome things for them? And we might ask the same for ourselves: Who are we, to enjoy God’s favor in the Christ child?

*Dear God, renew in us wonder at your decision to save, redeem, and bless at all costs, reminding us of your determination always to bring new life. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2021

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*The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.*

ISAIAH 11:2-3a

Isaiah promised the struggling Israelites that God has not forgotten God's promise to David, that God will cause a living shoot to spring forth from the dead stump of David's tree. Isaiah may have been speaking of the birth of Hezekiah, son of King Ahaz. While Ahaz is chiefly remembered for abandoning the ways of the Lord and worshipping the gods of the Assyrians, Hezekiah – one of the few "righteous kings" in Israel's history – would restore the Temple, prohibit the worship of foreign deities, defend Israel against the Assyrians, and lead a renewal of faith in the Lord. In all these ways, Hezekiah seemed indeed to be one on whom the spirit of the Lord rested, a spirit that includes wisdom, counsel, strength, and most importantly a holy awe regarding the God of Israel that shaped his life and actions.

Yet even Hezekiah's rule would eventually come to an end, his own son would reverse his religious reforms, and Israel would again fall into disarray. No wonder that later Evangelists believed Isaiah's words described not simply a mortal king but reached forward to characterize the attributes of God's Messiah. Jesus, as Matthew describes, descendent of Jesse and David, Ahaz and Hezekiah (Mt. 1:6-9), is the shoot that springs from Jesse's stump and on whom the spirit of the Lord rests in its fullness (Mt. 4:16-17).

But the story doesn't end here. Each time a child is baptized, we hear these words of Isaiah again, as we pray that the same Spirit that attended Jesus would now bless the child brought to the font. We – all of us – are in this way caught up into Isaiah's promise and drawn into God's family through the gift of the Christ child.

*Dear God, grant us power in the Spirit to grow into your promises and be your people.  
In Jesus' name, Amen.*





FRIDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2021

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*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.  
They will not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain;  
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord  
as the waters cover the sea.*

ISAIAH 11:6-9

**A**nd here's where Isaiah's promise soars beyond even the best of Israel's kings.

Most rulers are expected to order their world – imposing their will on their government, their people, their realm. But the ruler Isaiah envisions, the one blessed by the Spirit of the Lord, doesn't simply order the world, but re-orders it. The world Isaiah describes – often called “the peaceable kingdom” – involves an entire re-arranging, if not inverting, of the natural order. There is no longer predator or prey, but all creatures living in harmony. There is no longer vulnerable and dangerous, but all living together in accord. There is no longer “kill or be killed,” or “might makes right,” or “to the victors go the spoils,” but instead the promise that the whole world will be so filled by the knowledge of the Lord that all people and even animals will live in the kind of peace that has eluded humanity since the fall of Adam and Eve.

No wonder early Christians seized on these words to describe the birth of Jesus. He is the One, the Evangelists confessed, to usher in this new world order. But... even this element of Jesus' reign has not been fully accomplished. And so we stand with Isaiah, his people Israel, and all since who long for the day when, submerged in God's grace, we live in complete peace. May the day come soon!

*Dear God, let your peace reign in this world, starting with us. In Jesus' name, Amen.*



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2021

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*The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”*

LUKE 1:30-33

**K**nowing a little more of the story of God’s promise to David and how that promise was remembered and repeated by prophets like Isaiah helps us appreciate more fully the angel’s words to Mary: “Do not be afraid.”

Do not be afraid, the classic announcement throughout the Bible that what is about to come is good news. But... does Gabriel say this because his unexpected appearance has startled her? Or does he say this to prepare her for what is to come?

You will conceive and bear a son. Do not be afraid. He will be great. Do not be afraid. And called the Son of the Most High. Do not be afraid. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. Do not be afraid. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever. Do not be afraid. And of his kingdom there will be no end. Do not be afraid.

Good news indeed. And also terrifying. With these words, Gabriel draws Mary into the centuries-old story and promise of God’s love for God’s people, assigning her a key part in God’s redemptive plan. And when we read these stories of God’s continued and relentless work to love, bless, and save the world... we’re drawn into this story, too.

