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Features

From the Editor


The story of Jesus’ cross and resurrection is a story for some to preach but for everyone to tell. It is remarkable to read the appointed lessons for this Lent and Easter season and notice how many different voices speak the Gospel message in their particular contexts. And that’s to say nothing of how many different languages the Pentecost preachers used to speak the message . . . and how many Pentecost hearers went home to share the great Good News in their own languages. Each witness brings the one saving word from a unique perspective.

In a small way, we’ve always tried to reflect this in the authorship of Concordia Pulpit Resources. We work to see that the voices in each issue are many and diverse. Scan the bylines here in volume 30, part 2.

Above all, this is a journal for every-Sunday preachers, so the largest number of authors is always parish pastors. In this issue, that’s nine men—four, by the way, who graduated from our seminary in St. Louis, four who come from the Fort Wayne sem, and one who attended St. Catharines.

We do, though, like to hear from some of the men who train us to preach, so in every issue I ask one professor from each of at least our two US seminaries—in addition to the editor. We also recruit regular contributions from the seminary faculties of our international partner churches. No international faculty members this time, but in this issue we do “throw in” (he’ll surely appreciate me putting it that way!) the president of one of our LCMS seminaries.

Not to be forgotten are the theological faculties of our Concordia University System institutions. Dr. Brian German of Concordia Wisconsin this quarter gives us the sermon studies for Lent 4 and 5.

Retired pastors bring their wealth of wisdom to virtually every issue, and in this one that comes from John Fale, who was for many years on the staff of the LCMS.

Of course, the very large majority of our authors are ordained men. This is, after all, a preaching journal. But Deaconess Jeni Miller has written excellent children’s messages for several of our Lenten and Easter Sundays. And each issue this election year we’re being blessed with the work of two of the most gifted (and in demand!) authors in our church, Mr. and Mrs. Mark and Mollie Hemingway. Yes, the Mark and Mollie Hemingway of The Weekly Standard and Fox News fame. Sorry, pastors, but I was more excited to get Mark and Mollie to sign on for their series of articles than I was to get any of you! You understand.

CPR is the preaching journal not only of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, but of the Lutheran Church—Canada as well. In this issue, we have two authors who are Canadian. One you’ll recognize immediately from his author information: Nolan Astley is senior pastor of Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Kitchener, Ontario. The other Canadian, well, we’ll leave that to you to research.

Usually recognizable without further research are the names of synodical officers. This quarter we have two current or former synodical vice presidents: Dr. Astley of the LCC and Dr. Scott Murray of the LCMS.

Always a delight is sharing how missionaries, military chaplains, theological educators deployed overseas, pastors of partner churches, and the like proclaim the Gospel from their viewpoints. We’ve had lots of each of those, and this time it’s, again, Rev. Fale, whose experiences have most recently included working as pastoral support to LCMS missionaries abroad. One of his two studies you’ll read is, quite appropriately, for the Day of Pentecost.

Finally, our authors are sharp guys. In this issue, that’s reflected in nine of them holding degrees beyond the masters. That’s no prerequisite for excellent preaching, but it doesn’t hurt.

So, in basically every issue of CPR you’ll find parish pastors and professors (from each seminary), university pros, emeriti, laity, deaconesses, residents of Canada and Texas and parts of the world belonging to all continents, officers and credentials . . .

Parthians and Medes and Elamites . . .

Carl C. Fickenscher II

Carl C. Fickenscher II
Pastors Conference

Your Responses to Practical Preaching Questions

Q: What’s your thinking about children’s sermons—reasons for doing them or for not doing them?

A: As a child, I never liked going to church. I found it to be extremely boring. I dreaded sermon time!

I don’t want children to be bored in church. I want them listening to a sermon they can understand, to want to come to church because Divine Service is interesting. I want them to look forward to the sermon as a time to learn about God.

People think they want the children to come up front and gather around the pastor. He brings something from home and uses it to talk about Jesus, and the children can usually be counted on for a chuckle. What people really want is for their children to be able to get something out of the sermon, so the children want to—not have to—come to church.

So I preach a children’s sermon every Sunday. From the pulpit. Right after the sermon hymn. It lasts about twenty-two minutes. It’s a challenge. A lot of speakers speak to one age group; teachers teach children who are all the same age. Our hearers range in age from infancy to ninety-something, but we have to speak to them all in a way they can all understand.

I never use objects. They’re distracting. What I do use is things like stories and figures of speech, like Jesus does, like the writers of the Bible do, like Aristotle and the ancient writers did, like the New Journalists do to make true history more interesting. The sermon itself becomes a story, as the Bible is a true story, and we all like to listen to a good story.

I try to speak to the children and the elderly and everyone in between. Not everybody understands every part of the sermon equally. But children are used to hearing and watching things they don’t fully get. Likewise, adults will tell you they get more out of the children’s sermon . . .

Take yourself back to when you were five years old and came to church every Sunday wanting to learn about God. Put yourself in the shoes of that fidgety youngster. They don’t have to be taught to listen. Preachers need to be taught to preach so they want to listen.

Rev. Steven Lyle Anderson, pastor
Immanuel Lutheran Church, Grand Mound, Iowa

Upcoming Topics!

30-3: If you had to characterize your preaching as being more like “The Gambler,” “The Godfather,” or “The Great Gatsby,” which would it be? (Thank you for your responses.)

30-4: How do you graciously receive constructive criticism on your preaching? (Submit by February 1, 2020.)

31-1: What is the most helpful tip you received in a homiletics class at seminary? (Remember that a while ago we asked about the least helpful!) (Submit by May 1, 2020.)

31-2: Describe for us the Lenten sermon series you (or the boys in the seminary? (Remember that a while ago we asked about the least helpful!)

Responses should be a maximum of 350 words and may be sent to Editor, Concordia Pulpit Resources, 3358 S. Jefferson Ave., St. Louis, MO 63118-3875 or emailed to cpr@cph.org. We also invite suggestions for future topics.
Ideas for Illustrating

Lent 1
Shark Bait

See this illustration in the sermon for Lent 1, pages 15–16.

Scott R. Murray, Houston, TX

The Tempting Fast

Some years ago, my wife and I went on a couples retreat. It was a great experience—with, of course, the best part being lots of unscheduled leisure time with Claire. The most memorable scheduled events, though, were a twenty-four-hour fast followed the next evening by a dinner date with a gift certificate to any local restaurant of our choice. So guess how Claire and I spent much of the fast day? Walking through town checking the menus of every restaurant. Believe me, after sixteen, eighteen, twenty hours of fasting, everything looked tempting! Going without food will do that.

When the devil came to Jesus with that first temptation, Jesus was hungry! Forty days of fasting will certainly do that! And bread—any way Jesus would like to bake or toast it, Amish white, honey whole wheat, cinnamon raisin—would surely have looked awfully good! But Jesus responded that “man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Mt 4:4).

The devil’s temptations may look particularly good to us when we’re hungry—and not just for food. Any time we’re not regularly dining on the Word, everything begins to look tempting—another woman, a step up at work we might have to step over someone else to get, a class rank we can only earn by cheating. But the other side is this: the Word of God made flesh has already earned for us a far better banquet—by fighting off all of Satan’s temptations and on the cross paying for all the times we give in. Looking past our present fast, savoring that feast to come—that’s our defense against temptation.

Carl C. Fickenscher II, Fort Wayne, IN

Lent 2
“Forlorn Hope”

See this illustration in the sermon for Lent 2, page 17.

Scott R. Murray, Houston, TX

The Family Line

“I’m glad your parents met,” I’ve often said to my wife, Claire. (I’m glad, of course, that my parents met too, but if my mom and dad had never gotten together, I wouldn’t be missing anyone or anything else.) But, ahhh, Donald Helmreich and Ruth Romoser, students worshiping at University Lutheran at the University of Illinois back in the early fifties—there’s a match I’m glad was made in heaven! Not only has it given me the blissful delight of over thirty-six years of marriage, but there’s Rachel . . . and Daniel . . . and Gabriel. And now . . . well, ask me about our first grandbaby, Rachel and Coleman’s Augustana!

God does a lot of careful planning to give us family joy! All of it, though, every delight any of us ever experiences, is a direct result of the promise God made to Abram and his wife, Sarai, over four thousand years ago: “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3). God made sure Abram met Sarai, and Isaac met Rebekah, and Jacob met Leah, and . . . just so that someday their great-, great-, many-times-great-grandson Jesus the Christ would be born. Every blessing anyone receives is because God’s own Son went to the cross to take away the sins that would have cut us off from any of God’s good things. Thank God he brought all this together!

Carl C. Fickenscher II, Fort Wayne, IN

Lent 3
Picture-Perfect

Mark Zuckerberg, technology entrepreneur and co-founder of Facebook, is only five feet seven inches tall, but you wouldn’t know it. He purposely stages photos to exaggerate his height compared to those standing next to him. Also, he often straightens his back and puffs his chest out to make himself look taller.

We are constantly comparing ourselves to others, often wanting to be like others or to have what others have, doing whatever we can to make ourselves look better. When we stand next to Jesus and compare ourselves to him, the difference is striking: he is the righteous and sinless Son of God. We are unrighteous, sinful, and ungodly. You can’t Photoshop this picture or alter it to make us look any better. Thankfully, God shows his love for us through the death of his Son, Jesus, for us sinners (Rom 5:8). Through Christ, the picture is entirely different: We are no longer unjust but justified, no longer wearing the filthy clothes of unrighteousness but clothed in the righteousness of Christ. There’s no need for Photoshop to doctor your picture. Because of God’s love for you in Christ, you are picture-perfect!

Douglas D. Bauman, Columbus, IN

Lent 4
Night Vision

Whether or not you’ve ever tried on a pair yourself, you’re likely aware that night-vision goggles were developed so we could see images of our surroundings even in
complete darkness. As you may have noticed from movies or TV shows, these devices display images in shades of green, and I read recently that this color selection was far from accidental. It turns out that green was chosen quite deliberately because our eyes are far more sensitive to this color than to many others. Picking green for the display was yet another feature of these goggles that would help us see as naturally as possible the things that would otherwise remain shrouded in darkness.

Even at high noon on a clear day, this world is in total darkness to sin. All of creation is corrupted, and we ourselves are naturally unable to see the things of God. Jesus, however, has come to a people dwelling in darkness in order to be the light of the world, and in him we receive eyes to see the things of God as they truly are. When we look at our lives with this light, we have the kind of “night vision” that makes all the difference in the world (Is 42:16).

Brian T. German, Mequon, WI

Lent 5
A(nother) Breath of Life

In C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the evil witch turns both the people and the animals of Narnia into stone statues. They are totally lifeless. When the human characters Lucy and Susan discover these stone statues, the girls, too, become breathless because of what they see. Suddenly, however, Aslan, the Lion of Narnia, breathes upon these statues. Though it doesn’t happen instantly, soon all the people and animals of Narnia who had been turned to stone are brought fully back to life.

The prophet Ezekiel twice mentions that God’s people not only had hearts of stone (Ezek 11:19; 36:26) but were also as dead as a pile of bones (37:1–2). These images depict complete lifelessness: stone dead in trespasses and sin, and completely sapped of all hope unless we receive a breath of life from above. And while the breath of resurrected life that Jesus gives to us here and now may not immediately transport us to a new heaven and a new earth, he has, like Aslan, begun a good work in us that will most certainly be brought to completion (Phil 1:6).

Brian T. German, Mequon, WI

Palm Sunday: Sunday of the Passion

The Very Hour

The United States Constitution not only designates January 20 as inauguration day for the president but dictates the hour when the new president is to take the oath of office: noon. With the Twentieth Amendment, inauguration day was changed, but the hour remained the same. Such a peaceful transfer of power was virtually unknown in the world at our country’s founding. The framers of the Constitution left nothing to chance; they made it clear down to the very hour when this transfer of power would occur.

God determined the very hour of his Son’s death (Mt 27:45–50), the time when all that was prophesied was fulfilled, the time when Christ’s earthly ministry reached its climax. With the “It is finished” that Jesus spoke in that hour, there was a transfer of power: from bondage to Satan to freedom in Christ, from the power of darkness to the kingdom of light, from eternal death to eternal life.

Douglas D. Bauman, Columbus, IN

Good Friday
Skull and Crossbones

On the high seas centuries ago, nothing brought terror like the sudden appearance of a ship flying the black flag with skull and crossbones. Pirates! The flag was black for a reason; the skeleton would send chills down any honest sailor’s spine. Perhaps surprisingly, though, the Jolly Roger, the black flag, the skull, the crossbones, actually offered mercy. The real purpose of raising the black flag was to invite a merchant ship to surrender without a fight. It would, of course, lose all of its valuable cargo, but the crew’s lives would be spared.

At Golgotha, the place of the skull, the cross certainly hoisted a black flag of death, the death of the Son of God. But it also offers mercy. For the sake of Christ’s cross, we beg for that mercy, and, though we lose everything else, our lives are spared for eternity.

Carl C. Fickenscher II, Fort Wayne, IN

The Resurrection of Our Lord: Easter Day
Walls Come Down

On Sunday morning, August 13, 1961, the leaders of what was then the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) gave the order for the border between East and West Berlin to be closed. This was the beginning of the construction of the Berlin Wall, one of the most hated structures of the Cold War. In time, August 13 was remembered as “Barbed Wire Sunday,” a dark day in the history of the nation and the world. Families were split, workers lost their jobs, and ultimately many people were killed trying to escape to freedom.

However, what went up eventually came down. On November 9, 1989, around 7 p.m., the order was given for the border to be opened. Citizens of East Berlin began gathering at the wall demanding to be allowed to pass to the west side of the city. By 10:45 p.m., the guards at the wall were so overwhelmed and outnumbered they had no choice but to allow the people through. Within the next year, Germany was unified as a democracy and a new era began.

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Today, Easter Sunday, brings the undoing of sin, death, and Satan’s “Barbed Wire Sunday.” Even the grave could not hold Jesus, which means that nothing can prevent us from passing into the kingdom of heavenly light (Mt 28:2; Acts 10:43).

Nolan D. Astley, Kitchener, Ontario, Canada

Easter 2
Show Me

Today’s Gospel (Jn 20:19–31) could well be a Scripture text specifically for the state of Missouri and Eliza Doolittle.


In the musical My Fair Lady, Eliza Doolittle becomes irritated at Freddy, a man who is infatuated with her, but who can only express his love by talking incessantly. In her exasperation, she demands that Freddy show her something beyond words as a sign of his earnestness: “If you’re in love, show me!”

And of course, Jesus’ disciple Thomas says, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe” (Jn 20:25). It’s a little less direct, but what he is saying is, “Show me!”

How remarkably patient our Lord is!

Nolan D. Astley, Kitchener, Ontario, Canada

Easter 3
Not Hide-and-Seek

Children play hide-and-seek with the expectation that sooner or later those who hide will be discovered. God does not play this game with hiddenness. When he hides himself, he can’t be found even by clever detectives! God hides himself so as not to be found by us. Yet in his hiddenness, he reveals himself to us so that we recognize him as our Savior. This is what the prophet Isaiah meant when he called the Savior of Israel the Lord who hides himself (Is 45:15). So after his resurrection, Jesus kept the disciples on the Emmaus road from recognizing him until he revealed himself (Lk 24:16, 30–31, 35). This was anything but a game of hide-and-seek.

Nolan D. Astley, Kitchener, Ontario, Canada

Easter 4
The Necessity of the Cross in the Christian Life

Martin Luther found himself in circumstances not unlike those Christians who were the original recipients of 1 Peter (1 Pet 2:19). Luther had to endure unjust suffering and hostility for the sake of Christ. On Holy Saturday, 1530, just before his colleagues left Coburg to go to Augsburg where they would confess the evangelical faith, the reformer preached on cross-bearing and suffering in the life of the Christian. In that sermon, he said, “Therefore, since it is better to have a cross than to be without one, nobody should dread or be afraid of it. After all, you have a good strong promise with which to comfort yourself. Besides, the gospel cannot come to the fore except through and in suffering and cross” (AE S1:207).

John T. Pless, Fort Wayne, IN

Easter 5
Seeing Things Differently

The Optical Illusionist is a popular website. It is filled with images that change as you look at them. You are looking at a rabbit. But then, on second thought, it looks like a duck. You see a black vase in the middle of the page on a white background. But then, on second thought, if you look at the black as the background, you see two people on the edges of the page, facing each other, with the black background between them.

These illusions remind us how difficult it is to know what we are seeing. The same thing can happen with the Christian life. In the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:57–60), we have a vision of hatred and persecution for the faith. At the same time, however, we have a glimpse of the working of God. When Stephen is stoned, he falls to his knees and prays for his persecutors. Suddenly, in the midst of suffering, we hear someone sound like Jesus, praying that God would forgive his accusers. Because Jesus has triumphed over suffering and risen from the dead, we can sometimes see God at work in the midst of suffering. As Christians, we see things differently.

David R. Schmitt, St. Louis, MO

Easter 6
Finding Your Way

The Roman god Janus has two faces. One looks forward. The other backward. He is a god of beginnings and endings. One of the interesting things about Janus is that he is often pictured with a staff in his hand. The staff is there to guide people on their journey. There’s wisdom in this ancient pagan art. Knowing where you’ve come from and where you’re going helps you find your way in the present circumstance.

