

# A Thought for Christmas and a Conference Invitation

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*Co-Missioners,*

Christmas is six days away, or five and a half if you launch the celebration at six o'clock on Christmas Eve. That's exactly what most all of us do, of course. Between now and then lies the Fourth Sunday of Advent, another name for which could well be "Swivel Sunday." Such is the effect the day's texts have on our eyes. After three weeks of staring with Isaiah's help at the glories of the future's far horizon, we're pulled abruptly backward to the sequence of inglorious events that make this future supremely worth hoping for. The first per this Sunday is a disreputable pregnancy that requires, for the mother's sake, a quick cover-up job by the apparent cuckold ([Matt. 1:18ff](#)). Whoever would have thought—whoever dares even now to think—that God would get that down and dirty for the likes of us? And this is but the warm-up, a mere initial slide toward those depths he'll descend to "for us and for our salvation."

"Merry Christmas," we say, though not as the Gentiles say it. Theirs is free of both irony and awe. Ours is packed with both. See how God has embarrassed Godself for the making of the shame-free future he wants us all to revel in forever. Notice too how that embarrassment is ongoing. Just look at the tawdry rags his Son's bride, the Church, continues at this end of 2019 to flounce around in. That's in the public view, at least, if not in God's—God who has sworn to honor and uphold the Son's cover-

up job, as in the cloak of astonishing and ever so righteous love that Christ keeps wrapping around the Beloved's shoulders.

*So yes, Merry Christmas—said now, because we won't be sending a post next week. Christ is born! Savor the wonder!*

*The Crossings Community*

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Speaking of things to savor, we again commend our [forthcoming 2020 conference](#) to you, and with all our hearts invite you to it. It's less than six weeks away. That's still enough time to register and find a plane ticket at a reasonable price, if that's how you travel.

And talk about worthwhile travel—certainly for anyone whose

passion is the Gospel and how to hear it as God's gift of gifts for today's fractured world.

The topic is "The Broken Life," be it the life of a person, a family, a church, a nation. A splintered culture. A global ecosystem that seems more and more out of whack. How, as Lori Cornell put it some months ago in a set of preliminary notes, does one reconcile such things with God's promise of an unbreakable love in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:39)? Such is the question the untutored would ask. The question for Gospel-bearers is how to present their broken, crucified Christ as a promise to trust and use as the heap of shards grows ever higher.

Lori, as you likely know, is the long-standing editor of the weekly text studies that have flowed from Crossings for the last two decades. She'll launch our discussion on January 27 at 9 a.m. with a keynote presentation entitled "Faith Enough for the Broken Places."

That same day, after lunch, we'll hear from Chad Bird on "Wounded Prayers: Relearning the Language of Lament." Bird is a former LCMS pastor and Old Testament professor who spent subsequent years wandering amid the rubble of those careers—a marriage too—as a self-described "[prodigal soul](#)." He drives a truck for a living these days. A while back he also emerged as a brilliant writer whose ear for real-deal Gospel is as good as it gets. Check it out at [chadbird.com](#). Or take a glance at his latest book, [Upside-Down Spirituality](#), published last April. He is not to be missed.

Just as compelling is David Zahl, who is back for a second Crossings visit after hitting a home run at our 2018 conference. Zahl is the executive director of [Mockingbird](#), a group of writers and thinkers with Episcopalian roots who are thoroughly

infected with a Lutheran passion for distinguishing Law and Gospel. Their other passion lies in spotting and tracking the theological undercurrents of what appears to others as strictly secular culture. Zahl's latest book, [\*Seculosity\*](#), is a stunning example of how to do that well, in a way that "necessitates" the promise of Christ. He'll talk with us on Tuesday morning about "Speaking Grace in a World of #GettingReal."

On Tuesday afternoon we hear from James Brooks, once the youth ministry coordinator at Grace Lutheran Church, River Forest, Illinois, and now the senior pastor of Harmony Community Church on Chicago's west side. His topic is "The Three R's: Relocation, Reconciliation, Redistribution." We anticipate a lively conversation of the kind the Gospel enables.

Later that same afternoon we'll hear from Karen Clapp, a nurse practitioner who worked for some years at Lawndale Christian Health Center, also on Chicago's west side. (Pr. Brooks presently serves Lawndale as Chief Ministry Officer.) Clapp's speciality is family medicine. That surely entails a steadier and more intense exposure to human brokenness than the rest of are used to. We look forward to her reflections on how she puts the Promise to use as she attend to this.

So too on Wednesday morning, when we'll welcome Sue Westhorp to the podium. Westhorp will have traveled all the way from Melbourne, Australia, where her days are filled with managing spiritual care and directing the CPE (clinical pastoral education) program for Austin Health, a major medical institution. A trained theologian, she is also immersed in the life of a lively Lutheran congregation and is known in the Lutheran Church of Australia as a musician and composer. Her insights on the use of the Gospel within the Australian setting—distinctly more secular than America's—will be invaluable, especially in this age, still new to us, when the

“none’s” are on the rise. (Dear to God, they are, as are we all.)

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ur time together will launch on Sunday evening when Marcus Felde walks us through a newly written primer on the Crossing method of Bible study. He developed it in recent months with the express aim of making the method easier to teach and grasp. Your reactions will be of enormous benefit as he finetunes it with an eye to getting it published by a recognized church press. Felde, a retired pastor and missionary, is a Crossings stalwart. He served for several years on the Crossings Board and continues to grace our stream of text studies with his pithy, lively prose. At the moment he’s serving a six-month stint as the pastor of an international congregation in Bali.

Worship, of course, is a fixed and central component of the time we spend together. Glen Monson will preach at our Monday night

Eucharist. Monson serves an ELCA congregation in Rochester, Minnesota. He discovered Crossings about a decade ago and drew on this for a book about Law-and-Gospel preaching. He writes a weekly blog about this too, attracting preachers around the world.

Finally, and in some ways best of all: there will be lots of time for conversation, chances to enjoy the gifts of God that we are to each other. You're one of those gifts too. Hence our hope that you can make it. Bring a friend, a colleague. First-time attendees get a 50% break on the conference fee. That jumps to 100% for seminarians and newly-ordained pastors. It's a deal you can't beat. So register now. [Register here.](#)

*God grant your presence. Merry Christmas in the meantime.*

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**Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use**  
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