Good news for sure, but also a little startling, perhaps even terrifying. But... do not be afraid, for in the birth of the Christ child we receive the promise that we, too, have found favor with God.

*Dear God, arm us with both courage and compassion so that we can answer your call.  
In Jesus’ name, Amen.*



# Second Sunday of Advent

DECEMBER 5, 2021

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURES:

*ISAIAH 7:10-17; MATTHEW 1:18-25*

*“GOD GIVES A SIGN”*

*Dear God, help us to trust you in all things, seeing in the birth, life,  
and death of your Son the sure sign of your love for us, and seeing in  
his resurrection the promise that your love is greater than all things.*

*In Jesus' name, Amen.*



MONDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2021

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*Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, "Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven." But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test." Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel."*

ISAIAH 7:10-14

**T**he backstory to this scene is crucial. Jerusalem is being threatened by several foreign powers. Isaiah meets the king inspecting the reservoir in anticipation of a siege and shares news that the Lord will drive his enemies away. It's a big promise, so the Lord offers a sign to assure its validity. King Ahaz quotes Scripture to reject the Lord's offer (Dt. 6:6). But Isaiah is not fooled; he knows Ahaz rejects the Lord's protection because he doesn't want or trust the Lord's help, as he's already made an alliance with the Assyrians. So Isaiah declares the Lord will provide a sign anyway. And then comes the verse we know from the Christmas story: "Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and name him Emmanuel."

Most biblical scholars believe the "young woman" is Ahaz's wife, who would soon give birth to Hezekiah, Ahaz's heir. Isaiah goes on to promise that, by the time Hezekiah is weaned, the Lord will remove the foreign powers plaguing Jerusalem. Ultimately, Hezekiah proves to be one of the best of Israel's kings and destroys the altars to foreign gods built by his father. In this sense, Hezekiah was both the promise and fulfillment of his name, Emmanuel, which means "God is with us."

As we'll see, St. Matthew hears in Isaiah's words reference not only to the good king Hezekiah, but also to the king of kings, Jesus.

*Dear God, help us to trust your promises that we may live in peace.  
In Jesus' name, Amen.*



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2021

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*Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way.*

MATTHEW 1:18a

I'm always struck by how Matthew begins his account of Jesus' birth in such a matter-of-fact way, especially since he connects it to Isaiah's prophecies. The rest of Matthew's story follows suit, as most of his account briefly describes the complicated situation leading up to the birth itself, and how that situation is resolved. Jesus' actual birth, however, gets just a sentence. If you sneezed, you might miss it.

But while I miss the fuller description Luke gives – with mangers and shepherds and angels and all the rest – there is something fitting about Matthew's spare depiction. Because, truth be told, most people did miss it. No local news team followed Mary's pregnancy. No camera crews or gaggle of first-century paparazzi awaited the birth of the king of kings. There were no baby showers beforehand, or Christening invitations afterward. From all we can tell from Matthew's story, just about no one noticed.

Which is why Matthew wrote. He lifts his pen to record, if only in a few sentences, the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, heir to David's throne, and in this way bears witness to an event most of the world ignored. Except it wasn't as if the world actively ignored anything. It was just a birth, like millions of others, unremarkable in every possible way.

Which is, once again, Matthew's point. Jesus – Emmanuel – came as one of us. Jesus was born like we are, lived as we live, loved and laughed and suffered as we do. And died as we will die. And on the third day, God raised him from the dead, that we might no longer live in fear of death.

But we're getting ahead of the story. For now, we should wait, content with Matthew's spare opening. As, indeed, this is how the birth of Jesus, David's heir and Israel's Messiah, took place.

