

Preparing for Christmas

I'm often puzzled by the "signs of the season" that tell us Christmas is coming. Tiny lights are strung up on houses, evergreen trees are cut down so they can be put up indoors, and giant inflatable snowmen and penguins are set outside. Not that these things aren't fun—for they are—but what do they really have to do with Christmas?

It's the paradox we face every year: we celebrate not one, but two Christmases. The more obvious Christmas is the Christmas of our popular culture, the one festooned (I like that word; it refers to a decorative chain, and means, 'to decorate or adorn') with all the oddments you can buy at the store. The other Christmas, the less obvious but more important one, is the more serious and far more wonderful Christmas recorded in the Bible, the Christ-Mass we celebrate when God's people gather around Word and Sacrament at church, the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord, the Incarnation of the Son of God, the birth of the God-Man Jesus.

Two Christmases, side-by-side. And it's tempting to let the popular one win out, isn't it? The Christmas of our culture fills up our schedules so fast, we all too often forego our preparations for the "serious" Christmas. Instead, many people just show up at church on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, listen a little, sing a little, pray a little. Then they go back to their celebrations of that 'other' Christmas, until it's time to put away their festoons for another year.

How, then, should we get ready for Christmas? This year, Concordia Publishing House has released the *Lutheran Prayer Companion*, a new English translation of the German *Evangelical-Lutheran Prayer Treasury: A compendious collection of the prayers of Dr Martin Luther and other orthodox Lutherans reproduced without alteration; along with 106 orthodox hymns for home devotional use*. As part of your preparations for the upcoming festival, I invite you to attend to the "Prayer of Preparation on Christmas Day" provided in this volume:

O Lord of Sabaoth, Holy God, how heartily we rejoice at the return of this sacred time, that we may go into Your house to gaze upon the beauty of Your worship and to inquire in Your temple, that in the assembly we may hear the mystery which is great indeed: that God, Your Son, was manifested in the flesh and, according to the flesh, born of the seed of David! Grant us, we beseech You, life and blessing, that throughout this day and at all times we may go around Your altar, where thanksgiving is proclaimed aloud and all Your wondrous deeds are told, and that we may go with the throng and lead them in the procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival. Give our preachers and ministers a mouth and wisdom, that they may preach to us what You command them, and that in opening their mouth boldly, they may so instruct us that their doctrine may flow like a life-giving spring. In so doing, may they save both themselves and us. O Lord, open our hearts, that we may with joy and heartfelt devotion hear and hold fast the comforting and graceful sermons on the saving birth and incarnation of Your beloved Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Grant, O faithful Father, that we may greatly rejoice in the Lord, and our soul may exult in our God and Savior and sing glad songs of salvation in the tents of the righteous. Create in us clean hearts, O God, that by true repentance we may duly and worthily prepare and ready ourselves for the sacred occasion now approaching. Preserve us in these solemn days and at all times from fire, sedition, murder, and manslaughter. Curb all the works of the flesh, as adultery, sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, murder, drunkenness, and gluttony. Restrain the devil, who, being a liar and murderer, eagerly seeks to hinder our good devotion and drive us to such sins. And help us to conclude these solemn days with good health, rest, and peace, for our own comfort and blessed edification, that we may partake of all the benefits of our dear newborn Christ unto our eternal salvation. Amen.