John T. Pless, Fort Wayne, IN
In our culture, we are tempted to get lost in the moment. The present experience is all that matters. “You only live once,” people say as they jump from one experience to another. While it is true that we only live once, our present experience is not all that matters. Our lives are part of something much greater. God’s work in the past and God’s work in the future help us understand our present moment. Our Baptism and our resurrection give shape to our life. Peter reminds us that discipleship is not just about the present moment. The work of Christ in the past and the promises of Christ for the future help Christians make sense of what they are doing right now (1 Pet 3:18).

David R. Schmitt, St. Louis, MO

The Ascension of Our Lord
Such Sweet Sorrow

“Parting is such sweet sorrow.” You’ve got to hand it to Shakespeare, don’t you! He does have a way with words—and, more than that, a profound understanding of human nature. As Juliet says good night to Romeo in their famous balcony scene, she expresses so poignantly the way we often feel. “Parting is such sweet sorrow.” Not all parting is anything sweet, of course; some is bitter and spiteful. But when parting is indeed both sorrowful and sweet, it’s always because there’s a deep, loving relationship. The sorrow comes from interrupting the joy of being together. But the sweetness is knowing there will be a reunion—and that the relationship itself is worth longing for in the meantime.

Forty days after his rising from the dead, forty days after the disciples’ ecstasy at seeing him overcome death and all their failures, Jesus led his closest friends out of Jerusalem as far as Bethany, up the Mount of Olives, and “while he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven” (Lk 24:51). We can surely picture the sorrow, just as we often know sorrow feeling as if Jesus is distant from us. The joy of seeing Jesus’ face, hearing his voice, feeling his embrace—not for now. But how sweet will be the day we do see him, hear him with our own ears, hold him in our arms, and are held by him! And in the meantime, knowing how much he loves us, hearing that in his Word and Sacraments, makes even the pining, the longing, sweet. “And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God” (24:52–53).

Carl C. Fickenscher II, Fort Wayne, IN

Easter 7
Praying for Missionaries

International missionaries in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod report often that they experience increased attacks from Satan as they tell others about Jesus, help to establish churches and teach future pastors, and help people through tangible expressions of mercy. Several pastor missionaries note that when they served congregations in the United States, they taught their members about the reality of Satan and his attacks. They taught their members about the reality of suffering for the name of Jesus. But as they’ve entered the mission field with their families, they experience these attacks as more palpable. Just when it looks as if they’re succeeding in their work, invariably something “inexplicable” happens to deter them and tempt them to give up and return to the States. When asked what they need most in the field, missionaries most often respond that they need prayers that they would not be discouraged; that they would have joy in the midst of their trials; that their families would be strengthened so they could endure. They also report that they have a new appreciation for how important it is for them to remain in God’s Word daily and cast all of their anxieties upon him so they can focus on their work (1 Pet 5:6–11).

John A. Fale, St. Louis, MO

The Day of Pentecost
Jesus Never Stops Calling Out to the Thirsty

One of the hardest things for any spouse or family to go through is when a family member is addicted to drugs or alcohol and refuses to admit that life is out of control. Mean, cruel things are often said to the very people who love the troubled child or spouse the most. The values and faith that were once shared are discarded. The rejection of loving family members who want to help hurts deeply. Still, families most often don’t give up. While the family members are committed to stop enabling behaviors, they communicate love and concern and the offer of help when the alcoholic/addict is ready to receive it. They pray for the sufferer. They hold out hope for sobriety and recovery. When an alcoholic or drug addict admits that his or her life is out of control, that he or she is spiritually thirsty and needs the help of God, amazing and miraculous things can happen. Working the recovery program often brings a commitment to help other alcoholics or addicts because one knows what it was like seeking to quench spiritual thirst with chemicals.

Despite a long history of rejection, God never stops having compassion on his creation. He redeems spiritually thirsty sinners and fills them with his Holy Spirit to help other spiritually thirsty sinners, testifying to God’s mercy in Jesus, the living water (Jn 7:37–38).

John A. Fale, St. Louis, MO
Book Review

Religion and American Culture: A Brief History
by George M. Marsden, 3rd ed.

Rev. Lawrence R. Rast Jr., STM, PhD, president, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana

In 1972, Lutheran historian Sydney Ahlstrom of Yale University published A Religious History of the American People. It was immediately recognized as a classic, winning the National Book Award in Philosophy and Religion in 1973 and being named the Religious Book of the Decade by The Christian Century in 1979. Ahlstrom’s ambitious volume of over 1,200 pages sought exhaustively to chronicle the development of religious thought in America over the course of its history. It remains a classic.

The exhaustive character of Ahlstrom’s work, however, also makes it less than accessible to the typical reader. Certainly, most parish pastors lack the luxury of the time it takes to work through such a tome. And that is where George Marsden’s Religion and American Culture: A Brief History shines, presenting itself as a useful volume for today’s pastor who seeks to place his sermons into a meaningful context and desires to speak to his audience in meaningful ways.

Eerdmans has given this volume, at first primarily a textbook, new life as a third edition. No longer relegated to the religious studies shelf of the university bookstore, Religion and American Culture succinctly tells the unique story of Christianity in the United States and its predecessor colonies, particularly in light of its intellectual development. The volume is not an institutional history, and Marsden admits, much as Ahlstrom did before him, that this is primarily an “intellectual history.” For Marsden, that means exploring “the changing shapes of dominant and subdominant values and assumptions that people take for granted” (x).

Marsden opens with one of many quotable statements from Alexis de Tocqueville’s 1835 Democracy in America: “In the United States the sovereign authority is religious, and consequently hypocrisy must be common; but there is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America.”1 Nearly two hundred years later, many still wonder at the religious character of America. The Pew Religious Landscape Study notes that over 80 percent of Americans are “absolutely” or “fairly” certain they believe in God.2 The same study notes that 70 percent of Americans self-identify as “Christian,” granted, in the broadest possible terms.3

This enduring American religiosity, so distinct from the European experience, makes Marsden’s narrative extremely useful for the pastor. This is, after all, a book about religion and culture—the relationship between the two. At the heart of the text is a claim coupled with questions. The claim: “The United States is both remarkably religious and remarkably profane” (1). To untangle this paradox, the questions:

What do American religious beliefs and practices tell us about American culture? What does American culture tell us about American religions? In other words, in what ways have American religions shaped American morality value systems, beliefs about priorities, and views about themselves, other humans, their families, their government, the nation, and the nation’s role in the world? At the same time, to what extent has the American experience transformed traditional religious beliefs and practices? (1-2)

Marsden unpacks answers to these questions in a series of chapters that take the reader from the pre-American scene to the present. Noting that there is more material treating the early history of religion in America, Marsden intentionally emphasizes the latter part of the story. The narrative thus takes one from the European background of American religion through the American Revolution to the revivals of the Early National Period. A single chapter grapples with the myriad changes 1860 to 1917. Here, the narrative struggles at times since the demand of addressing so many discrete issues challenges the telling of the story. World Wars and their impact frame the latter part of the work, where a seeming consensus gives way to the fragmentation of the late twentieth century. A last chapter, “The Twenty-First Century,” offers themes that are familiar to pastors today: the global south of Christianity, world religions in the United States itself, changing patterns of religious belief and practice, religion and politics, and finally “preserving a pluralistic society.” All in all, it is a concise presentation of the American religious story presented clearly and in a compelling way.

A quick word about the theological perspective of the author. Marsden writes as a historian committed to the Reformed tradition. This is not an issue, as Ahlstrom’s Lutheranism did not affect his book noted above. Indeed, to have a historian writing from within the magisterial Reformation strengthens the volume. The book is worth the effort and will enhance a reader’s preaching. For that reason alone, I recommend Religion and American Culture highly.

Notes
Editor's Note: In honor of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has created Preach the Word, a series of twelve modules being offered over these festival years to encourage pastoral growth in preaching. This brief article introduces you to Module 5. To use this and each one of the modules with fellow pastors, go to www.lcms.org/preach-the-word.

You reach out your hand to greet an older member as she walks out of the church. You’re expecting the usual, “Great service, Pastor. Nice message.” But instead she turns around, looks at the now empty church, and, with a tear in her eye, simply says, “I remember when this place was full.”

Her words are not meant to be a dig against you or the hours of preparation you poured into the message, the Bible study, and the worship service. Her words possess more of a puzzled tone. One that seems to say, “It just doesn’t make sense. The service is the same. The church is genuinely loving. There’s a kids’ program and even a youth program. Where are the people? Why aren’t they here?”

As she slowly walks away, you ponder her words. You think about all the time you spent creating a sermon designed to share that life-changing Gospel message people can’t find anywhere else. You consider the time you spent in prayer, praying the Holy Spirit would use your words to speak life into someone. You reflect on the hesitation you felt as you stepped into the pulpit, knowing the weight of the Gospel message you were about to proclaim. As you proclaim the Gospel with your whole heart and soul to the people in those sparsely populated pews, you ask yourself a simple question, “What if I could move this pulpit?”

What if I could put the pulpit in the center of the soccer fields so more families could attend? What if I could put the pulpit in the middle of a crowded coffee shop? What if I could take it into the public schools? What if I could put it into the packed local gym? What if I could put it in the bar down the street from the church? What if I could put the pulpit in someone’s car as they rush off to work? What if I could put it on the beach in the summer and the mountains in the winter? What if I could put the pulpit where the people are already going?!

Would you believe me if I said you could?

Right now, every member in your church has a device in his or her pocket with more computing power than was used to launch the first rocket into space. A device small enough to hold in your hand that started out as a way to make calls on the go has quickly morphed into a mobile computer portable enough to go anywhere and powerful enough to connect you to the world. The internet was a huge leap in technology. It literally brought the world to you. The mobile web was an even bigger leap! It literally gave you access to the world wherever you go!

Would you believe me if I told you you can take the pulpit in your church and put it in the palm of someone’s hand?

Thanks to mobile technology, you’re now no longer waiting for people to show up to the sanctuary. The sanctuary goes to the people. Now your church’s pulpit is on the soccer field, in the coffee shop, the public schools, the gym, the bar, even in the car! The pulpit is on the beach, in the mountains, and anywhere else your people go. Your little, old pulpit now has the capability to go wherever your people go.

What if I told you that means you now have the ability, using that very same message you’re preaching to those sparsely filled pews, to reach out to an entirely new group of people throughout the week? So many people, in fact, that if all these people were to attempt to attend your church on a Sunday, you wouldn’t be able to fit the crowd in the building! What if I told you you have the ability to share the Gospel with people who aren’t even looking for the Gospel and wouldn’t think to walk through the doors of your church?

Would you look at those sparsely filled pews as a sign of an aging and declining church, or would you see them as an opportunity to innovate, to take your church’s message further than it’s ever gone before? Literally taking the pulpit out the door and putting it in the palm of someone’s hand.

The world has changed drastically in the last twenty years. For many, those changes have created heightened feelings of anxiety and have produced an increasingly dismal outlook. But those drastic changes have actually created incredible opportunities for a church body like ours that believes hearing the Gospel has the power to change someone’s life radically. All of those drastic changes have paved new avenues for sharing the unchanging Gospel with an ever-changing world in ways that open the door for your church to reach out to people you could have never reached before!

It may sound too good to be true, but the truth is it’s easier and cheaper than you think. Take an opportunity to see how. Go to www.lcms.org/about/leadership/president/preach-the-word and check out Module 5, “The Use of Technology in Preaching.” You’ll find the opportunities are greater than you ever imagined.
Heads-Up for Preaching in an Election Year, Part 2: A Christian Consideration of Immigration and Rule of Law

Mark and Mollie Hemingway, Alexandria, Virginia

Editor’s Note: Lutheran pastors are careful—and wisely so—to avoid endorsing particular candidates for office. However, a preacher’s task does include informing his hearers of issues in the public arena that are addressed by Holy Scripture or that might impact our freedom to proclaim Christ. With 2020 a national election year in the United States, we asked well-known Washington commentators Mark and Mollie Hemingway to select and discuss topics of such interest in each of the four quarters of CPR Volume 30. Mr. and Mrs. Hemingway are members of Immanuel Lutheran Church in Alexandria, Virginia.


In the last few years, immigration has emerged as one of the most contentious topics in politics, and one that presents challenges for both Lutherans and American Christians more generally. There are many respectable and differing opinions to be had on the issue of immigration, but in order to think about it as Christians, it requires striking a balance between Law and Gospel. In order to do that, an understanding of the broad strokes of recent political history is needed.

**Recent History of Immigration Politics**

The truth is that immigration had been a very contentious and animating subject long before Trump came along and started leading chants at rallies of “Build the Wall!” Even if major media and national politicians had often avoided addressing the issue, immigration was more animating for a large subsection of the population than just about any other issue, and had been for decades now.1

A huge part of the reason immigration issues were so frustrating to many people is that many local and state governments didn’t have the resources to deal with the massive illegal immigration influx we’ve experienced since the eighties. And increasingly, more liberal local and state governments have simply refused to enforce existing laws, a position that was alternately said to be humanitarian and politically calculating. For their part, Congress has refused to address the issue by clarifying and updating the law where necessary, in addition to holding accountable the state governments that refuse to enforce the federal immigration laws.

Underlying all of this is the issue of border security. Nearly everyone who has been in Congress for any length of time is on record as supporting massive increases in border security. For years, it was the one thing that Republicans and Democrats could at least pretend to agree on. Republicans, who at least feint at being immigration hawks on television, would routinely say they were open to providing some amnesty and liberal immigration reforms—but only if the border was secured to the point that we wouldn’t have to worry about yet more amnesty proposals for all-new waves of illegal immigrants years from now. For their part, Democrats were publicly amenable to this compromise.

After years of feigning agreement here, border security didn’t happen. And frankly, it’s a struggle not to see the inaction through a lens that is anything but cynical. Democrats didn’t want border security because they saw the demographic changes immigration was bringing about as advantageous to them at the ballot box, though as the election of 2016 showed, the demographics-as-destiny argument was at a minimum premature.2 To get even more cynical, Democrats have been rather uncharitably portraying any attempts even to enforce existing immigration laws as motivated by racism, though enforcing the laws really only meant supporting many policies that Democrats themselves supported ten or twenty years ago.3 Now some Democratic members of Congress are essentially advocating open borders and even explicitly abolishing the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency.

Republicans, for their part, have always been somewhat divided on immigration. The more libertarian wing of the party has always been staunchly pro-immigration, though it must be said that this mostly centers around arguments for increasing legal immigration—and there are many respectable arguments for doing so, even though some on the right oppose more legal immigration, as well. By these lights, the Trump administration isn’t anti-immigration per se. They have been quite public about their desire to move America to a skills-based immigration framework, and they have nonetheless been pilloried for advocating America adopt essentially the same immigration policies as Canada and Australia. This would theoretically allow for much more legal immigration.

However, notable voices on the right, such as the otherwise illuminating Wall Street Journal editorial page, occasionally reflect pro-immigration views in ways that seem to border on excusing illegal immigration as well.4 Again, to be thoroughly cynical, it’s probably worth asking to what extent accepting campaign checks from corporate America, which also benefits greatly from cheap labor in the form
of illegal immigration, affects the behavior of Republican politicians.

And it can also be said that Republicans and Democrats alike have found leaving immigration as a festering wound on the body politic to be a useful motivator to their respective bases. Every election, both parties promise voters they will fix the issue if elected. But both parties have had complete control of Congress and the White House at points in the last decade, and at no point were comprehensive immigration plans passed. Fixing the problem would only deprive them of a way to rile up voters for the next election.

**One Hot-Button Issue**

With the broad outlines of the debate in mind, let’s look at some more specific aspects of immigration policy and the Christian reaction to it. In June 2012, President Obama created the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)—also known as the Dreamer program—to allow illegal immigrants who entered the United States as children to receive a two-year reprieve from deportation and eligibility for work permits. He attempted to expand the program in November 2014 at the same time he announced the Deferred Action for Parents of Americans (DAPA). These programs enabled illegal immigrants who had been in the country for a certain period of time, or who had been brought to the country illegally as minors, to receive work permits.

Prior to creating these programs, President Obama had repeatedly said such action would be unconstitutional and that he had no power to change immigration laws. When he issued these changes, he said it was a “temporary stopgap measure” and encouraged Congress to handle the issue legislatively, as the Constitution requires.

A successful lawsuit against the 2014 expansion was brought by state attorneys general, and the same group had given the federal government until September 5, 2017, to stop DACA before it would sue to end it.

With this deadline before the Department of Justice, department attorneys would have the difficult and futile task of defending the unconstitutional executive overreach of the preceding administration. So President Trump rescinded the program and gave it a six-month off-ramp to enable Congress to do its duty. (Congress, which has never missed an opportunity to actcowardly when faced with a tough immigration problem, let the March 2018 extension come and go. Courts have been preventing DACA from being phased out ever since.3)

Now you may have noticed, the Trump administration tends to anger people. But some were particularly upset with this announcement that the president wanted to end DACA, and one of the specific lines of attack adopted by Trump administration critics is that what they were doing was somehow un-Christian. If you were on Twitter, you quickly learned that Jesus unambiguously supported the DACA program. Also probably DAPA. And maybe probably also no borders.