*Dear God, thank you for reminding us in the birth of Jesus that no one is too ordinary or mundane or unimportant to escape your notice...or your love. In Jesus' name, Amen.*



WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2021

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*Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.*

MATTHEW 1:18-19

**W**e use the word “engagement” differently than Matthew does. So let me try to simplify: for all intents and purposes, at this point in their relationship Mary and Joseph had entered into a legal contract of marriage (which is what “engagement” or “espousal” means), but had not yet moved in with each other or consummated their union (which would happen after the wedding feast). Hence Joseph’s great distress at discovering that Mary was pregnant. It could only, as far as Joseph was concerned, mean one thing: his espoused wife had been unfaithful. At this point, Joseph wants to exit this unfaithful union and has two options – publicly exposing Mary or privately divorcing her, that is, undoing the legal contract. He opts for the latter course, not wishing, as Matthew describes, to expose her to public disgrace and, presumably, punishment.

While Luke’s account focuses on Mary, Matthew’s revolves around Joseph, a character who is heartbroken by what appears to be a betrayal and who agonizes with how best to respond. I think this focus is important because, ultimately, Mary and Joseph aren’t merely characters from a stained-glass window but flesh and blood people. And the more we can imagine them as people like us, with ups and downs to their relationship, for instance, the more we might imagine ourselves to be people like them – that is, people who go through all kinds of things, some quite damaging, and yet whom God uses nevertheless to accomplish God’s purposes.

*Dear God, you chose Mary and Joseph to be the parents to your Son, and you choose us to bear words of mercy and grace to all of your children. Empower and equip us to do just that. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2021

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*But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”*

MATTHEW 1:20-21

**A**s we’ve noticed already, Matthew’s story of Jesus’ birth differs in a number of ways from Luke’s. But on one detail they are identical. When the angel comes – in Matthew to Joseph, in Luke to Mary – the message is preceded by a simple but powerful exhortation: do not be afraid!

So much of life, when you think about it, is colored by fear. Fear for our safety or that of those we love. Fear about the future, or about our relationships. Fear of being rejected, or lonely, or unloved. Fear. It has dominated the human story as long as there has been a human story. Tellingly, once Adam and Eve first ate the forbidden fruit, they became almost instantly afraid, even of that which once gave them great joy – the presence of the Lord.

There is, I believe, no more true measure of the character of the God we worship than that the primary message carried by angelic messengers is the antidote to our condition: do not be afraid. God comes bearing not judgment or condemnation or terror, but instead God comes to grant courage, joy, and love.

And so the angel comes to Joseph, fearful descendant of King David, in the middle of his distress and tells him not to be afraid to take Mary into his home as his wife and partner. Because the child she carries will be called Jesus – “he saves” in Hebrew – and he will indeed save us from the tyranny of sin, death... and fear.

*Dear God, send us out as your messengers with words of courage and grace that others may know you and escape their fear. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*



FRIDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2021

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*All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:  
“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,”  
which means, “God is with us.”*

MATTHEW 1:22-23

**A**nd now we arrive at Matthew’s quotation of Isaiah... but with a twist. The Hebrew word Isaiah uses to describe the young maiden, you see, doesn’t necessarily imply a virgin. Rather, Isaiah’s drawing on something fairly ordinary – the birth of a child – to make a point about the time that will pass before the promise of deliverance is kept. But Matthew is reading a Greek translation of Isaiah and the Greek word used in this version can be translated both as “young maiden” or as “virgin.” So Matthew sees and hears in that verse the anticipation of Mary, the young woman who will conceive through the Holy Spirit.

But I wonder if Matthew isn’t also conscious of time. That is, the “sign” Isaiah gives isn’t meant as a demonstration of his power but rather is telling fearful and unfaithful King Ahaz how long it will take before the Lord will deliver Jerusalem. Knowing that, might Matthew also be saying that in the birth of Jesus we have an answer to the question that is regularly asked throughout the Bible: How long? How long until you come to deliver, O Lord? How long until our suffering is over? How long until you rescue us? And to all these questions, Matthew says, “Now! In the birth of Jesus, God is drawing near to save now!” For Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us.

As Matthew writes, the angel told Joseph to name the child “Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” Now. Or as the beloved Christmas carol sings,

*No more let sin and sorrow grow, Nor thorns infest the ground  
He comes to make His blessings flow  
Far as the curse is found.*

*Dear God, let us be so encouraged by your Spirit so that we might share with others word  
of your mercy, grace, and love...now. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*





SATURDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2021

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*When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.*

MATTHEW 1:24-25

**A**nd then, all of a sudden, Matthew's story of the birth of Jesus is over. Joseph wakes up, does what the angel commands, and Jesus is born.