Christian Christensen, an American journalism professor at the University of Stockholm, tweeted, “If you support a revolting, bigoted decision like ending #DACA, take any reference to God, Jesus or Christianity off your Twitter bio” (@ChrChristensen, September 4, 2017). Bill Prady, the executive producer of the massive hit TV show _The Big Bang Theory_, quoted Leviticus—not typically a part of the Bible many Hollywood types endorse—to condemn the decision: “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens … for you were strangers in Egypt” (@billprady, September 3, 2017). And Sister Helen Prejean, the nun and famous anti-death-penalty activist, said, “Jesus was very clear: ‘I was a stranger and you welcomed me’” (@helenprejean, September 3, 2017).

As LCMS pastor Hans Fiene joked at the time, “Thank you, Twitter, for reminding us Christians that the Bible’s crystal clear on immigration policy and hopelessly vague on sexual ethics” (@HansFiene, September 4, 2017).

It is absolutely true that Christians are called to serve others and be hospitable to strangers. And you will see a wide variety of Christian groups lobby on behalf of illegal immigrants. It is also true that these issues aren’t nearly as reductive as our impoverished social media discussions would indicate.

For one thing, no matter what your personal immigration policy preferences are, we can likely agree that neither Jesus nor Moses argued in favor of unnecessarily flouting the US Constitution to achieve those goals. For another, the entire reason DACA beneficiaries are set apart is precisely because they aren’t strangers, but people who have lived in the country for many years and become part of the community, but not its citizenry.

The ethical concerns and moral arguments don’t run in just one direction. That is particularly true when we take the discussion beyond hospitality to strangers. Indeed, the concept of hospitality is a good frame with which to understand immigration. In his incredibly prescient and illuminating book _Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: Immigration, Islam, and the West_, former colleague Christopher Caldwell devotes an entire section to looking at contemporary immigration debates relative to hospitality in the Western tradition.

“In historically Christian countries, ‘pro-immigrant’ politicians always draw on deep cultural reflexes, not to mention the support of most official church groups, and ‘anti-immigrant’ politicians must always smash a few taboos before they can get anywhere,” he writes. However, Caldwell also notes that the cultural traditions around hospitality have always been understood to have limits. The failure to obey
them results in much of the tension we see over immigration: “Hospitality is meant to protect travelers in hostile territory; it is not meant to give large groups of visitors—who may include militants, freeloaders, and opportunists—the run of the place. And yet, since hospitality is such an innate, deeply human inclination, canny people find it a particularly easy thing to exploit, much as advertisers exploit other deeply human drives, such as sex. That is why cultures establish all kinds of rules around hospitality. A guest who tarries becomes an interloper.”

This understanding of hospitality—that it is both a necessity we are called to provide (Mt 25:31–46) and that it has limits that should be heeded lest that hospitality come at the expense of our neighbor whom we are also compelled to love—is perfectly compatible with a Christian understanding. Of course, determining where those limits are can be a very subjective matter, and debates over the available American resources for hospitality are likely to drive political debates for years to come.

The Need for Rule of Law

One area where it seems there is less subjective room for debate, however, is the need for rule of law and, ultimately, the sovereignty that allows those laws to exist. Part of the problem with the immigration status quo is that we are now, and have been for a long time, openly dismissing the immigration laws that were passed and agreed upon through our constitutional and democratic processes because it is politically convenient to do so. But sovereignty and rule of law are necessary preconditions for an ordered society, and flouting immigration laws so dramatically will only encourage the flouting of laws in other areas.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops denounced the rescinding of DACA with a statement that quoted Mk 9:37 and then followed, “Today, our nation has done the opposite of how Scripture calls us to respond. It is a step back from the progress that we need to make as a country.”

A country is territory, laws, and institutions. Ideally, people are attached to these things and form their identity as citizens of a given nation-state around these things. Illegal immigration can erode that identity, and for that reason immigration is highly regulated in the nation-state.

Generally speaking, countries tend not to reward illegal immigrants with citizenship, particularly if they hope to send a message to inhabitants of the region that rule of law is important or that further illegal immigration is undesirable. If attachment based on land, laws, and institutions are derided, other attachments become stronger, including those based on race and religion. Without strong adherence to the rule of law, these non-national attachments can lead to strife and violence within a country.

British philosopher Roger Scruton writes on the moral value in belonging to a civic community in *England and the Need for Nations*:

It is because citizenship presupposes membership that nationality has become so important in the modern world. In a democracy, governments make decisions and impose laws on people who are duty-bound to accept them. Democracy means living with strangers on terms that may be, in the short-term, disadvantageous; it means being prepared to fight battles and suffer losses on behalf of people whom one neither knows nor particularly wants to know. It means appropriating the policies that are made in one’s name and endorsing them as ‘ours’, even when one disagrees with them. Only where people have a strong sense of who ‘we’ are, why ‘we’ are acting in this way or that, why ‘we’ have behaved rightly in one respect, wrongly in another, will they be so involved in the collective decisions as to adopt them as their own. This first-person plural is the precondition of democratic politics, and must be safeguarded at all costs, since the price of losing it, I believe, is social disintegration.

Nationality is not the only kind of social membership, nor is it an exclusive tie. However, it is the only form of membership that has so far shown itself able to sustain a democratic process and a liberal rule of law.

Being a legal member of the society is important to the rule of law and the bonds of peace, the means by which strangers are able to interact with one another. The rule-following is actually a key ingredient. Scruton wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* in 2017 that civic patriotism means acknowledging that we all share institutions and laws. These laws can extend to immigrants as they come into a country, but only if they also acknowledge those same shared laws.

Adults who were brought to the United States as children are obviously in a different class than people who knowingly break the law as adults, but we should not dismiss the importance of the rule of law as breezily as many critics do. When one downplays or dismisses its importance, it undermines the entire case for citizenship in a healthy democratic republic.

Legal requirements for granting citizenship are foundational to the rule of law. And yet, many people regard such immigration necessities as little more than a formality, and an offensive one at that. ABC News advertised a segment on its show by tweeting, “TONIGHT: #DACA recipient teacher opens up about uncertainty of her status under Pres. Trump: ‘Why do I have to persuade him on my humanity?’” It’s an interesting turn of phrase. Most people would think...
that regulation of immigration does not deny the humanity of non-citizens but addresses which humans are members of the citizenry.

Borders, Good Order, and Shared Values

At the Library of Law and Liberty website, philosophy professor Paul Seaton discusses the French philosopher Pierre Manent, who writes about the comparative advantages of the nation-state to other forms of governance based on removal of borders. For those who think Jesus opposes all borders, it is of note that Manent has argued that the nation-state is a uniquely Christian concept.12

The issue with immigration restrictions is not humanity but human community. Immigration restrictions, far from denying humanity, can be a form of charity to the members of a given group. Seaton quotes a translation of Manent’s words found in Seeing Things Politically: Interviews with Benedicte Delorme-Montini:

This universal human need for order or for good government expresses itself in Europe in a context defined by two specific conditions. The first is obviously the pagan political experience of civic life and of the difficulty or the impossibility of recovering civic life once it has been lost. . . . The second is the Christian proposition of a human community at once more extensive and [more tightly knit together] than any political community. . . . In Europe, the human desire to be well-governed is sharpened and complicated by this double condition.13

Along these lines, it should not be out of bounds to ask whether our immigration policies (or the lack of enforcement of them) is eroding the Christian character of America. On some level, it is undeniable that the privately held Judeo-Christian values of citizens are complimentary to and strengthen the hard-won secular political freedoms of the West. By that understanding, immigration where there is shared cultural and religious traditions might be more welcome.

We do not have to imagine that using our own tolerance to justify importing intolerant religious and cultural understandings will lead to less tolerance in the end. We only have to look to Europe to see how failing to assimilate large numbers of doctrinaire Muslims can represent a step back politically and culturally.

Of course, the understanding that immigration has the potential to change our cultural and political landscape shouldn’t automatically be frightening. After all, America is a nation of immigrants, and the changes they bring can be a blessing. However, as the country becomes more diverse, we should make sure that we are not throwing the baby out with the bathwater when it comes to preserving American values like freedom and tolerance.

This awareness should cause us to engage in the public square as Christians and evangelize to immigrants, for the future depends on it. “Faith produces its effects only so long as it remains faith and not calculation,” French philosopher Remi Brague wrote in the 1990s. “We owe European civilization to people who believed in Christ, not to people who believed in Christianity.”14

Fortunately, most people agree that citizens of a nation have a right to protect their culture and defend their economic and security interests by regulating immigration. Most people also probably recognize the obligation that citizens in free and prosperous countries have toward those from other countries seeking asylum for humanitarian or other serious reasons.

Loving the Neighbor

Balancing those interests is not immoral or un-Christian. Citizens of a country should be mindful of the cultural and economic changes that immigration can bring and particularly how the downside of those changes tends to be borne by those with lower incomes and less power than the ones who tend to make immigration policy. For example, unfettered immigration can strain the resources and services of schools, hospitals, and local communities. Poorly managed immigration policies can also lead to disruptions in the political order and culture.

As Peter Meilaender has written:

The world, after all, contains countless needy people who require assistance. How are we to know whom to help? So we begin with those to whom we stand in special relationships. The neighbor whom we are commanded universally to love takes particular shape as the aged father in need of regular attention, the cousin whose husband is away fighting in Iraq, the fellow parishioner who has lost his job. Immigration regulations are a way of embodying in policy a preferential love for our own fellow citizens and the way of life that we share. Such a preference can be overridden, but it is not inherently suspect.15

The founding fathers explained that the Constitution itself was put in place “to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.”16

Immigration laws defined the United States’ borders and boundaries. They ideally foster community for all the people contained therein, including the community benefits that come from following the rule of law. When immigration laws are flouted and people not lawfully present in the country observe problems with immigration enforcement, they and
others can reasonably conclude that consequences for crimes are non-existent and that the government is weak.

The people in our country can and should think about reforming immigration policy. Developing a legalization program for illegal immigrants who have spent a great deal of time in the country is reasonable precisely because these people are part of the community and have built families and homes in the country. A program that requires something on the part of these non-citizens is more than reasonable, precisely to show the importance of rule of law.

Such a program should also be balanced with immigration policies that are agreed to by the people—not unilaterally decided by a king or president—and that can be and are enforced. A country that is unable to set and keep immigration policy is not a country at all, and fails to serve the needs of its citizens or its near neighbors.

Notes

1. Take it from someone who worked at two major daily newspapers—if the number of letters to the editor is anything to go by.

2. To give you an idea of how overconfident Democrats were about demographics, famed Democratic party political consultant James Carville actually wrote a book during the Obama years entitled 40 More Years: How the Democrats Will Rule the Next Generation (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009). There's a good chance Democrats will benefit from demographics in the longer term. However, there is evidence to show that Hispanic and Asian voters may not be as reliable a voting bloc as the Democrats would like. To some extent, what happens here depends on GOP savvy and minority outreach, and the history of the GOP expanding the tent in recent years is . . . not good. Further, electoral incentives for GOP politicians to appeal to minority groups are diminishing, with the polarization and capture of ethnic voting blocs by Democrats. Given the vagaries of Electoral College math, Mitt Romney could have done forty points better among Hispanic voters and still not garnered the votes to win in 2012.

3. The hypocrisy and/or sudden reversal of party policy here is staggering. Harry Reid, the Democratic senate leader through 2016, had even been on record as opposing birthright citizenship in the 1990s.

4. There's a lot to be said here if you want to get into internecine conservative policy debates, but National Review and the WSJ editorial page have been duking it out on immigration for years (though obviously both places have expressed a range of views). Along these lines, there's been a major academic debate about whether inflows of low-skilled immigrants depress wages for blue-collar Americans. The laws of supply and demand, along with compelling studies from Harvard economist and Cuban refugee George Borjas, tell us that they certainly do depress wages. But the pro-immigration, where clear thinking on economic issues normally prevails, has taken this debate quite seriously. For example, see the 2016 op-ed, "New Evidence on Immigrants and Jobs," from academics Giovanni Peri and Vasil Yasenov, with the tagline, "A large influx of Cubans to Miami did not depress the wages or employment of low-skill American workers." (WSJ.com, January 18, 2016, https://www.wsj.com/articles/new-evidence-on-immigrants-and-jobs-1453162462, accessed March 19, 2019).

5. While not much will be said here about the courts and immigration, the way politicized courts have handled the issue is alarming given the concerns about rule of law. There's no apparent reason why it would somehow be illegal for a president to stop a program that was created out of whole cloth by the previous president (and under constitutionally dubious authority at that). And yet, here we are.

6. For understanding immigration, as well as resurgent populist movements in European and American politics, Caldwell's book can't be recommended highly enough.
Sermon Studies

LENT 1, MARCH 1, 2020

Baptized into What?

Text: Matthew 4:1–11
Other Lessons: Genesis 3:1–21; Psalm 32:1–7; Romans 5:12–19

Sermon Theme: How does the Christian face the temptations of the devil?
Sermon Goal: That the Christian would be centered in the gifts granted in Baptism to live in the wilderness of this age.

Hymns:
- A Mighty Fortress Is Our God
- The Tree of Life
- O Christ, You Walked the Road
- O Lord, throughout These Forty Days

Rev. Scott R. Murray, PhD, senior pastor, Memorial Lutheran Church, Houston, Texas

Liturgical Setting

Epiphany shows us God's Son being baptized into his office as Messiah, taking into himself the sin of the world. Now at the head of Lent, we see what the outcome is. Like us, Jesus faces temptation because of his being baptized. His power to fend off Satan as the Israel of God, after just coming across the Red Sea of Baptism, gives us hope for ultimate rescue as we walk the Lenten way with him. We go with him from the font to the wilderness of this age, looking forward to crossing the Jordan to the heavenly home promised to us.

Relevant Context

Jesus goes straight from the triumph of his Baptism to the wilderness to undergo temptation. He is led to the wilderness by the Spirit. This is not an accidental wilderness wandering, but an intentional act that identifies him with Israel of old. Through his undergoing temptation and declining to be enticed by our enemy, he remakes Israel in himself. Where Israel falls to temptation, Jesus holds fast to the Word of God. He will not accept the big "if" but confesses his Father and keeps the First Commandment as the head of them all.

Textual Notes

V 1: This tempting (πειράζω) that Jesus will experience is not the testing God gave to Israel during their wilderness wanderings. Notice in verse 3 that ὁ πειράζων, "the tempter," is the agent. This is a fuller onslaught against God's Son, that he might fall into an unbelieving confession.

V 3: Satan is not merely saying that Jesus might not be a son of God, but he is calling into doubt that he is the Son of God (see Jeffrey A. Gibbs, Matthew 1:1–11:1 [St. Louis: Concordia, 2006], 188). This is an existential threat akin to the testing in Eden (Gen 3:1–7).

V 4: How clear Jesus' dependence on the Word of God, and how certain he is of its success against the tempter!

V 5: παραλαμβάνει. Note the use of the historical present. Other instances in Matthew include those occurring during Jesus' temptation in Gethsemane (Mt 26:36–46).

V 6: ὅτι. While ESV does not translate ὅτι, thus showing Satan's words as direct discourse (an actual quotation of Ps 91:11, 12), Gibbs argues ὅτι should be translated as "It stands written that to his angels he will give orders . . . "—indirect discourse (Gibbs, 190). This is purposeful by Satan; he is avoiding a direct quotation of God's Word. Of course, he also misquotes it by leaving out the second phrase of 91:11.

Sermon Outline

3. Baptism attracts Satan—as it did that shark to Jesus.
2. Christ’s Baptism joins us to him—as targets of Satan.
1. But we use our Baptism in the wilderness of this world. HOW DOES THE CHRISTIAN FACE THE TEMPTATIONS OF THE DEVIL?

Sermon

Just before going into the wilderness, Jesus is baptized by the reluctant Baptist. John would have preferred that he should be baptized by Jesus, not Jesus by John. But in typical style, John did not know what he was saying. He could only think of the privilege and benefit of being baptized by the Son of God, the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. About that, he was right. Certainly, he was right.

But this Baptism of Jesus was to be different. This Baptism was also Jesus' messianic "ordination"; it was a public induction into the office of Messiah. It was to set the name of Father upon the Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit, launching him upon his work as the Savior of the world. His ministerial career was at its pristine beginning. He was now to begin the work of saving the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

3.

On this point, John miscalculated. The Baptism experienced by Jesus brought him face-to-face with his enemy and our enemy, the tempter. “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came” (vv 1–3).

Jesus is baptized into a bad deal. Surf fishermen tell me it's important to put your catch on a long stringer in case the
wounded fish attract sharks. Usually a stringer should be six feet long, though that would be too short for me. If the fisherman gets tangled in the stringer, the shark also might treat him as food. When Jesus stands in the Jordan, his Father has set him on a fishing expedition, to make fishers of men. He’s looking for a big catch, of both good and bad.

Jesus’ Baptism wrapped him in the stringer of fish. The shark veers straight for him. Because he fills his Baptism with all righteousness, the water is colored crimson, the cleansing blood infusing every font. No wonder the satanic shark glides toward him with the triple-toothy smile of slaughter. Jesus is like a weak and wounded fish, caught on the stringer of our sins. He no sooner comes forth from the water when, driven by the Holy Spirit, he goes out into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Here is the life-devouring and death-dealing enemy of all humans cruising in to make the kill on God's Son, who is the only life worth consuming.

Jesus does not stumble into this confrontation with man’s enemy accidentally. He knows it’s coming. He’s planning on it. He seeks it. He yearns for it. He desires it with every fiber of his being. He is about the righteousness that must be so, as he says to John. And not just that. He is the righteousness that must be so. The kingdom of God is defined by his righteousness (Mt 6:10), but that righteousness is the enemy’s enemy.