That's it. Again, the absence of mangers and shepherds and angel choruses may strike us as rather anticlimactic. We may be tempted to ask, this is it? Just one man's obedience? Yes, one man's obedience to overcome his doubt, hurt, and fear in order to believe the angel's word and take Mary as his wife.

But I don't think Joseph's obedience is a small thing. What else has been – or, perhaps more importantly, could be – achieved by one person's obedience? One person's willingness to take God's command to care for the poor seriously? One person's obedience to love your neighbor as yourself? One person's obedience to regard all people as God's beloved children? One person's obedience to share the good news of Jesus with the world? One person's obedience to resist the way of violence and turn the other cheek? One person's obedience to hunger and thirst for righteousness?

We can probably each name larger-than-life persons who have done just this. Mother Theresa or Martin Luther King, Jr., for instance. But larger-than-life obedience isn't the point, just obedience. So think for a moment about the individuals who have made a huge impact in your life. A teacher, coach, parent, pastor, sibling, neighbor, friend...who was simply obedient to the call of God to love others and, in this case, you.

Small gestures, perhaps, in the larger scheme of things. But as history and our own experience witness, when it comes to acts of love and obedience to God's call... there are no small gestures.

*Dear God, give us ears to hear your call and hearts to obey it, that by being faithful in small things we may change the world. In Jesus' name, Amen.*



# Third Sunday of Advent

DECEMBER 12, 2021

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURES:

*ISAIAH 9:1-7; JOHN 1:1-5, 14, 16*

*“THE PRINCE OF PEACE”*

*Dear God, you have sent your son, Jesus Christ, to be the light of the world. So also send us to be bearers of that light, sharing word of your grace and working for a better world. In Jesus' name, Amen.*



MONDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2021

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*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.*

*For a child has been born for us, a son given to us!*

ISAIAH 9:2, 6a

**T**he contrast between light and darkness stretches from the beginning to the end of Scripture, as God calls light from darkness in Genesis (1:3) and God's glory illumines the new creation in Revelation (21:22-26). Whereas darkness is regularly associated with death and loss, light regularly represents possibility, new life, and the presence of God. In this case, the darkness plaguing "the people" is self-inflicted. As we saw earlier, King Ahaz rejected God's promise of the protection in favor of his own schemes, schemes that would provide temporary relief from his immediate foes but ultimately make him dependent on the Assyrian king and would lead him to worship Assyrian gods. Moreover, Ahaz's people follow suit, rejecting the ways of the Lord in favor of practices forbidden by their faith. For this reason, just a few verses earlier, Isaiah prophesied that the people "will see only distress and darkness, gloom and anguish; into thick darkness, they will be thrust" (Isaiah 8:22).

But despite Israel's faithlessness, God remains faithful, and Isaiah promises that light will return and Israel will be granted a new ruler, good king Hezekiah. This promise identifies another recurring theme: despite the failings and flaws of God's people, God will not give up on them. God will not turn away. God will not forget the promises God made.

As we approach the birth of Jesus, we get a glimpse of just how far God will go to keep faith with God's people, even though we regularly fall short of God's hopes and expectations. For in Jesus, God is born in the flesh of a helpless child, takes on our lot and our life, and experiences everything we experience, including death itself. Truly, in the giving of this child, light shines on us!

*Dear God, let us see in the Christ child the light of your love and give thanks.*

*In Jesus' name, Amen.*



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2021

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*For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onwards and for evermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

ISAIAH 9:6-7

**M**ost biblical scholars identify the child of whom Isaiah speaks as Hezekiah, who does indeed restore Israel's fortunes, fending off an attack of the Assyrian emperor, reforming Israel's religious practices, and enlarging the size and scope of his kingdom.

Yet while so much points to Hezekiah being the "child born to us," it is easy to see how later Christians heard Isaiah's words stretch beyond Hezekiah and point to another. Notice, for instance, that whereas Isaiah earlier talked about the birth of Hezekiah as a sign (ch. 7), now it is a child who actually rules. The tenses Isaiah uses aren't future – "authority will rest on his shoulders" – but present: "authority rests on his shoulders." Odd.

Further, of the titles ascribed to him, two might be applied to earthly kings – Wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace – and they could describe Hezekiah, who was wise in the ways of the Lord and who established relative peace. But the other two titles – Mighty God, Everlasting Father – would normally be reserved for God. Odder still.

Which makes it sound like Isaiah imagines God dwelling with humanity in a new way, through a child who is descended from David yet surpasses even the best of Israel's kings. A child who refuses the violence and domination of earthly emperors but instead rules through wisdom (counselor), compassion for the poor (justice), right worship of God through love of neighbor (justice), and who establishes peace not for a season or even a generation but forever. Truly, this One would be Emmanuel, God with us.

*Dear God, let us receive the "child given to us" as the greatest gift of all.  
In Jesus' name, Amen.*



WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2021

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*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.*

JOHN 1:1-4

**W**e've already seen how Luke and Matthew pick up elements of Isaiah's prophecies to capture their reflections on Jesus' life and ministry. Both stress that Jesus is descended from the house of David, and Matthew quotes Isaiah's words about the child who will be called Emmanuel. But when it comes to the light that will shine on the world and the child who bears God's own person in his flesh, we turn to John.

John doesn't tell a traditional Christmas story describing the birth of Jesus. Rather, he goes even further back to describe the birth of the whole world. Notice that he begins his Gospel by quoting the opening words of Genesis. Do you remember: "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth..." Which John imitates, "In the beginning was the Word."

With this bold opening, John declares that he is writing a new Genesis, where God decides not simply to create, but actually to re-create, the world. So while Genesis tells the story of humanity's fall, John tells of its redemption. Similarly, just as the first command in Genesis is about light – "Let there be light!" (1:3) – John also talks about light. In fact, he confesses that the eternal Word of God that was present since, and intimately connected to, the creation of all things is the life and light of all humankind.

Jesus, John will confess later in his Gospel, is the Light of the World (8:12), a light that not only shines on those living in darkness, but also encourages, strengthens, and ultimately saves them... and all of us.

*Dear God, let us see in the birth of the Christ child your promise to re-create and redeem all things, including us. In Jesus' name, Amen.*



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2021

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*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

JOHN 1:5

**T**his, I think, is one of the most poignant lines in Scripture. It first offers an affirmation: the light of the Word shines in the darkness, illuminating, bringing hope, making bright.

But it also acknowledges struggle. There is darkness, darkness that wants and seeks to overcome the light. Darkness in the world, darkness in our lives, darkness in our hearts that seeks to quench the light. This life is a life of struggle.

This is the heart of almost every story, whether told around a fire, set down in a book, or written in the journal of our lives: the struggle between darkness and light, despair and hope, meaningless and purpose, futility and possibility, death and life.

And it runs throughout the Biblical story as well. God blesses Adam and Eve, who nevertheless give into insecurity and fear and disobey God. God calls and blesses Abraham, who also falls prey to fear and falters. God redeems Israel from Egypt and gives them the Ten Commandments as a gift to guide their lives, and they break those laws relentlessly. And, most recently as we read in Isaiah, while God promises continued presence and protection through the prophets, yet Israel chooses to live in darkness.

Yes, there is darkness throughout the biblical story... throughout the world... and throughout our lives. Yet whatever the power of darkness, it is ultimately no match for the light.

This is the story John is writing. It is our story. It tells a hard truth – that there is darkness in our lives. But it also tells a glorious truth – that God will not abandon us to the darkness and that, in the end, the darkness is simply no match for the light. For God's light has come into the world, illumines our lives, shines on in the darkness... and the darkness has not overcome it.