The satanic shark knows that the Lamb’s life must be kept from us. He must be deflected, bumped off course, devoured, and destroyed. The cosmic battle for all souls was joined in Baptism’s waters. Then it spilled out into the wilderness of sin, where the Son of God battles our fearsome enemy.

In every Baptism, we repeat that scene. The Son has laced his Baptism with the blood of his crucifixion. They are wrapped in the blood that saves. “Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Eph 2:13), because the blood of Christ has been brought near to you in the baptismal font. It gives life because it covers us. “The blood of Jesus [God’s] Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn 1:7).

But just as Jesus’ Baptism spread the waters with blood, so our Baptism also attracts the devil. Those already in his maw has no need to devour. We who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ and his crucifixion. It isn’t any other way; those who have become children of God in the washing of regeneration will face attacks from the master of degeneration. The devil does us the compliment of attacking us. He leaves alone those already among the living dead. So if you want peace in this world, best renounce your Baptism. Baptism attracts our enemy, who desires to kill the life given by the Life of the world.

I know that makes the parent’s heart quail as we baptize infants. We prefer to hope the child’s life will be all sweetness and light. But we would be foolish to say so. Think of your own battle with temptation. When has the tempter ever let you alone? When has he left hectoring, berating, and accusing you? Can you always see the promised land? Can you slap the shark on the snout so that he swims away forever? (Insert temptations to sin or despair common among members.) What then would you make think that Satan would leave alone our baptized little ones? If the Son of God has been treated this way, what makes you think this little dollop of flesh and blood will get a pass from the father of lies?

We, like Moses, will die east of the Jordan, knowing that the Promised Land is just over there, and only then, dying in faith, will we enter the peace and rest that is our inheritance through Christ. Though the victory has been won, Baptism still has us in the midst of battle. The experience of our Lord says so. He was led into the wilderness following Baptism. He enters into his divine office only to face immediately the onslaught of the evil one. It is no different for us. Life in the world becomes harder from here on out for the baptized, because we live in the wilderness of sin. Like Israel, we walk forty years awaiting God’s ultimate rescue in the promised land, dying little by little until we are the people God wants us to be, and in the end falling asleep in the arms of Christ.

1. How shall we then live in the midst of such attacks? How shall we live in wilderness with the Savior? With what shall we ward off the enemy’s approach to devour our little ones?

Instill in them every word that comes from the mouth of God. The Word of God is a great weapon against the onslaughts of the liar. Why? Because that Word of God is the truth. We combat the lie with the truth. Set the holy catechism on your child’s lips. Bring her to Sunday School. Put her in Lutheran school. She will live with every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Not opinion. Not entertainment. Not even religious opinion. Not with mere Law: Do not taste. Do not touch. But with the eternal Gospel of life, that her sins have been taken away in Christ through his bloody death. Teach her that.

Commend your child to the care of his heavenly Father who will always guard his life against the attacks of Satan. Will he always understand how his Father is protecting him? No. Will he always appreciate how his Father is protecting him? No. Will his heavenly Father stop protecting him? No. Not any more than his earthly father ever would. He will send his holy angels to guard him in all his ways.

Teach her to worship God alone. Not you. Not herself. Not other humans. Not the stuff in the creation. God. This is
the God who has redeemed her by his holy blood, and cov-
ered her with that mantle.

The baptismal font is the entrance of the church. We pass through it to enter in. We pass by it to return to the wilder-
ness. Into the water and up out again. Only with its power
can we walk away from the altar. Only its power will draw
us back to the altar. But it will also attract the devouring
deceiver. That is the way it will be, until we pass into the
promised land of perfect peace in Christ, when Baptism's
down payment of death is redeemed with its full life.

Baptism gives the full Christ to us so that we now bear the
name “sons of God.” No “ifs” about it. We have the full deal
in him. But the full deal attracts the enemy, too, like those
who win the lottery suddenly have more friends and relatives
than they had ever known they had before. And yet there is
only one direction to go: out. Out into the wilderness. Out
into the world. In it. Not of it. To serve there. To minister
to those who also need Baptism and to bring them in. The
Holy Spirit also drives us out into the wilderness.

**How Does the Christian Face the Temptations of the Devil?**

The font needs to be our everyday companion, so that it can
be used today, tomorrow, and ever after to slap our enemy on
the nose. We can walk the wilderness way living in Baptism.
Baptism indicates that “the Old Adam in us should by daily
contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins
and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and
arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever”
(Small Catechism, Baptism, Fourth Part). Satan is our enemy.
One little word can fell him: I am baptized. Amen.

**Liturgical Setting**

When Abram (Abraham) moves on from Haran to Canaan
at the command of God, he is going he knows not
where, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown.
Yet he goes out by faith with good courage, God’s hand
leading and his love supporting him. The Psalm of the day
reflects this certainty: “The Lord will keep your going out
and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore”
(Ps 121:8)—a certainty which we who live by faith share
with Abraham, our forefather by faith. Like Abraham, we,
too, go out into the world counted righteous by God (Epistle,
Rom 4:3), certain that we are those offspring who are among
the blessed families through God’s blessing to Abraham. This
is how we live and move and have our being as we move
toward the cross with Jesus.

**Textual Notes**

V 1: “from your country.” The sequence with 11:31–32
seems to suggest that this call comes to Abram not in the land
of his birth, Ur of the Chaldeans (lower Mesopotamia), but
rather in Haran (upper Mesopotamia), where he next settled
with his father Terah. Acts 7:2–4 clarifies that it came in Ur.

V 3: “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”
The critical element of the promise, specific that the Messiah
would come through Abram, for all are blessed in Christ.

**Sermon Outline**

I. Hoping only in a promise leads into the darkness where
God hides and reveals himself.

II. But the promise in which we hope God still fulfills in
his Word.

III. And in Christ, God gives this hope to us who trust his
Word.

**Sermon**

During the Napoleonic wars, the British general Arthur
Wellesley, who would become the Duke of Wellington, often
found himself using the British troops he commanded to
reduce Spanish towns and villages held by French troops.
Once the artillery had broken a section of the wall, the real
dirty work began. The first troops through the breach were
called the “forlorn hope.” Their chances of survival were
extremely low. They advanced through the breach in the
wall with the confidence that they would likely be killed.

There’s a big difference between this “forlorn hope,” a
hopeless hope really, and the hope against hope. In the hope
of Abraham, God tells this different story. He calls Abraham
to hope against hope. This is Abraham’s faith. Against hope,
he believed a promise that he would be the father of many
nations. And so it is for us.

**Our Hope and Abraham’s Comes from a Promise.**

**Lent 2, March 8, 2020**

Our Hope and Abraham’s

Text: Genesis 12:1–9

Other Lessons: Psalm 121; Romans 4:1–8, 13–17; John 3:1–17

Sermon Theme: Our hope and Abraham’s comes from a promise.

Sermon Goal: That God’s people hope in the promises of the
Word in the midst of earthly trials and hopelessness.

Hymns:

- When in the Hour of Deepest Need
  - LSB 615
- Sing Praise to the God of Israel
  - LSB 936
- The God of Abraham Praise
  - LSB 798
- Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer
  - LSB 918

Rev. Scott R. Murray, PhD, senior pastor,
Memorial Lutheran Church, Houston, Texas
God made shockingly weighty promises to the patriarchs. He granted to Abraham a whole land and descendants as far as the eye could see. God also promised him that from among those descendants would come the blessing that would redeem the world from the fall and its disastrous effects. All people would be blessed through him! So far, so good. The problem is that God required Abraham and all his posterity to believe those promises. God steadfastly declined to give the fulfillment of his promises in easy, simple, or obvious ways. In this text, God promised Abraham a homeland of his own and asked him to leave Ur and then Haran to go there. The only drawback was that Abraham wasn’t sure where it was exactly, nor did God ever give Abraham the deed to this land he promised to him. He was a sojourner in his own land. Indeed, Abraham only possessed it by the promise, and he owned only a plot in which to be buried with his household at “the cave of the field of Machpelah east of Mamre (that is, Hebron)” (Gen 23:19). The best Abraham could do was burial insurance. Isn’t that sad?! 

Imagine asking your wife to pull up stakes and leave her home and family like Abram did Sarai. The conversation would go something like this: “Honey, let’s go to live somewhere else.” “Where are we going?” “Oh, I don’t really know.” “Where will our home be?” “I’m not sure.” “What will our home look like?” “Um, we haven’t got one yet, but God has promised us burial insurance. How about that?” Abraham lived to an advanced age and fathered the son of the promise, Isaac, when he was almost a hundred years old. But given what he said to his wife Sarai, it’s a wonder that Abram lived past that conversation.

Still, when God said, “Go,” Abram went, with neither deed nor map, taking Sarai with him. God expected Abram to believe not on the basis of his sight, feeling, deeds, burial insurance, or any other earthly prop. God had spoken his great promises. That was good enough for God, and therefore it was good enough for Abram. God hid and revealed himself at the same time in the Word of promise. It was all there, because the mouth of the Lord had spoken. The theology of the cross is the theology of the Word. He speaks. We believe. 

God permitted Abraham to dangle, to live in a darkness so impenetrable that it often frustrated both Abraham and Sarah. They failed to see how God would fulfill his promises to them, and sometimes in cowardice and unbelief they schemed to help God fulfill his promises their way. You know how that worked out! But despite their weakness, God was not about to go back on his promise to Abraham. He required Abraham to trust him and only gave fruition to the promise when it was too late, too impossible, the human situation too hopeless. Abraham, St. Paul says, “believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, ‘So shall your offspring be’” (Rom 4:18).

The Word of God always confronted Abraham. He was told of the promise. To know God is to trust the Word of God without any evidence of fulfillment. God saying does all. Abraham preached this to Isaac and Jacob, and Isaac and Jacob preached it to their own households. Since God never goes back on his promises, they are intended likewise as our support in trouble, because the Word of God abides forever (1 Pet 1:25)—no matter how impenetrably dark our path, no matter how forlorn our hope appears to us.

How could Abraham become father of many nations? He couldn’t be the father of one son, let alone many nations. He was a man who was landless, except a burial plot, which reminded of the impermanence of the flesh. Abraham had nowhere that was his own. He lived in God’s land only by the sufferance of pagans. Yet the Word of the Lord in our text was, “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3). How do those things go together?

Human reason will not support this faith and confidence. What reason sees drives it to despair of God’s goodness and blessing. It sees sin and weakness. We see broken marriages, children born out of wedlock, and all manner of rebellion against God’s order. We see a weak and suffering ministry. We know how the great people in the world live. It’s reasonable. They have a big house, car, and beautiful clothes. They live behind high walls. They appear to be blessed by God. Surely they’re blessed if they have all these possessions! What makes us think we have the blessing of God? We have neither power, nor the deed to it. But this is exactly why we must trust in God. All he gave to Abraham was a word. Not riches, not a land, not a deed to the promised property, not even hope. So he against hope believed and had hope.

Much that we believe must be believed against hope. Why should God dwell here in our humble church? He who created heaven and earth and all that is in it has neither deed, legal right, nor the trappings of power. Why should our pastor have the authority to forgive sins in Holy Absolution or to give us the Supper of the Lord so that in our mouths we receive the body and blood of Christ? Do we have a man giving him permission? Can we show that he has human authority to preach, teach, and forgive sins? Does he really have the deed to the church’s riches? His authority is not from man, but from God. Abraham believed “as he had been told” (Rom 4:18), because it was the Word of the Lord that had spoken to him. The voice of God’s promise assures that we are blessed and a blessing to the nations, through the Seed given to Abraham, even Jesus Christ, our Lord.

But you may say, “Ah, that was all for the great man, Abraham. We don’t have the status of someone so exalted. We cannot attain to this status. We would never have those
who live behind the walls and drive the fine cars come to our home and eat with us and share the hospitality of our table. How could we expect God to commune here at our table with us in this humble, earthly house built by human hands, as beautiful as it may be? Yet, like Abraham, our Lord Jesus Christ lived a landless existence. He tells us he has no place to lay his head. But he in his flesh is willing to live here among us. He is willing to give himself to us in the Word and under bread and wine for us Christians to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of sins. His full authority is granted by the promise just as it was to Abraham.

Paul says, “The words ‘it was counted to [Abraham as righteousness]’ were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also” (Rom 4:23–24). God wanted us to know this same thing too. God wants us to know that he is willing to come down into our humble homes and this little church. It was written for us too. God treats us the same as he treated Abraham. Just when reason shows us that all is lost and hopeless, that we are defeated and on the verge of despair, God our Father comes in Christ to show us that he cares for us, and has opened his heart to us. The one who raised Christ from the dead has sent Christ to bear our transgressions and to acquit us of our sins through his resurrection from the dead. All this he did for us. This faith believes that we are at the same table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is the God of the living not the dead. If that is so, Abraham is also part of our faithful community. Just as Abraham against all hope had faith and went forward not seeing, so we, too, by the power of God can have a faith that trusts God to reckon us as righteous before him, although we never see it.

What hope against hope do we have? What is not reckoned to us is our transgressions. The apostle Paul says that our transgressions are handed over to Christ Jesus. Does Christ need our sins, our transgressions for himself? Does he desire to know and feel your wickedness and despair? No, he does not need this for himself. Think of the last time a grown son or daughter fell into great trouble, and had to come and confess to you what they had done. You dreaded to hear it. It hurt your heart to know their foolishness and their suffering. Perhaps it was a teenage daughter who has become pregnant without being married; perhaps it was a son who lost his job through neglect and laziness. Perhaps it was a child who drinks too much or becomes involved with drugs. “Dear God, what must I listen to when they come to tell me what they have done?” It hurts God, too, to see and hear our sins. And so he does not need them for himself. Just as we listen to the hurts and problems of our children, so we have a God who sees and listens to our hurts and problems, our sorrows and sins, our foolishness and wickedness. He listens as only a loving Father can. But he takes on our sin not because he must for his own sake, but for ours. So Isaiah (53:5) says: “He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.” These are the blessings God promised to Abraham, a promise given to all the families of the earth... and given, therefore, to you.

Lent is a time of hope in the midst of hopelessness. Our heavenly Father sent his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, as possessing nothing and yet blessing all nations by giving himself to death for them. He came not to possess the land but to give himself to those who are journeying with him to the cross. With the promised blessings, we are still going on toward our final home. Even though we have no deed for it, we have hope in it, because God has promised, just as he did to Abraham. Our hope is Abraham’s hope. Amen.
Relevant Context

The text is a summary of Romans 1–4, especially 3:21–4:25. With the “therefore” of 5:1 (see below), Paul declares the result of justification by faith: peace with God. Since Christ died for us who were weak, ungodly, and unrighteous, we now stand in grace, a grace that sustains us even in suffering. Apart from God's love in Christ, suffering reveals God's wrath and judgment (2:9), but for those justified by faith, even suffering is sanctified, resulting in hope, which does not put us to shame.

Textual Notes

V 1: οὖν. This verse and the following verses are dependent on what Paul has written up to this point in Romans. The participle δικαιωθέντες is placed first in the sentence for emphasis. The aorist tense conveys how that justification is neither a future event nor an ongoing process but an accomplished reality. The passive voice reflects how justification is something that is bestowed, done to us. And peace is the result of justification. Interestingly, righteousness and peace are often coupled together in the Scriptures (cf Ps 85:10; Is 32:17; 48:18; Rom 14:17).

V 2–4: Through Christ, we rejoice in hope. This hope springs from suffering. For the justified believer, suffering is a gift through which God produces endurance, character, and hope. The result is rejoicing both in hope and in suffering.

V 5: The work of salvation is trinitarian, as the Holy Spirit pours God's love into our hearts. The Holy Spirit abundantly bestows God's love on us, accomplished for us by Christ's death, through the Gospel.

V 6–8: These verses compare and contrast us to and with Jesus Christ. We are weak, ungodly, unrighteous sinners, but Christ, the Righteous One, shows God's love by his death. This is the grace in which we now stand (v 2). Christ's death was not the result of any goodness or righteousness in us, but solely an act of love and mercy.

Word Study

συνίστησιν in verse 8 is rendered in English as “shows” (ESV), “demonstrates” (NIV), or “commendeth” (KJV). The verb is a compound of σύν, “with,” and ἵστημι, “to stand,” but in this context, the verb means “to show, demonstrate” (W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 3rd ed. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999], 972–73). In this case, the showing and demonstrating is done by comparing. In Rom 5:6–8, God's love is revealed when we sinners stand next to Christ and his cross. Paul uses the same word in Rom 3:5 where he contrasts our unrighteousness and Christ's righteousness. Here in Rom 5:1–8, Paul says God's love is revealed when we are next to the cross and compare ourselves to Jesus.

Sermon Outline

Where Do You Stand by Comparison?

I. By comparison to Jesus’ righteousness, you stand in sharp, sinful contrast.

II. But when you stand next to Jesus’ cross, God's love for you is glorious by comparison.

III. So rejoice in where you now stand by comparison to your past.

Sermon

We are always comparing and contrasting. We need something from the store. What's the best product? What's the best value? Our minds are constantly evaluating different ideas, putting them side by side, seeking to determine the better of the two. Although we may not like to admit it, we are always comparing ourselves to others, comparing how we look, where we work, and what we have.

Our text this morning invites us to compare and contrast. In verse 8, we read: “But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” God shows his love, the apostle Paul says, when you stand next to the cross of Christ and you are compared to Jesus. In light of such love,
changes the subject to debate the proper place for worship, but the contrast remains painfully obvious: This woman is in the presence of one sent from God who knows her past and present.

II.

When you are standing next to Jesus, it shows the obvious. It proves who you are—weak, unrighteous, ungodly, a sinner. However, our text today draws a different comparison than you to Jesus. The point of comparison in Rom 5:8 is you to the cross of Christ. When you are placed next to the cross of Jesus, what does it show? What does it reveal? What does it prove? The answer: God's love. "But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (v 8). When the point of comparison is you and the cross of Jesus, God's love for you is revealed, proven, and demonstrated. Listen to this glorious contrast and comparison: "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (vv 6–8).

God's Word invites you to make another comparison: Who would need to be standing next to you for you to say, "My life for his." "Put me to death so she can live." You might offer your life to save the life of a family member. Possibly if it was a child you might be more inclined to give the ultimate sacrifice. The reality is, very few would give their lives to save another. Paul writes that someone might do this for a righteous or a good person, but laying down your life for one who's ungodly, unrighteous, a sinner? That's unheard of! Except on Good Friday. There's Jesus, your Savior, and there you are standing with him, with all your sin, your evil desires, your ungodly words, your unrighteous deeds. And Jesus says, "My life for yours. I will endure the punishment you rightly deserve for your sin. I am your Good Shepherd, and I will willingly lay down my life for you, even though you are a sheep that loves to wander. I will pay the debt of your sin, a debt you could never repay. I, the sinless Son of God, will suffer in sadness, so that you, the sinful child of man, may live in gladness" (cf LSB 439:3–5).

III.

As you stand with Jesus, as he offers his life for yours, God's love is revealed to you. By the death of his Son, God shows, demonstrates, and proves his love for you. Because of Jesus, your standing before God now has changed. Paul writes: "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (Rom 5:1–2, italics added). Since Jesus offered his life for you, in the eyes of God you are no longer unjust but justified, no longer unrighteous but clothed in the righteousness of Christ, no longer a sinner but a saint, no longer an enemy of God because of your sinful rebellion against him and his commands but at peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ. Consider this comparison and rejoice in your present as compared to your past: who you were by nature to who you are now in Christ, what you justly deserved because of your sin compared to what your God in Christ has freely given to you. You were once standing in the muck and mire of your sin, but now you stand in the grace of God.

By Christ's death, your standing before God has changed. You are justified, declared not guilty, through the blood of Jesus. With sin forgiven, you have peace with your Creator. By the faith you have been given, you now stand in God's grace and will remain in God's grace through all eternity, for your hope is a sure and certain hope, firmly founded in God's love shown to you through the death of his Son.

Since your standing before God has changed, even your suffering takes on a whole different purpose. As one justified, your suffering is not God's wrath over your sin. Christ endured God's righteous wrath in your place on the cross. Thus, by God's grace, even the believer's suffering in this fallen world is sanctified. God is at work in all things in your life, including suffering. Romans 5 declares: "Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (vv 3–5). The love of God—shown, proven, and demonstrated for you in the cross of Christ—is now abundantly poured into your heart through the Holy Spirit. It's happening today. You come to this place with your sin, and God's love is poured into your heart: "I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." He says: "Take, eat; this is my body. Take, drink; this is my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins." You come to this place with all your suffering, trials, afflictions, burdens, and cares, and God's love is poured into your heart today to strengthen you, to comfort you, to produce in you endurance, character, and a hope that will never disappoint. Thus, there's even joy in suffering, for you face suffering with the confidence that nothing in all creation will be able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (cf Rom 8:39).

If it were not for the grace of God, you would not be able to stand. But through Jesus, our standing before God has changed. The proof is the cross of Christ. When you're standing next to the cross of Christ, God's love is revealed to you. You, the sinner, are forgiven. You, the one unworthy of love, are loved abundantly, unconditionally, eternally. You, the suffering one, are given peace, endurance, and hope in trial and sorrow. Do not doubt it. Instead, as you stand next
to Jesus, stand next to his cross, God your Father will again and again show, prove, and demonstrate his love for you, for while you were still a sinner, Christ died for you. Amen.

LENT 4, MARCH 22, 2020

Look with the Light

Text: Isaiah 42:14–21
Other Lessons: Psalm 142; Ephesians 5:8–14; John 9:1–41
Sermon Theme: Jesus gives us eyes to look with the light of the world.
Sermon Goal: That the hearers would look at all of life with the world.

Hymns:

- Jesus, Priceless Treasure
- God Loved the World So That He Gave
- Light of Life, O Sole-Begotten
- O God of Light

LSB 743
LSB 571
LSB 914
LSB 836

Rev. Brian T. German, PhD, assistant professor of theology, Concordia University, Mequon, Wisconsin

Liturgical Setting

The Scripture readings appointed for Lent 4 carry forward the season’s general focus on repentance and forgiveness, this week by means of the more specific imagery of sin as darkness-blindness and forgiveness as light-seeing.

The Old Testament Reading is illuminated by the other readings in a number of ways. While the Lord declares through his prophet that all of his people are “trapped in holes and hidden in prisons” (Is 42:22, one verse after the pericope), the Psalm gives the appropriate words to all those caught in that predicament: “Bring me out of prison, that I may give thanks to your name!” (Ps 142:7). Also, just as the appointed psalm includes a plea for God to watch over David’s ways and paths (“When my spirit faints within me, you know my way! In the path where I walk they have hidden a trap for me” [142:3]), so also does the Lord promise through Isaiah, “I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know, in paths that they have not known I will guide them” (Is 42:16). The apostle Paul further articulates this reality for those baptized into Christ, stating in the opening lines of the Epistle, “At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light” (Eph 5:8).

In other words, what God once promised through Isaiah has now been fulfilled in his only-begotten Son. Finally, the Gospel’s account of Jesus healing a man born blind provides a relatively lengthy and detailed physical account of how our Lord deals with spiritual darkness. In this way, all four readings appointed for Lent 4 revolve around the one who is the light of the world (Jn 9:5).

Relevant Context

The Old Testament Reading from Isaiah follows closely after the first of four “Servant Songs” in the book, or four poems that describe the person and work of “the servant of the Lord.” Each of these songs is followed by a response of some kind, and, while the exact boundaries of each song and its respective response vary somewhat in modern commentaries, one delineation is the following:

- First Servant Song: Is 42:1–9 (response: 10–13)
- Second Servant Song: Is 49:1–7 (response: 8–13)
- Third Servant Song: Is 50:4–9 (response: 10–11)
- Fourth Servant Song: Is 52:13–53:12 (response: ch 54)

The reading from Isaiah for this day, then, occurs right after the response to the First Servant Song. This is significant.

The First Servant Song introduced us to the Lord’s servant as one who will be “a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness” (Is 42:6–7). After a response of praise to the Lord for his work through his servant (42:10–13), our Old Testament Reading includes the following jarring contrast: “Hear, you deaf, and look, you blind, that you may see! Who is blind but my servant, or deaf as my messenger whom I send? Who is blind as my dedicated one, or blind as the servant of the Lord?” (42:18–19). Because of this manifest blindness, it is the Lord himself who will “lead the blind in a way that they do not know. . . . I will turn the darkness before them into light. . . . These are the things I do, and I do not forsake them” (42:16). While the First Servant Song in Isaiah thus depicted an idealized Israel—a perfect Israel that could only be fulfilled in Christ (see Is 42:1–4 quoted in Mt 12:18–21 in reference to Jesus)—the text for today focuses on the reality that Israel has become a blind and deaf servant (cf Is 6:10; 43:8).

Textual Notes

V 14: “For a long time” the Lord has not only “held [his] peace” (шуח, literally, “I have been silent”) but has also “kept still” (שוחק) and “restrained” (私も) himself. These three terms collectively emphasize divine forbearance over sin (cf Rom 3:25); God is patient and merciful. The time has now come, however, for the Lord to “cry out” (מע), “gasp” (תחם), and “pant” (איש) “like a woman in labor,” three more terms that collectively emphasize divine wrath over sin. God is just and will deal with sin accordingly. Indeed, the vocabulary and imagery of childbirth evokes one of the most excruciating human experiences; God is no robot but is affected by sin in profound ways. At the same time, this imagery also implies that God’s people are on the verge of receiving new life, or a rebirth of sorts that is entirely beyond their doing.
V 15: God’s wrath over sin is not simply a spiritual, other-worldly phenomenon but affects all of creation. The imagery in this verse moves from the greater to the lesser (that is, from “mountains” to “hills” to “vegetation,” from “rivers” to “pools”) and recalls the preparations announced in Is 40:3–5 for making ready the way of the Lord (see especially v 4: “every mountain and hill be made low”). Seen in this light, it is the Lord himself who is handling the arrangements necessary for his own visitation.

V 16: The blindness motif is introduced here in the text and will be repeated several times later, especially in verses 18–19. Note how the focus of this verse begins on the “way” (דֶּרֶך) and the “paths” (תֶּחְוָיִים) on which Yahweh will “lead” (נֵלְכֹת) the blind before there is any word of sight being restored, which soon follows (“I will turn the darkness before them into light”). It is not the case, then, that Yahweh first restores the sight of his people so they can see various paths and make a decision for Yahweh’s way. It is rather that while his people were still blind, Yahweh acted on their behalf (cf Rom 5:8). For Yahweh himself to turn “rough places into level ground” is, as in the previous verse, another indication of how he himself handles the preparatory work necessary for his own drawing near (see Is 40:4: “The uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain”). Indeed, in addition to the several first-person singular verbs in this verse is Yahweh’s summative statement: “These are the things I do.” Finally, that Yahweh does not “forsake” (לָכֵת) his people is to declare his faithfulness by negating the same term that is typically used to depict covenantal unfaithfulness, thereby sharpening the contrast: while the people have often forsaken Yahweh, Yahweh will not do the same to his people.

V 17: The blindness of the previous verse is now related quite explicitly to idolatry. The ones “who trust in carved idols” and “who say to metal images, ‘You are our gods!’” are both “turned back” (תֵּבַע וַתַּחְוָיִם), two words that emphasize a dramatic turning around, and “utterly put to shame” (הָעִוְר לְשֹּׁחַם), two words that emphasize tremendous shame. Recall also how idols are described elsewhere as having “eyes, but do not see,” and how “those who make them become like them” (see Pss 115:4–8; 135:15–18).

V 18: The irony of telling “deaf [ones]” (חָרִישׁים) to “hear” and “blind [ones]” (עָרֵים) to “look” “that [they] may see” is, of course, quite startling. It should be remembered, however, that it is the very speaking of Yahweh that calls into existence the things that do not exist (Rom 4:17).

V 19: The blindness mentioned in verse 16 is further specified here as blindness that characterizes Yahweh’s own “servant” (repeated twice), “messenger,” and “dedicated one” (לָכֵת לְשֹּׁחַם). While “deafness” (חָרִישׁים) is now also included, it is “blindness” (עָרֵים) that is mentioned three times as much. The reader is left pondering: How effective is a servant who cannot see the task, and a messenger who cannot hear the message?

V 20: The nature of the blindness at work in Yahweh’s servant is now becoming even clearer: he does indeed see much (יָרֵד), but he fails to “observe” (רָאָשׁ, “watch, keep, observe”); he does indeed have open ears, “but he does not hear.” Far beyond mere physical disabilities, the Lord’s servant refuses to appropriate both the deeds and the words of his Lord. This recalls the first thing Isaiah was commissioned to speak to God’s people: “Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive” (Is 6:9).

V 21: While the preceding verses depicted Yahweh as speaking to his people, the shift to third-person speech in this verse may serve as further emphasis on the refusal of Yahweh’s people to hear what he has to say. The Lord’s “righteousness” (צֶדֶק) mentioned here is not some sort of abstract concept but receives content in Yahweh’s decision to “magnify” (וֹדֵעַ) and “glorify” (דֶּרֶך) his Torah in the midst of a people who reject it. Even as the Lord is profoundly agitated by sin (v 14), he is all the while “pleased” (נָשָׁה) when his words go forth among a rebellious people whose lives depend on them.

Sermon Outline

Introduction: When I visited Israel several years ago, our tour guide told our group that after decades of leading tours, one of the most repeated reasons he heard for people wanting to return to Israel for a second visit was “to see it without the camera lens.” Many new tourists, it turns out, were so captivated at seeing the Holy Land for the first time that they ended up taking too many pictures; by the end of the visit, they felt they’d spent far too much time behind the lens of the camera. Many of them therefore wanted to come back and see everything all over again, only this time they wanted to take it all in as it really looks.

In our text today, God’s people have been seeing things only through their own lens—missing what God had wanted them to see. The only correction for that is Christ, and Jesus Gives Us Eyes to Look with the Light of the World.

I. God’s people have been looking at things all wrong!
   A. We were conceived in sin and born into the darkness of this world.
      1. Our eyes do not work the way they should (physical blindness, deterioration with age).
      2. We have the desire to look at things we shouldn’t (pornography, other examples).
      3. We are not able to see the things of God for what they truly are.
         a. Water, bread, and wine.
         b. Suffering (the disciples’ mistake, Jn 9:1–2).
      4. All of this wrongful seeing stems from idolatry (Is 42:17).
B. God is deeply affected by our looking at things the wrong way.
   1. He has been holding his peace and restraining himself “for a long time” (v 14).
   2. He is now like a woman in labor, crying out, gasping, and panting (v 14).
      a. God is profoundly affected by our sin.
      b. But this also pictures a new life for his people about to emerge.
   3. He is making ready the way for his own visitation (lowering the high places, for example, v 15).

C. God’s people were intended to look at things in a much better way.
   1. Isaiah reiterates the special status of Israel as “the servant of the Lord.” God’s chosen people were called to be a blessing for all nations (Gen 12:1–3).
   2. But the ideal servant of Is 42:1–4 has turned into the blind servant of our text (v 19).
   3. The blind servant is us!
      a. Our eyes see our Lord’s deeds (in creation, in his Word), but we do not pay attention to them as we should.
      b. Our ears hear our Lord’s words, but we do not observe them as we should.

II. God himself restores the way we see things.
   A. It begins with a call to repentance (v 18).
      1. Before we can truly see, we must first admit that we can’t see (Confession).
      2. In today’s Gospel, the blind man admits his ignorance several times, while the Pharisees keep talking about how much they know. The blind man ends up seeing more and more clearly, while the Pharisees, who more than anyone else at the time should have been “seeing,” become blinder and blinder.
      3. “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind” (Jn 9:39).
   B. It continues with absolution through God’s Word and Sacraments.
      1. “Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:3). When our old selves are put to death, a new person—with new and improved vision—arises out of the water to which he sends us. (Note how “Siloam” in Jn 9:7 means “sent” or “sent one.”)
      2. This giving of spiritual sight is entirely the Lord’s work (Is 42:16).
      3. He will continue to lead, guide, and be with us (v 16).

III. God calls his people to look with the light of the world.
   A. Return again and again to the font of the “Sent One,” and you’ll see things with the Light of the world, the Light that makes all the difference in the world.
   B. The ones who are truly blind are the ones who see things only with earthly eyes.
   C. The light of the world changes how we look at things.
      1. Baptism is more than simple water.
      2. The Lord’s Supper is more than simple bread and wine.
      3. Suffering is not simply punishment.
         a. It may be to display the works of God (Jn 9:3).
         b. The theology of the cross means seeing our Lord hidden under the opposite.
      4. The cross is the greatest glory. Recall how darkness was over the land when the one who is the light of the world hung on the cross!

D. The light of the world is a daily lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Is 42:21; Psalm 119:105).

Conclusion: Whatever it is that weighs most heavily on your heart right now, look at it with the light of the world. This is a light that shines in the midst of family troubles, a light that depression can’t touch, and a light that your own doubts can’t put out. Whatever comes your way, see it through this lens first. There’s no darker place you can go where this light is not there before you. You have the light that nothing whatsoever—not even your own death—can overcome. And as much as the world, in the darkness of its blindness, wants to put it out, it still hasn’t, and it never will. Amen.

LENT 5, MARCH 29, 2020

Take a Breather

Text: Ezekiel 37:1–14
Other Lessons: Psalm 130; Romans 8:1–11; John 11:1–45 (46–53)
Sermon Theme: Jesus gives us the breath of resurrected life.
Sermon Goal: That the hearer would receive the resurrected life that comes only from Jesus.

Hymns:
My Song Is Love Unknown LSB 430
Savior, When in Dust to Thee LSB 419
Jesus, Refuge of the Weary LSB 423
Go to Dark Gethsemane LSB 436

Rev. Brian T. German, PhD, assistant professor of theology, Concordia University, Mequon, Wisconsin

Liturgical Setting

The Scripture readings for Lent 5 prepare us in marvelous ways for the central focus of Holy Week and the entire Christian faith: Christ’s death and resurrection.

The appointed Psalm places us in the right posture for confessing this central proclamation: “Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD” (Ps 130:1), a reality greatly enhanced when
contemplating the bones and graves mentioned in the Old Testament Reading. Just as the Lord’s word is emphasized in Ezekiel 37 as that which brings life out of death, so also does Psalm 130 express hope in the same: “I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope” (130:5). While the psalmist ends on a note of confidence that the LORD will indeed redeem Israel (130:7–8), Ezekiel receives one of the most remarkable visions of what exactly that means.