*Dear God, at our darkness moments, help us to remember that you are with us, shining on us and through us and never letting us go. In Jesus' name, Amen.*



FRIDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2021

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*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. And from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.*

JOHN 1:14, 16

**E**mmanuel. God with us. The name of the promised child Isaiah shared with faithless king Ahaz. In John's Gospel, that name takes on much deeper meaning. In today's verses, John moves from his description of the Word of God that shines light on the world to a more specific and scandalous confession that God's eternal and immortal Word took on flesh – human flesh, our flesh, vulnerable and mortal flesh! – and lived among us.

The word we translate “lived” is actually a Greek word that is sometimes translated “dwelt,” which might sound more familiar: “dwelt among us.” But it can also be translated as “setting up one's tent.” Do you remember when David wanted to build a Temple and God told him that God had never lived in a house before? God went on to say that God had lived in a tent since departing Egypt. That was a reference to the tabernacle, the tent the Israelites built to house the Ark of the Covenant and contain God's holy presence after the Exodus, through their wanderings and conquest of the holy land, right up until Solomon built the Temple of Jerusalem.

So John is confessing that Jesus, the Word made flesh, is the means by which we now have complete access to God's holy presence. In fact, John is saying that the glory of the Lord – the glory that was always too much for mortal eyes to see unveiled – has now taken on our vulnerable and mortal form, our life and our lot, and become intimately and immediately accessible to us. That which has always been far away and inaccessible is now nearby, readily available to us, always in love. Emmanuel, indeed!

*Dear God, remind us that you understand us better than we do ourselves and are available to us, always eager to encourage, support, and love us. In Jesus' name, Amen.*



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2021

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*Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.'*

MATTHEW 4:12-16

**T**here's one other place in the Gospels where Isaiah's words are used to shape our understanding of Jesus. And that's when Matthew describes the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

In the verse right before talking about light shining on the people, Isaiah mentions the "land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali." If you don't recognize those names, don't worry; most of us don't. They're regions named for two of Jacob's sons, and Capernaum – where Jesus begins his ministry – is a part of that territory. Knowing this, Matthew remembers these verses from Isaiah and sees in Jesus the fulfillment of that promise.

But Capernaum – and therefore the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali – is not just the place where Jesus begins his ministry, but also where he calls his disciples. Which means that Matthew hears in Isaiah's prophecy not only words about Jesus, but also words about his followers. And, as Jesus commissions those disciples to take the good news to all the world and then promises to be with his followers forever, that means Isaiah's prophecy stretches all the way up to us! For just as Jesus is the One who brings light into the world and bears news of God's grace and mercy, so we are those commissioned to share that good news and shine that great light on others!

*Dear God, we give you thanks for all the faithful who have shared word of your grace and mercy, from Isaiah to Matthew to those who share the gospel in word and deed today.  
In Jesus' name, Amen.*





# Fourth Sunday of Advent & Christmas Communion

DECEMBER 19, 2021

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURES:

*MICAH 5:2-5; MATTHEW 2:1-6*

*“O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM”*

*Dear God, so often you choose those the world overlooks to accomplish great things. Let us take comfort in that promise, seeing in others the potential for great acts of faithfulness and believing ourselves capable of great acts of love. In Jesus' name, Amen.*



MONDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2021

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*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.*

MICAH 5:2

**G**od likes surprises, especially by choosing ordinary, even unlikely people through which to do extraordinary things. Abraham and Sarah were way too old to have a child. Surprise! Moses was a lousy public speaker and hardly the one to bring God's message of deliverance to Pharaoh. Surprise! And David was the youngest and smallest of Jesse's seven sons and didn't look at all the part of a future king. Surprise again!

That theme continues with Micah's prophecy that the promised future ruler of Israel will come from Bethlehem. Not capital city Jerusalem, but backwater town Bethlehem. Bethlehem, the hometown of David, "whose origin is from old, from ancient days."

Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah, prophesying around the same time and about the same issues. The northern kingdom would soon be destroyed by the Assyrians, and even Jerusalem would be threatened, though spared. Micah believed all of this stemmed from their mistreatment of the poor, and so he called Judah, the name of the southern kingdom, to express their devotion to God not through empty worship but just living.