With much talk of both physical and spiritual death, life, and the role of the Spirit, the apostle Paul in the Epistle (Rom 8:1–11) is practically writing a commentary on the Ezekiel text from the perspective of Christ’s resurrection. Verse 11 illustrates this quite nicely: “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.” Finally, the raising of Lazarus in the Gospel provides not only a powerful display of how our Lord triumphs over death but also a foreshadowing of what will soon happen to him (note the many similarities between the two: “tomb,” “stone,” “linen,” “face cloth,” “weeping”) and to all those who live and believe in him (Jn 11:26).

**Relevant Context**

In a book loaded with judgment against both Israel and the surrounding nations, it is noteworthy that the Old Testament Reading for Lent 5 occurs in a context of several earlier promises of restoration. For example, the Lord himself will shepherd his people (Ezk 34:11–24), he will make a covenant of peace with them (34:25–31), and he will bring them home and make them prosperous (36:8–15, 22–38). Seen in this light, the reading from Ezekiel 37 for this day is rightly understood as a culmination of prior prophecies of renewal and, in turn, puts all of them in proper perspective (for example, that regaining the physical Promised Land was never the end of the story).

Specific mention should be made of the Spirit, whose role in the previous chapter was described as follows: “I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (36:26–27). While the Spirit here is given anew to bring about a heart animated by Yahweh’s words, the Old Testament Reading fleshes this out by beginning and ending with the Spirit for the ultimate purpose of bodily resurrection (37:1, 14).

**Textual Notes**

**V 1:** Yahweh not only puts his hand “upon” (יָדָֽעְתָ) you, but also brings him out and sets him down, all emphasizing how thoroughly the former is orchestrating the movements of the latter. For Ezekiel to be “set down” (יָנִיחֵנִי, literally, “caused to rest”) implies that he was in some sense first lifted up before being placed “in the middle” (בַּמִּקְוָה) of the lowest part of the region (“the valley”). To put it another way, Ezekiel is first made to descend into the depths of death (“it was full of bones”) before he experiences life being raised up.

**V 2:** Already in the midst of the bones, Ezekiel is now “led around among them” (יָרָדְשֵׁנִן) forced to see both their quantity (“very many”) and their quality (“very dry”). The “surface of the valley” (שְׁלֵמה הַנְּפָר) would be the lowest point of this already lowest place. God is still certainly guiding his prophet, but further and further into the poignancy of death. (Note also Ezekiel’s repeated “behold.”)

**V 3:** God continues moving this vivid experience forward by initiating a conversation with his prophet, posing a question to Ezekiel that prompts him to consider the reality of death even further: “Can these bones live?” Ezekiel’s response is emphatic—“you [yourself] know” (אַתָֽה יָדָֽעְתָ) and implies his recognition of a condition that is completely beyond human recoverability.

**V 4:** Rather than a snap of the fingers, Ezekiel is told to “prophesy” and “say” to the bones that they should “hear” the “word” of the Lord, four terms emphasizing speech. This speaking, in addition, is not to be performed just anywhere but is to be done both “over” (עַל) the bones and “to” (לָיָן) them, strengthening the connection between speech and death. For Ezekiel to address the bones exactly as they are (“O dry bones”) is yet another acknowledgment of their lifelessness, calling a thing what it is and not making light of it or sidestepping it in any way.

**V 5:** This verse places even more emphasis on speech (“Thus says the Lord God”) being carried out in connection with death (“to these bones”). While Ezekiel is commanded to do the speaking, Yahweh remains the primary doer (“I will cause breath to enter you”). “Life” for these bones comes from the “breath” (רוּחַ) Yahweh gives, the same word that is also used for the Spirit twice in this account (vv 1, 14). When considering that Ezekiel was first told to speak to these bones, there is thus a strong relationship forming between speech, breath/Spirit, and life.

**V 6:** Four first-person singular verbs continue the emphasis on what Yahweh himself will do to these bones, moving from the inside out (that is, from “sinew” to “flesh” to “skin”) and culminating in “breath” (note how “breath” is now repeated after physical restoration). This activity, Ezekiel is told, will lead to knowledge of the Lord (“You shall know that I am the Lord”), suggesting that essential to the Lord’s identity is his bringing life out of death.

**V 7:** Ezekiel does just as he was commanded (“I prophesied as I was commanded”), moved into action by the same word that will also move the bones into action. That the “sound,” “rattling,” and coming together of the bones happened “as [Ezekiel] prophesied” (כְּהִנָֽבְֹאִי) further strengthens the connection between divine speech and its
effect on death. Again the sequence of events seems significant: speaking (prophesying) and hearing (sound) before seeing (bones coming together).

V 8: Yahweh had promised “sinews,” “flesh,” “skin,” and “breath” in verse 6, but Ezekiel’s first act of prophesying brings about only the first three of these. The body has been restored, but not the רוח (Spirit/breath/wind). The similarities between this account and the two-stage creation of Adam are apparent, indicating that God’s people are as good as nonexistent and in need of re-creation, something that only God, of course, can do.

V 9: God initiates a second conversation with Ezekiel, first instructing him to do just as he did before in verse 4: “prophesy.” This command is not only repeated but also appears in conjunction with “say,” “thus says the Lord,” and several occurrences of הנחשי (“the Spirit/breath/wind”), further solidifying the connection between speaking, breath, Spirit/wind, and life. As Ezekiel earlier addressed the dead (“O dry bones”), now he addresses the source of life (“O breath,” רוח). Note finally how the dead are here referred to as “these slain” (להבהים, literally, “these killed ones”).

V 10: As above in verse 7, Ezekiel speaks just as he was first spoken to, animated once again by the same word that this time brings about life-giving breath. Those once slain stand on their feet and are labeled as a חיל (“army”), perhaps implying an impending battle of some kind. In any case, the breath of life is not given for inactivity. The adverb לָכֵן is repeated twice at the end of the verse to emphasize the sheer size of this re-created group, connoting something like “a very exceedingly great army.”

V 11: While Yahweh’s people have not listened to his words, he has certainly heard theirs. The complaint is ongoing (יָאֹרַח, literally, “they, behold, are saying”), and the last phrase of their cry is emphatic: “we are indeed cut off” (נקצו לָנ, literally, “these killed ones”).

V 12: Yahweh hears a confession of utter death, and “therefore” (לְךָ) issues forth a word of life. Ezekiel is once again commanded to “prophesy” (as he was in vv 4 and 9), and again the focus remains on divine speech (“prophesy,” “say,” “thus says the Lord God”). For the first time in the pericope, there is also talk of “graves” (repeated twice), implying that not even burial and varying degrees of decomposition will prevent Yahweh from resurrecting his people. (Note how he will both “open” [פתת] and “raise” [עלו],)

V 13: This verse associates knowledge of the Lord (cf vv 6) with repeated grave imagery and the repeated ל (‘when’). The Lord will be known “when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves,” thus reiterating in even more dramatic terms the claim in verse 6 that essential to the Lord’s identity is his bringing life out of death.

V 14: In verse 10, “the breath” (רוח) enters for life, and here “my Spirit” (רווח) enters for life. Given that this verse ends with an emphasis on Yahweh’s speech (“I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord”), the whole pericope thus concludes by reiterating the firm connection between speaking, Spirit/breath/wind, and life. Finally, knowledge of the Lord is associated here not only with bringing life out of death (cf vv 6 and 13) but also with the provision of land.

Sermon Outline

Introduction: Every single time we inhale, our diaphragms contract and move downward so that the space in our chest cavity increases. The lungs then expand, air is pulled in, and with help of a fancy protein called hemoglobin, oxygen goes to the blood. While this is all going on, carbon dioxide moves into the lungs and is then forced out when we exhale. The whole thing is pretty amazing, and there are hundreds of more details about this thing we call “breathing” that I left out. Given that the average person takes about 25,000 breaths per day, it’s no wonder that we should check in with our breathing every now and then.

In our text today, God shows the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel a vision that makes quite dramatic how important this simple thing of breathing is; it brings the resurrection of the whole army of Israel! Ezekiel envisions those who were very dead breathing again, physically. But he’s also seeing what breath can mean spiritually—with a definite pun intended there. More on that later. Ultimately, of course, Ezekiel’s vision is a picture of what Jesus does for us:

JESUS GIVES US THE BREATH OF RESURRECTED LIFE.

I. God’s people haven’t been breathing very well!

A. We were born into broken breathing.

1. Our breathing doesn’t work the way that it should (various lung problems).
2. We “inhale” all sorts of things that harm us physically (drugs, too much food, too much sitting).
3. We “inhale” all sorts of things that harm us spiritually (greed for a BMW, a corner office, a better look, a new partner).

B. This kind of breathing has dried us to the core.

1. Israel breathing all the wrong things has resulted in their destruction and captivity in Babylon. God gives Ezekiel a vision of what that means for them spiritually. It’s as if they are breathless, “very dry” bones (see vv 1–2, 11).
2. Ezekiel was forced to take a good look at the situation, just as God’s Law forces us to take a close look at our own condition (Rom 3:20).
3. We have been taking into our nostrils the breath of death: “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off” (Ezek 37:11, emphasis added).
4. On our own, we are deep down in the lowest of low places, lying lifeless in the valley of death.

II. But a breath of fresh air is on the way.
A. It begins with the Word of the Lord (vv 3–4). The Word is living and active (Heb 4:12).
B. And where the Word is, there is also the Spirit (in Hebrew רוח): “Prophecy to the breath [again רוח]; prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath [yes, רוח], Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath [one more time, רוח], and breathe on these slain, that they may live” (Ezek 37:9).

Spirit and breath—it’s the same word. A Hebrew play on words . . . a pun that doesn’t make us groan.

C. Because where the Spirit is, there is life.
1. “I will cause breath [רוּחַ] to enter you, and you shall live” (v 5).
2. “I will put my Spirit [רוּחַ] within you, and you shall live” (v 14).

D. The Word and the Spirit give us back the breath of life that we lost in the fall. Notice, it’s just like the way God created Adam: first he formed him, then he breathed into him the breath of life (Gen 2:7).

III. So now God calls his people to take a breather.

A. Jesus gives us the breath of resurrected life.
1. In the Gospel, Jesus speaks, “Lazarus, come out,” and Lazarus receives a new breath of life.
2. In fact, “an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear [Jesus’] voice and come out” (Jn 5:28–29).
3. The breath that Jesus gives re-creates both soul and body. Remember how very physical the resurrection was that Ezekiel saw (Ezek 37:6–10).
4. The breath that Jesus gives reaches even those in the grave (vv 12–13).

B. This breath of resurrected life happens because Jesus gave up his breath on the cross. Note especially Mt 27:50–53!

C. Now this breath of resurrected life is given in the Divine Service.
1. Every Absolution is a new breath for a new day.
2. Taking in the preached Word both kills false hopes (thus making “slain ones”) and gives life to the dead (Rom 4:17).
3. With this breath in you, God sees you as already raised up with Christ in the heavenly places (Eph 2:6).

D. This is our sure comfort and hope, because “if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you” (Rom 8:11).

Conclusion: Breathing is a big deal, and today God calls us all to receive the breath of resurrected life that comes only from Jesus. So, take a breather! In him is a breath for the weary and heavy-laden, for the crushed in spirit, for the despised and lowly. The breath he gives enters into the deepest dryness of your life and revitalizes who you are beyond all understanding. Yes, in Jesus is a breath of life that extends even beyond the grave, so breathe easy, my friends. Amen.

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**Palm Sunday: Sunday of the Passion, April 5, 2020**

**The Hour Is at Hand**

**Text:** Matthew 26:1–27:66  
**Other Lessons:** Isaiah 50:4–9a; Psalm 118:19–29; Philippians 2:5–11; Processional Gospel: John 12:12–19

**Sermon Theme:** Not only is the hour of Christ’s death the center and focus of the Scriptures and all history, but the hour of Christ’s death is the hour of your salvation.

**Sermon Goal:** That the hearer believe that the ninth hour on Good Friday is the hour of salvation.

**Hymns:**
- Ride On, Ride On in Majesty  
- All Glory, Laud, and Honor  
- No Tramp of Soldiers’ Marching Feet  
- Hosanna, Loud Hosanna

*Rev. Douglas D. Bauman, pastor, St. Paul Lutheran Church, Columbus, Indiana*

**Liturgical Setting**

Palm Sunday is unique in that it is the only Sunday in the Church Year with two appointed Gospels. The Processional Gospel, Jn 12:12–19, records the events of Palm Sunday and is preceded by a collect (LSB Altar Book, 502). Then, after the processional hymn, the Collect of the Day marks a transition in the service from Jesus’ triumphal entry to his passion. By design, the Palm Sunday liturgy contrasts the joy of Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem with the somber remembrance of his death.

With the procession of palms and the reading of the Passion, the sermon may be abbreviated, and other portions of the Service of the Word may be omitted (cf LSB Altar Book, 501). Thus, the sermon outline below is designed to be easily modified in order to be either a full-length sermon or a devotional homily.

The appointed pericopes focus our attention on the Passion. The Old Testament Reading, Is 50:4–9a, is the third of four Servant Songs, all fulfilled in the Messiah. The Third Servant Song reveals that the Lord’s chosen servant is the Suffering Servant, beaten and spit upon. The Suffering Servant is clearly revealed in the Fourth Servant Song, the Old Testament Reading for Good Friday (Is 52:13–53:12). The Palm Sunday Epistle confesses Christ’s humiliation and subsequent exultation, introduced by an imperative: ‘Τοῦτο θεωρεῖτε ἐν ὑμῖν, “Have this mind among yourselves” (Phil 2:5). The Collect of the Day asks that God would give us this mind of Christ, “that we may follow the example of His great humility and patience” (LSB Altar Book, 504).
Relevant Context

The text begins near the end of Tuesday of Holy Week. Jesus has concluded the fifth and final discourse recorded in Matthew’s Gospel on the end times (Matthew 24–25). What follows is what occurs from Tuesday evening through Holy Saturday. The text is framed by actions of the religious leaders, beginning with their plot to kill Jesus (Mt 26:1–5) and concluding when they deploy soldiers to guard and seal the tomb (27:62–66).

Textual Notes

26:2–4: In verse 2, Jesus predicts the day of his death “after two days.” By contrast, the religious leaders, meeting in the palace of the high priest, plan to arrest Jesus and kill him but “not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people” (26:5). The chief priests and elders will not determine the day and hour of Christ’s death, for not only the day but also the hour is according to God’s divine plan, at the ninth hour (3 p.m.) on Good Friday (27:46).

26:16: Judas’s agreement to betray Jesus aligns the evil plans of the religious leaders with the divinely appointed day and hour. Judas is seeking an “opportunity” (εὐκαιρία, literally “good time”) to betray Jesus.

26:18, 45: Jesus declares in 26:18 that his “time” (καιρός) is at hand and in 26:45 that the “hour” (ὥρα) is at hand, further reinforcing that all is according to God’s timing.

27:45–46: These verses mention time twice: the darkness that covers the earth from the sixth to the ninth hour, culminating in Christ’s death. Of the evangelists, Matthew gives the most details of the events that occur at the ninth hour: the tearing of the curtain, the earthquake, the resurrection of saints, and the confession of the centurion (27:51–54).

Word Study

 hôra: At the wedding of Cana, Jesus says to his mother, “My hour has not yet come” (Jn 2:4). In Jn 7:30 and 8:20, the religious leaders desire to arrest Jesus, but are prevented because his hour had not yet come. After his triumphal entry on Palm Sunday, Jesus declares, “the hour might pass from him” (Mt 14:35). As Judas approaches with the religious leaders and soldiers, Jesus declares, “the hour is at hand” (Mt 26:45). After his arrest, Jesus says to the chief priests and elders that it is their hour, the hour of the power of darkness (Lk 22:53).

Matthew, Mark, and Luke give great detail to the hour of Christ’s death. Mk 15:25 records that Jesus is crucified at the third hour, and all three synoptic records describe the darkness from the sixth to the ninth hour when Jesus yields his spirit. The ninth hour is the hour of the evening sacrifice, when the lamb was offered at the temple. Jesus’ death occurs during the Passover feast, giving even greater significance to the day and hour of his death. The evangelists are clear that his death at the ninth hour is no mere coincidence, for he deliberately gives up his spirit at this time.

Sermon Outline

1. ‘ It is the hour when the Lamb was sacrificed for your sin.
2. ‘ It is the hour when your Great High Priest opened the Most Holy Place, the heavenly temple, for you.
3. ‘ It is the hour that prophesies the hour of your resurrection from the dead.

Sermon

When a couple is engaged to be married, countless decisions must be made. Among them are the day and the time of the wedding. First, there’s the day. What day works best for family and friends? What season of the year will make for the picture-perfect wedding? When is the church available? And then there’s the hour. When should the wedding begin? Enough time needs to be allotted for pictures and for guests to go to the reception but not too much time. Once day and time are set, wedding websites actually count down the days, hours, and minutes until the happy occasion.

3.