Because of the timing of his prophetic ministry, Micah also could be speaking of Hezekiah. But... Hezekiah was born in Jerusalem. And so the Evangelists make clear that while Jesus may have grown up in Nazareth of Galilee, he was born in Bethlehem.

All of which means that God is not done with surprises. Not only is Bethlehem the unlikely birthplace of Israel's messiah, but Mary is an unlikely vessel to bear him. And most of Israel assumed David's heir would come as a warrior king, not a vulnerable baby. So perhaps we should not be surprised when God continues working through ordinary, even unlikely people... including you and me!

*Dear God, surprise us again by working in us and through us to love and bless the world.  
In Jesus' name, Amen.*



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2021

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*Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel.*

MICAH 5:3

**T**here is so much promise in this fifth chapter of Micah – little Bethlehem will yield Israel's future ruler, the promise made to David is still valid (both from yesterday's reading) – that it's easy to miss the note of sadness, even lament, in today's: "he shall give them up until the time..." Or, in other words, "not yet." Micah writes when Israel is at a low point, the northern kingdom defeated and the southern kingdom under siege. But while Micah promises that the Lord will restore Israel, that time has not yet come. In fact, in the meantime, the Lord will "give them up."

Yes, Bethlehem will yield a ruler, but not yet. Yes, the Lord will remember the covenant made with David, but not yet. Yes, the rest of Israel's kindred – the whole world? – will return, but not yet. The imagery of a woman giving birth is apt. At the end of pregnancy is joy, but it can be very difficult getting there and culminates in the pain of labor.

I'm grateful for Micah's honesty. Especially at this time of year, when the expectation that everything in our lives should be bright and merry can be burdensome, when we are bombarded by advertisements promising that buying the perfect gift can make everything right, and when the pressure to present an idealized life and family to the world can be overwhelming. This is where Micah comes in. Yes, all will be well in the end, but not yet. And while we sometimes feel God's presence and peace strongly, sometimes they are painfully elusive.

Advent is a season of waiting. Waiting for Christmas, certainly, but even more for a sense of wellbeing in our lives, families, communities, and world. And caught up in both the promise and challenge of waiting, we sing the age-old Advent hymn and prayer afresh: "*O come, O come Emmanuel, and rescue captive Israel... and us!*"

*Dear God, use us to remind each other of your presence, especially when it seems far away.  
In Jesus' name, Amen.*



WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2021

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*And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.*

MICAH 5:4-5a

**T**he fifth chapter of Micah that we've been reading this week contains two passages of promise surrounding one of lament. Promise: God will again surprise the world by raising up Israel's future ruler from little Bethlehem. Lament: That time is not yet here. Then, in today's reading, another Promise: when he comes, he will care for his flock like a shepherd and the people will live without fear.

Allusions to David continue. Not only will the future ruler come from Bethlehem, but he will also be a shepherd. Shepherding was a regular metaphor the prophets employed. Kings were called to be good shepherds, guarding and protecting the people with their own lives, if necessary. Bad kings, in contrast, were chastised as false shepherds, who put their own wants and needs above the flock.

Again, the resonance between this passage, with its references to David, and the life and ministry of Jesus, David's descendant, are abundant. In John's Gospel, Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd, the one who lays down his life for the sheep (10:11). Jesus also says that he has other sheep that do not yet belong to the fold (10:16), echoing Micah's promise that Israel's kindred will return.

But while there are many similarities between David and Jesus, there is one stark difference. David knew very little peace. He established his kingdom through violence, protected it by war, and suffered the hostility of his family as a result of his infidelities. By contrast, Jesus comes not as a warrior king but is born in the flesh of a vulnerable child and is the one who achieves ultimate peace not through conquest but self-sacrifice. "Glory to God in the highest," the angels sing at his birth, "and peace among those he favors." Amen.

*Dear God, let us share the peace of the Christ child this season and always.  
In Jesus' name, Amen.*



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2021

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*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"*

MATTHEW 2:1-5 a

**W**hat always fascinates me about this dark scene is how something as small and seemingly insignificant as the birth of a child can strike fear into the heart of a king and all the inhabitants of his capital?