On this Palm Sunday, we discover that our God is also concerned about time, in particular, not only the day but also the hour of his Son’s death, and rightly so. The hour of Christ’s death is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. When Adam and Eve sinned, God promised a time when the Seed of the woman would crush the serpent’s head. This prophecy was the first of hundreds more to follow through the centuries. The prophets declare who this Promised One will be: the Messiah, the Son of God, the all-powerful King whose kingdom will never end, the faithful servant of the Lord, and yes God himself. The prophets describe what the Coming One will do. Although Lord of all, he is the servant of all. He will proclaim the Gospel, heal the sick, and give sight to the blind. The prophets declare that the king of all comes to save not in power with horse and chariot, but in humility riding on a donkey. He will be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver. He will be despised and rejected, mocked, beaten, spit upon. His hands and feet will be pierced and his clothing divided by casting lots. He will be stricken, smitten, and afflicted as God lays our iniquity and the iniquity of the
entire world upon him. He gives his life as the perfect offering for our sin so that by his wounds we are healed.

2.

However, it wasn’t only the prophets who foretold the hour of Christ’s death. The festivals, the sacrifices, and the temple itself all find their culmination in Christ’s death. The coming of our Savior is the Year of Jubilee, his death the Day of Atonement. He dies at the feast of Passover, for he is our Paschal Lamb. All the blood shed at the temple altar points to the shedding of his blood on the altar of the cross. He is the eternal temple, destroyed only to be rebuilt in three days.

1.

Thus, not only the Old Testament but the entirety of our Lord’s earthly ministry anticipates the hour of his death. Before his first miracle, the changing of water into wine, he announces that his hour has not yet come. There would be times when the religious leaders desire to arrest Jesus and put him to death, but it does not happen because his hour has not yet come. Finally, the chief priests and elders do conspire to put Jesus to death; they plan to do so after the Passover feast. But that isn’t the divinely appointed hour either, for the Lamb of God is not to be sacrificed after the feast but during Passover. So after earnestly praying in the Garden of Gethsemane that, if it was his Father’s will, he be saved from this hour, Jesus then declares to his disciples: “See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners” (Mt 26:45). Now it is God’s time, the hour.

The entire Old Testament, all of human history, centers on the hour, the ninth hour on Good Friday, three in the afternoon, when Jesus died. His death was preceded by three hours of eerie and unexplainable darkness, a sign of God’s judgment and wrath over sin. Then at the ninth hour, the hour when the lamb was slaughtered at the temple, when all that was prophesied was fulfilled, Jesus yielded up his spirit. No one took his life from him, but he gave up his life of his own accord, at that time, at that hour.

The death of Jesus at the ninth hour on Good Friday fulfills prophecy and is the climax of our Lord’s earthly ministry. This event was the culmination of history. But,

**Not Only Is the Hour of Christ’s Death the Center and Focus of the Scriptures and All History, but the Hour of Christ’s Death Is the Hour of Your Salvation.**

1.

At that hour, the Lamb of God shed his blood and offered his life as the sacrifice for your sin. Your perfect Passover lamb has been sacrificed. All your iniquities were placed on him. Good Friday is your day of atonement as Christ offered himself as your substitute. The mob at Jesus’ trial shouted, “His blood be on us and on our children!” (Mt 27:25). They spoke in derision. You speak in faith, “His blood be on us and on our children,” for the blood of Jesus cleanses you from all sin. The blood of the Lamb is the means by which your sin-stained clothes are washed and made white. His blood is not only on you but in you, as during this hour you receive his body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins.

2.

The hour of Christ’s death is the hour of your salvation. When Jesus died, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, top to bottom. The hour of his death not only reveals that he is the perfect Lamb but also your Great High Priest, who has offered the atoning sacrifice for your sin. With that all-availing sacrifice, there is no curtain of separation. The way to the Father has been opened for you through the flesh of Jesus. Your sin no longer separates you from your Creator. Instead, you have access to the Most Holy Place, the heavenly temple, where you will dwell in the presence of God for all eternity.

3.

The hour of Christ’s death is the hour of your salvation. When Jesus died, there was an earthquake, and in that hour, the bodies of many believers were raised from the dead. As the centurion witnessed these events unfold, he confessed, “Truly this was the Son of God” (Mt 27:54). This will not be the only earthquake with the subsequent opening of tombs. On the third day, at an early hour, there will be yet another earthquake, and the angel of the Lord will roll back the stone from the tomb where Jesus was placed. The saints that were raised from the dead on Good Friday point ahead to Christ’s resurrection and to your resurrection on the Last Day. As Jesus declares, “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. . . . Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out” (Jn 5:25, 28–29, emphasis added). The believers raised from the dead on Good Friday reveal the purpose of our Lord’s death: to save those who were condemned to die eternally. Since he died and rose again, an hour is coming when your body will be raised from death and you will enter with him into the life that never ends.

The hour of Christ’s death is no coincidence. The very hour, the very moment of his death was planned from eternity. This is good news for you because the hour of Christ’s death is the hour of your salvation.

The hour we commemorate Jesus’ death is at hand. He enters Jerusalem on the donkey’s colt, his eyes fixed on the cross. In the coming days, we walk the way of sorrows with him to the very hour of his death, confident that the moment he yields up his spirit is the hour of our salvation. Amen.

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Everyone Who Believes

Text: Acts 10:34–43

Other Lessons: Psalm 16; Colossians 3:1–4; Matthew 28:1–10

Sermon Theme: Everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name!

Sermon Goal: That the hearers would more deeply trust their forgiveness of sins through his name!

Hymns:
Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands
O Love, How Deep
Christ Has Arisen, Alleluia
At the Lamb's High Feast We Sing

Text:

The profound nature of Peter’s experience is shown at the Jerusalem council, where Peter hearkens back to the events of Acts 10 to argue for the full inclusion of Gentiles into the life of the Early Church.

Textual Notes

V 34: One of the key phrases in this text occurs in its opening verse: νόμος ἐστιν προσωπολήμμης ὁ θεός, “God is not a respecter of persons” (my translation). While this is the only New Testament usage of the noun προσωπολήμμης, the concept behind it is common in both the Old and New Testaments. Deut 10:17 teaches that God is an impartial judge who cannot be corrupted, and later in Deut 16:19, the judges of the tribes of Israel are to reflect that same impartiality and are not to be blinded by taking bribes. Tucked away in the prophecy of Amos is a reminder that Israel was not the only people to experience God’s guiding. God brought the Israelites out of Egypt, but also the Philistines from Caphtor (Amos 9:7). In the New Testament, the same basic points are reinforced. Three times in his letters, Paul reminds that God does not play favorites (Rom 2:10; Eph 6:9; Col 3:25). Jesus is the embodiment of God’s impartiality, as even his opponents realize (Mk 12:14; Mt 22:16; Lk 20:21). The Church is warned that it is a serious sin to show favoritism. James specifically mentions partiality based on riches (James 2:2–4), but a few verses later the warning is broadened against any playing of favorites (2:9).

Within the specific focus of Easter Sunday, keep in mind the scriptural teaching of the universality of death and resurrection. “For as by a man came death, by a man has come also resurrection from the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor 15:21–22). Because of sin, all will die; because of Christ all will rise from death. Not all will rise to salvation, but all will rise!

V 36: Peter repeats the universality of God’s revelation as he continues his sermon. Though τὸν λόγον was sent to Israel, word has spread, beginning with what Christ did in Galilee at his Baptism, and has now reached Caesarea. While this particular Caesarea was likely about thirty miles north of Joppa, it is perhaps helpful to remember Caesarea was a popular city name in the empire and is perhaps symbolic not just of that particular town, but all of the places where Caesar was lord.

Vv 39–40: One of the striking features of Peter’s sermon is the brevity with which he describes the climax of salvation history. “They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear.” Many scholars note that a key feature of Luke’s writing, in both his Gospel and the Book of Acts, is that God’s actions are emphasized. Here Peter’s statement notes God’s work in contrast to the work of the people of Jerusalem. They hung
Christ on the tree, but God raised him. Short, simple, straight to the point!

V 41: Peter is quick to remove the possibility of doubt from the mind of the hearer. He describes himself and the other apostles as μάρτυρες (witnesses) who ate and drank with Jesus. The reference to eating and drinking surely calls to mind the events of Easter evening as described by Luke where Jesus appears among the disciples and eats a piece of broiled fish to show he is not a ghost (Lk 24:41–43). However, within the context of Luke-Acts, where table fellowship plays an important role in the narrative and within the specific context of Peter’s vision and the meeting with Cornelius, it seems likely that this is more than just a remembering of Jesus’ proof he was not a ghost. When Peter returns to Jerusalem, his visit with Cornelius is criticized because he went to uncircumcised men and ate with them (Acts 11:3). What Peter experienced in Caesarea was yet another manifestation of Jesus’ own expansive table fellowship. Just as Jesus welcomed sinners to his table and ate with them, so now the Gentiles are brought to the table to share not just a meal, but also in the recognition of Jesus that happens in the “breaking of the bread” (Lk 24:35)

V 43: Peter’s sermon closes with another reminder of the universality of God’s saving work in Christ. All the prophets bear witness to the reality that whoever believes in Christ receives forgiveness of sins through his name. While the fullness of the Easter experience awaits that day when Christ shall come to judge the living and the dead and the resurrection of the body occurs, the new life of Easter is not just for some day in the future. Instead, it is a here-and-now reality as we live out our baptismal connection to the death and resurrection of Christ and receive by faith the full, free forgiveness of sins in Christ. God is not a respecter of persons; male, female, Jew, Gentile, all are welcomed to the table and all share in the forgiveness shown for us at the empty tomb and in the risen Christ!

Sermon Outline

4. The wall had long separated Jews and Gentiles.
3. The earthquake announced that Christ had taken the curse of the wall.
2. The aftershocks continue to topple walls between God and all people.
1. Everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name!

Sermon

A 1914 Robert Frost poem describes a wall separating two neighbors’ properties. The neighbors talk as they walk along the stone fence-line. It’s the spring of the year, and, as they do every spring, together they mend the various places where frost, hunters, and other things have broken the wall.

In some places, not one stone is left on another. As they go about their work, one neighbor wonders to the other if the wall really is of any value. One neighbor grows pine trees; the other has an apple orchard. Neither has any livestock that needs to be kept in, nor have they any great need to keep intruders out. Yet year after year, they rebuild the wall because, as many people have observed, a wall between properties keeps just the right peace and harmony between neighbors. Or so people assume.

4.

So it is in this world. Fences and walls are almost everywhere. From the Great Wall of China to the little picket fence surrounding a vegetable garden, walls are ubiquitous. Our First Reading this Easter Sunday is a reading about a fence that existed for a very long time—the wall separating the people of Israel from the people of all the other nations on the earth. While this was not a physical wall, it was nonetheless very real. Like a lot of walls, it was first built with a good purpose. God wanted his people to be a nation separate from all the other nations. They were not to worship the gods of the nations, not to follow their ways, not even to marry outside the people of Israel.

The apostle Peter was a man who knew that wall very well. He knew what side of the wall he was to be on, and like one of the neighbors in the poem, Peter probably would have thought that the wall kept everyone’s relationship at just the right distance. But one day he learned the wall had outlived its usefulness.

3.

One day Peter received a perplexing vision. On a white sheet lowered from the heavens he saw all kinds of animals and birds. These were animals and birds he was not to eat, animals and birds from the other side of the fence, so to speak. Gentiles might eat these animals and birds, but no self-respecting Jew would even want to touch most of them. Then three times he was told, “Rise, kill and eat.” Three times he protested, “By no means!” No way would he mingle with things on the other side of the fence; they were unclean! But three times he heard, “What God has made clean, do not call common” (Acts 10:15).

As Peter contemplated what this vision might mean, there came a knock at the door. There were some Gentile visitors at the door with a request. Would Peter go with them to meet a whole gathering of Gentiles? The Holy Spirit instructed him to go without hesitation. And with that, Peter found himself on his way to the home of a Roman centurion in Caesarea, a man named Cornelius, a Roman, a Gentile, a man from the other side of the wall!

When Peter arrived at this Gentile home, the puzzle began to be solved! He opened his mouth and said, “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation...
anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. . . . He is Lord of all” (vv 34–36). It turns out God loves the people on both sides of the wall. It turns out that while God had created the wall between Jews and Gentiles, God did not love the wall. And so, more than frost or hunters or anything else, God once and for all shook things up to break down that wall.

2.

The shake ‘em up that broke down the fence between Jew and Gentile began on a Sunday morning at a tomb on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Mary Magdalene and another woman named Mary went to the tomb where Jesus of Nazareth had been laid to rest following his crucifixion three days before. As they arrived, behold, there was a great earthquake, an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and the heavy stone that walled off the tomb from the rest of the world was rolled away.

Peter’s reflection on those three days is short and to the point! “They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear” (vv 39–40).

Moses taught, “A hanged man is cursed by God” (Deut 21:23). But Jesus deserved no curse. Instead, as Peter proclaimed a bit earlier in his sermon, “He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him” (v 38). Yet despite all the good Jesus had done, there were many who were threatened by Jesus. He often acted as if there was no wall between Jews and Gentiles, between sinners and holy people, between insiders and outsiders. This was dangerous. The leaders of the people feared that if he had too many followers, it might provoke the Romans to come to Jerusalem and tear down the city walls and destroy all who were inside. So, they put Jesus to death, by hanging him on a tree.

They put him under their curse, but their curse wasn’t all that important. The real curse that was upon him as he hung on the tree of the cross was the curse upon all humanity, a curse going back to the day when our first parents were expelled from the Garden of Eden for their sin and a cherubim with a flaming sword prevented them or any of their descendants from returning to the tree of life in the midst of paradise. God put in place that living, angelic wall as a sign of his justice. But the wall was never meant to be permanent. God put the wall there, but God did not love the wall. So, God put all the curse of that wall on his Son, hanging him on a tree outside Jerusalem on a bleak and dark Friday. For a time, the Son of God would even be walled off from the Father, forsaken so that the gates of hell might never prevail against God’s people.

Today on Easter, beginning with the earthquake in the garden, the walls start coming down! “They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day” (vv 39–40). God raised the Son he had cursed, and with that the wall of the grave crumbled. Death no longer has the last word; the grave is no longer permanent. God raised Jesus, and now all who live and believe in him will rise, for he is the resurrection and the life. In your Baptism, you crossed over from death to life. Your sins were drowned in that water, and you rose to new life as a child of God. You went from death to life.

1.

The aftershocks of that first Easter earthquake continue to topple walls. The wall between God and people symbolized by the angel with the fiery sword outside the Garden of Eden has begun to fall. To be sure, we are not yet in paradise and able to eat freely of the tree of life, but already, like Peter and the other disciples, we are able to eat and drink with the risen Christ. Not only does he share our food as he did on that first Easter evening when he took broiled fish and ate it to show he was no ghost, but also we recognize him in the breaking of the bread. We are invited to his table to feast upon his body and his blood shed for the forgiveness of our sin. We share the feast of victory over sin, death, and Satan as a foretaste of that day when we will eat again from the tree of life in the midst of paradise.

And this isn’t just for a select few, a people walled off from the rest of the world. No, as Peter proclaims about Jesus, “To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (v 43). Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins in his name. Everyone. There is no wall so strong, so high, so impenetrable that survives.

The most sacred wall in all of Judaism was the wall in the temple that sealed off the Most Holy Place. The wall was of thick fabric. No one could pass through that wall, except the high priest, and he could only pass through once a year on the Day of Atonement. But on Good Friday, as Jesus breathed his last, that temple curtain wall was torn in two. Christ made the greatest sacrifice, with his own blood, and with that, everything changed. No longer does a priest offer the atoning sacrifice for our sin. The blood of Christ covers our sin, and God freely forgives you, me, and everyone who believes in Christ.

Someone knew better than to think there had to be a wall, and that someone is our God, who shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and who does what is right is acceptable to him! And the earthquake that broke open the tomb that first Easter morning is still breaking down walls. Walls of guilt, walls of addiction, walls of illness, walls of death, walls of culture and class, walls that hem us in, and walls that would keep us out!

**EVERYONE WHO BELIEVES IN JESUS RECEIVES FORGiveness OF SINs through HIS Name!**
Everyone—even you!

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

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**EASTER 2, APRIL 19, 2020**

**The Voice of Peace**

**Text:** John 20:19-31

**Other Lessons:** Acts 5:29-42; Psalm 148; 1 Peter 1:3-9

**Sermon Theme:** The risen Lord Jesus comes to you and to me to speak his peace into our hearts so that we may speak that peace to the world.

**Sermon Goal:** That the hearer trusts the power of God’s Word to bring forgiveness and peace.

**Hymns:**

- O Sons and Daughters of the King (LSB 470/471)
- These Things Did Thomas Count as Real (LSB 472)
- Good Christian Friends, Rejoice and Sing (LSB 475)
- Alleluia! Jesus Is Risen (LSB 474)

Rev. Nolan Astley, senior pastor,
Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Kitchener, Ontario, Canada

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**Liturical Setting**

One of the challenges of preaching on the Second Sunday of Easter is that the *Gospel* is the same in all three years of the common lectionary and indeed also in the one-year historic lectionary. There is no getting around Jn 20:19–31. However, the Holy Spirit in his wisdom inspired St. John to record three separate focal points in these twelve verses. Jn 20:19–23 focuses upon the Easter evening appearance of Jesus to ten of his disciples in the Upper Room. Verses 24–29 focus on events a week later when Jesus appears to the disciples a second time, this time with Thomas in attendance. The final two verses provide a commentary by the evangelist as to the reason Scripture is recorded—namely, that we may believe and by believing have life. The particular focus of this study will be upon the Easter evening appearance as Jesus brings peace to the disciples and sends them into the world to speak his word of forgiveness. The final verses of the text bring these words of peace and commission forward to our time.