Why would powerful King Herod, known for his political cunning and ruthlessness, fear a child? I think it is because dictatorships are far more fragile than we might imagine. Brutal, perhaps; ruthless, most likely. But because they stand over and against principles of freedom and dignity, and because they exert their rule through force, they are threatened by each and every act of defiance, courage, and compassion.

What is also interesting is that Herod and his counselors apparently already know that a messiah has been promised and can even cite Micah's prophecy. So the news that God will send a messiah is not new; it is that the messiah would come now, during his reign, that frightens him. And so it should, for all who oppress the poor, take advantage of the vulnerable, and stand against dignity and justice should tremble at the coming of the Lord. Then... and now.

*Dear God, let us always stand with you on the side of justice and work for the relief of those who suffer, are oppressed, or are in need. In Jesus' name, Amen.*



FRIDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2021

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*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 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 2:1-6

**L**uke has a flair for irony. He introduces his account of Christ's nativity by first citing the major powers of the day – Emperor Augustus and Governor Quirinius – and then focusing on the plight of two woebegone travelers, of so little account, or simply too poor, they couldn't find lodging when they get to their destination. What's ironic is that the story of these two – descendants of David and parents to Jesus – will be told long after we've forgotten almost everything about Augustus and can't remember a single thing about Quirinius.

The events that Luke narrates change the world, as God gets involved once more and most intimately in history. Their history – Mary and Joseph's, and Quirinius and Augustus' history. And our history. God comes in the person of Jesus, the helpless babe born in Bethlehem, to be joined to us – our ups and downs, triumphs and tragedies, hopes and fears.

Yes, what happened in that lonely stable changes the world, forever and for the good. Yet the powers of the day missed it entirely. Let us pay better attention.

*Dear God, as we hear the Gospel story of the birth of your Son this night, kindle our faith and spur our hearts to share your news of your love with all we meet.*

*In Jesus' name, Amen.*



# EVENTS AND SERVICE OPPORTUNITIES

## **CHRISTMAS FOR ALL DROP OFF**

*12/1, 5-7pm, Mpls & West Campuses. Donate a new – unwrapped gift in the \$5-\$40 range for one of our Ministry Partners.*

## **MOCW LUTEFISK DINNER**

*12/3, seatings at 3, 4:30 & 6pm, Mpls Campus. Advanced online ticket sales are requested and are available at [mtolivet.org](http://mtolivet.org). Cost: \$20 adults, \$5 kids 12 and under.*

## **CHRISTMAS EARLY MEAL DELIVERY**

*12/4, 10am-12noon, Mpls Campus. An early Christmas meal will be delivered to your residence by one of our wonderful volunteer drivers. All you need to do is heat it and enjoy! If you would like to receive a meal or be a volunteer driver, please contact Ann LaBree at 612.767.2288 or [annl@mtolivet.org](mailto:annl@mtolivet.org).*

## **MESSIAH SING-A-LONG**

*12/5, 3:30pm, Mpls Campus. Join us for a fun and casual community sing-a-long of Handel's Messiah! This festive forty-five-minute sing-a-long is sure to invigorate your Christmas spirit!*

## **CHRISTMAS TREE LIGHTING**

*12/5, 4-6pm gathering, 5pm tree lighting, Mpls Campus on James Ave. We will gather around our tree, share a song, and light up our small corner of south Minneapolis. There will be music, food, an opportunity to purchase Christmas trees and wreaths, and even Santa and reindeer will be available for pictures!*

## **MOCW COAT & MITTEN DRIVE**

*Through 12/15, please donate new winter outerwear, for those who are experiencing homelessness. Drop off at either campus.*

## **MOCW CHRISTMAS BRUNCH**

*12/18, 10am, Mpls Campus. Transport yourself from the cold, snowy December Saturday to the Caribbean Islands. Cost: \$15 adults, \$6 kids 8 and under. Purchase 8 tickets to reserve a table. All other seating is first come, first served. Register by 12/12.*



# MOUNT OLIVET LUTHERAN CHURCH

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