**Textual Notes**

V 19: This describes the church at its worst: behind locked doors and very afraid. What is amazing is how Jesus deals with fear-filled disciples. Rather than leaving them to their fear or even coming to them to administer a well-deserved tongue-lashing for their failures over the past few days, Jesus comes and stands in the midst of them and speaks peace to them. The greeting, “Peace be with you” (εἰρήνη ὑμῖν), is on one level a common greeting between Jewish people of the time. But it is never just a greeting! The New Testament understanding of peace draws heavily on the Old Testament understanding of שalom. This understanding of peace includes “the good which comes from God, both in this age and in the age of salvation. It is characteristic of OT piety that the term can signify this divinely given good in any sphere of life” (W. Foerster, “εἰρήνη, εἰρηνεύω, εἰρηνικός, εἰρηνοποίος,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 2 [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964], 408).

Consider that by using the greeting of peace, Jesus is like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, who, before his wayward son says a word to him, embraces that son and restores him to the family.

V 20: To appear suddenly in the midst of the disciples in a room where the doors are locked requires a body that is not confined to the laws of nature. However, Jesus is quick to point out that his post-resurrection body is still a tangible human body. He invites the disciples to see the wounds in his hands. A week later, Jesus will encourage Thomas to stick his fingers into the wounds and believe. Not only does Jesus offer living proof of the resurrection, but he also teaches us about our own resurrection bodies.

Vv 21–23: Melanchthon’s words in the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope about these verses are important: “These words show that the Keys are given to all the apostles alike and that all the apostles are sent forth alike. In addition, it must be recognized that the Keys belong not to the person of one particular man, but to the Church” (Tr 23–24). What is explicitly given to the apostles is also implicitly given to the whole Church. The mission of the Church (pastors and people) is to bring Christ’s forgiveness to people in such a way that they, too, believe in the risen Lord. While pastors forgive or retain sins publicly, on behalf of the congregation, the people of Christ are also called to “forgive each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Col 3:13).

Vv 24–29: What Jesus commissioned the disciples to do, he now demonstrates for them as he graciously ministers love and forgiveness to Thomas, who is reluctant to believe in the resurrection unless he is able to touch and see the risen Lord. This understanding of peace includes “the good which comes from God, both in this age and in the age of salvation. It is characteristic of OT piety that the term can signify this divinely given good in any sphere of life” (W. Foerster, “εἰρήνη, εἰρηνεύω, εἰρηνικός, εἰρηνοποίος,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 2 [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964], 408).

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gives us the account of our Lord’s life, death, and resurrection, but also is the Scripture written that “you may believe.”

Sermon Outline

THE RISEN LORD JESUS COMES TO YOU AND TO ME TO SPEAK HIS PEACE INTO OUR HEARTS SO THAT WE MAY SPEAK THAT PEACE TO THE WORLD.

I. Jesus speaks peace to his disciples in the Upper Room.
   II. Jesus speaks peace to his disciples today.
   III. Jesus speaks peace to the world through our voices.

Sermon

“Okay, Google, what’s the weather forecast this weekend?”
“Hey, Siri, call Mom.”
“Alexa, set my alarm for 7:00 a.m.”

The human voice has new power! Now we don’t have to type with our thumbs anymore. We can talk to our devices and they will do what we ask. Or at least that’s how it is supposed to work. It’s the sort of thing that was science fiction just a few years ago. At a time when most of the information that went into a computer was on punch cards, Captain Kirk and others on the USS Enterprise talked to a computer. And now we all can talk to the computer. We can dictate to our word-processing programs, we can surf the internet without touching the keyboard, and we can call up a recipe in the kitchen without dirtying the tablet screen.

God created the voice to have power. When sea lions gather in large colonies to raise their young, hundreds of pups will swim out into the water together and come back together. Once on the shore, they find their mothers by listening for the distinct sound of the mother’s voice. In time, all the young find their way back to their own mothers.

Easter is, among other things, about the power of the voice. On this Second Sunday of Easter,

THE RISEN LORD JESUS COMES TO YOU AND TO ME TO SPEAK HIS PEACE INTO OUR HEARTS SO THAT WE MAY SPEAK THAT PEACE TO THE WORLD.

I.

This is what we read in this morning’s Gospel. After Mary and the other women told Jesus’ disciples they had seen the Lord, the disciples did not really believe. By the evening of the day, the disciples are behind locked doors, like a little hutch of rabbits afraid of the wolf that might be looking for them. This is the Church at its absolute worst. Hunkered down, huddled together, letting fear rather than faith control their every thought and action.

Then suddenly, Jesus comes and stands among them. John says the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. But in their joy not one of them apologizes for his behavior over the last few days. No one says he’s sorry or that they should have done better. Perhaps part of the reason is they don’t get a chance to say anything. Instead, it’s Jesus who speaks the first word. And just as was the case at the sound of God’s voice in creation, the sound of Jesus’ voice creates something wonderful and new: “Peace be with you,” he says (v 19). This is not a wish or a hope. It is his gift to them. “Peace be with you,” he says, and there is peace and joy.

This, the disciples could only begin to realize, was the whole point of what Jesus had just been through. Jesus’ death on the cross was to reestablish the peace between God and man that had been shattered when we first sinned. Sin will always stand as separation, conflict, between two parties. In sin, we live for ourselves, not for the other. In sin, we cannot be in harmony, our will gladly yielded to the other. In sin, we could never be with God, because his holiness cannot be in relationship with unholiness. But by taking our sin to the cross, Christ removed the separation and reconciled us to God, bringing us back into peace with him.

The whole scene repeats a week later when Thomas, at last, is with the disciples. The doors are still locked, but Jesus comes again. He speaks the same word. “Peace be with you.” Rather than scolding, Jesus encourages Thomas to touch and see the wounds. “Do not disbelieve, but believe” (v 27).

II.

Even though two thousand years have passed since that first Easter evening, the church still struggles to get out from behind locked doors and into the world. While we might not fear suffering the same cruelty as Jesus suffered on the cross—the fear that kept the first apostles locked up—there is as much to be wary of in the twenty-first century as there was in the first century. (Here the pastor could add examples of the difficult times his congregation faces today, such as an aging and declining parish, the increasing hostility to religion generally or to confessional Christianity in particular, or the rapid paganization of our consumer culture. It is not hard to list things that bring fear to God’s people today.)

The temptation is to focus all our attention on our fear and let that fear paralyze us. This text from John 20 is not about how the world locks its doors to the Gospel, but how the Church locks itself away from the world. The irony of the disciples’ locked doors is that they weren’t really keeping out friends and relatives who may have wanted to ridicule them for following Jesus; there is no record of either of those things happening. The One they were locking out was Jesus. They locked out the word he had so clearly spoken to them about dying and rising again, and in locking out that word, they locked out Jesus. When fear becomes our focus, we fall into the same trap; we lock out the Lord, who time and again tells his Church, “Do not be afraid!”

Jesus will have none of it! The securely locked doors are no problem for him. If the grave could not keep him in the ground, their padlocks would not keep him outside the room.
where they were gathered. And so, he comes and stands among them and among us and speaks his word—a word that brings the very thing it says: Peace be with you!

This is Jesus’ word to you this Second Sunday of Easter. “Peace be with you.” “Peace, your sin is forgiven!” “Do not fear the world. I have overcome the world. Peace be with you.” That word comes to you and me today, with exactly the same power as it came to those first disciples on the first Easter and to Thomas a week later. “These [words] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (v 31). In his word, Jesus comes among us today, and we experience the power of his voice. He doesn’t just tell us about peace, but he actually speaks peace to you and me. As Luther puts it, “As soon as He said it, it was done” (AE 12:32).

Jesus spoke his peace to you in the water of your Baptism, where you were joined to his death and resurrection and you died to sin and rose to new life. That peace is spoken to you every time you return in repentance to your Baptism, and he says to you through your pastor, “I forgive you all your sins.” That peace is spoken to you at his table, where in, with, and under bread and wine, he comes through space and time to feed you his body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins and to lift from you your fears. There his voice speaks peace. “This is for you,” he says, “for the forgiveness of sin.” And we rise from the table at peace, ready to go into the world.

III.

“As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (v 21). The Lord cannot be bound; his word will not be bound; and his followers do not live behind locked doors. He sends us out into the world, but we do not go empty-handed. He breathes his Holy Spirit upon his disciples, and to his Church, he hands the keys to the kingdom of heaven. “If you forgive the sins of anyone they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld” (v 23). And with that, we, like those first disciples, are sent to the world to be the voice of peace. Our voices, our human voices, become voices of power, not because they are louder, wiser, or more entertaining than other voices, but because through our voice, he himself speaks.

Long before there was a Siri, Alexa, or Google, there was the risen Lord Jesus, speaking to and through people like you and me, so that all who are locked behind doors of fear, sin, sickness, and even death itself might hear his word: “Peace be with you.”

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

V 16: “Their eyes were kept from recognizing him” is an especially significant statement. It is not only that their vision was dulled and mistaken but also that they were prevented from recognizing Jesus. This imposed blockage of recognition sets the stage for revelation as Christ himself will open their eyes in verse 31.

V 17: Only one of the travelers is identified by name (v 18). He is Cleopas, who according to Eusebius, was the brother of Joseph and the father of Simeon, thus Jesus’ uncle (Earl Ellis, *The New Century Bible Commentary: The Gospel of Luke* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983], 277). Incognito, Jesus enters into their conversation, inquiring of these travelers about the things of which they are talking. They respond in verses 19–24 with a recital of the story of Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet who was mighty in deed and word, who was delivered up to be condemned to death and crucified. This section is a succinct summary of the Passion of Jesus seen as a longed-for prophet who would redeem Israel. Compare it to Peter’s sermon in Acts 3:22–23. On the title “prophet,” see Deut 18:15–22. For more on Prophet as a Christological title, see Oscar Cullmann, *Christology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., trans. Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A. M. Hall (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 13–50. Cullmann observes that Jesus did not simply appear as a prophet but as the final Prophet who would fulfill all prophecy at the end of time. Jesus had previously proclaimed in connection with his Passion that it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem (Lk 13:33). Jesus demonstrates that he is the Prophet par excellence, the one to whom all the prophets point, by suffering and dying in (just outside) the city of the temple.

V 18: Jesus is mistakenly perceived to be a visitor or stranger (the verb ἀναπόκτω is used) who had not heard of the goings on in Jerusalem over Passover. How surprising, they think, that anyone there present could have missed out on these events!

Vv 20–21: Compare these verses with the “passion predictions” in Lk 9:21–22, 43–45; 17:25; 18:31–34. The disciples did not grasp these words as Jesus spoke them. Now the two disciples on the road to Emmaus are similarly clueless. Their hopes had been pinned on Jesus as the one who would redeem Israel. (Note the connection with the *Benedictus of Lk* 1:68–79, especially verse 68, where God is blessed as the Lord who visited and redeemed his people. Also see Lk 2:38, where the prophetess Anna is speaking to all who were waiting on Israel’s redemption.)

Vv 22–24: But as far as the Emmaus sojourners were concerned, this “hope” was past tense. They recount to Jesus the story of the empty tomb and the vision of angels transmitted by the women, but there is still no appearance of the risen Lord as far as they know: “but him they did not see” (v 24). An empty grave and a vision of angels do not guarantee a resurrection. Other explanations can be given for such phenomena. Only the body of the crucified Lord alive can give fulfillment to hope.

Vv 25–27: Here Jesus rebukes his companions as “foolish ones” (ἀνόητοι) and “slow of heart” (βραδείς της καρδιάς) to believe what the prophets had spoken, that it was “necessary (ἔδει) that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory.” The ἔδει is of divine necessity, as in Lk 9:22. Christ “must suffer.” The cross is key to God’s own plan for the redemption of the world. Jason Lane observes about Lk 24:26 in an instructive essay, opening several fruitful homiletical approaches to an evangelical preaching of the divine necessity of Jesus’ death, “Necessity is here paired with fulfillment” (Jason Lane, “That I May Be His Own: The Necessary End of the Law” in *Handing Over the Goods: Determined to Proclaim Nothing but Christ Jesus and Him Crucified. Essays in Honor of James Arne Nestingen*, eds. Steven D. Paulson and Scott L. Keith [Irvine: 1517 Publishing, 2018], 60).

Jesus interpreted to them the Scriptures beginning with Moses and all the prophets, the things concerning himself. This aligns with Lk 9:30–31, where Moses and Elijah speak with Jesus at his transfiguration regarding the “exodus” that he is soon destined to accomplish at Jerusalem. Jesus’ interpretation of the Scriptures continues likewise in Lk 24:44–46.

Vv 28–31: Cleopas and his friend urge the stranger to stay with them. Ironically, the guest becomes the host as he does what any Jewish housefather would do at meal time. He takes, blesses, breaks, and distributes the bread to his companions. In this act, their previously restrained vision is allowed to recognize the Lord! He is acting in word and deed (Lk 24:19) to make himself known.

Luke particularly accentuates the episodes in Jesus’ public ministry where he demonstrates that he is the Savior come to seek and save the lost by eating and drink with them. See, for example, Lk 15:1–2 and 19:1–10. This event described in Luke 24 on Easter evening recalls those previous meals while also prefiguring the risen Lord’s self-giving in the Divine Service. In that Service, he still makes himself known as our Savior through the preaching of the Gospel of his death and resurrection and through the giving of his body and blood for us to eat and to drink.

In this encounter between the Emmaus disciples and Jesus, there is still the divine hiddenness as Jesus vanishes from their sight. For us, too, Jesus is unseen, hidden under the words of Scripture and under the bread and wine. But when he speaks, our hearts are enflamed with faith, like the Emmaus disciples. Compare with Jn 20:30–31.
Sermon Outline

IT IS IN HIS HIDING HIMSELF THAT JESUS SHOWS HIMSELF TO BE OUR SAVIOR.

I. The Lord hides himself until when and where he is pleased to reveal himself.

II. For us, that when and where is when we hear him in the Scriptures, the Absolution, and his Holy Supper.

Sermon

The stranger shows up on the road “but their eyes were kept from recognizing him” (v 16). Just like Jesus to come incognito, undercover as it were. He hides himself. Listen to the prophet Isaiah: “Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior” (Is 45:15). God hides himself. He will not let himself become visible. Yet

IT IS IN HIS HIDING HIMSELF THAT JESUS SHOWS HIMSELF TO BE OUR SAVIOR.

I.

It is not that these travelers on the highway to Emmaus were confronted with a case of mistaken identity. Their eyes were kept from recognizing him. It was not that the Lord Jesus was absent from them. No, he was right there with them on the road, but they were prevented from recognizing him. They could not see him for who he is. Jesus remains to them a stranger. So as the conversation goes on, they tell him of their disappointment and now dead hope.

Then the Lord Jesus interrupts Cleopas and his friend: “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (vv 25–27). They urge Jesus to stay with them, and he does for a while. He takes for himself the place of host, blessing and breaking the bread, and he gives it to them. “And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him” (v 31). Now they recognize that this stranger with them is none other than Jesus! The same one who was crucified, the very one on whom their hopes were pinned is now alive and in their midst. No phantom, no ghost, but Jesus! Yet when their eyes are opened to see who it is who is with them, he disappears.

With the Lord’s body, he can do with it as he wills. His body is not confined by geography or time, for it is the Lord’s body. With his body, locked doors are no barrier. With his body, he need not stay put one place at a time. But where he puts himself, he puts himself for you. God does not invite you to search for him where he cannot be found: in the cosmic reaches of space or in the depths of your own soul. (Here insert examples of uncertainties, tragedies, or speculations for which members of the congregation may be tempted to ask, “Where is God?” or may expect God to answer with signs or blessings that he has never promised.) Raised from the dead, he is free and loose to be wherever he puts himself for you. And you need not be in doubt as to where that is.

II.

The Lord hides himself from those men on the road to Emmaus so that he might reveal himself to them, to show himself where and when it pleases him. And this is how Jesus wills to be known by you: in his Scriptures. It is the Scriptures that testify of him—and his opening up of those Scriptures, so that he is preached as the very Son of God, who had to be handed over to evil men, crucified, and resurrected for us. The redemption that these Emmaus disciples had hoped for had indeed taken place, but it was far greater than what they could imagine. Redemption took place not in some act of political liberation. It happened in the death of God’s own Son, who paid the price of our release not with silver or gold but with his own blood. That is what was necessary! “It was necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory” (v 26). It was necessary for you and your salvation. It has been done. The work is completed for you. It is finished. Christ was put to death for your trespasses and raised again for your justification.

Yet even after his resurrection, the Lord Jesus hides his glory. He does not overwhelm the road-wearied sojourners on the road to Emmaus with a blinding flash of dazzling radiance. He comes to them as a stranger whose identity is concealed from their eyes. This stranger reveals himself in his words that interpret the Scriptures concerning himself and in the breaking of bread.

What the Lord did for the Emmaus disciples, he does for you. Your eyes are kept from seeing him. There will come a day when we will see him. On that Last Day, the Lord Jesus Christ will no longer be concealed from our view. Then all eyes will be upon him, either to their everlasting joy or their eternal shame. Then we will behold him and not another. Then in our flesh we will see our Redeemer as Job confessed in the Old Testament. But not yet. Now to recognize Jesus means that he vanishes from our sight. He hides himself so that we may learn to hear him, to trust in him, for faith comes not by sight but by hearing. Now we are not given to see him; we are given to hear him. We hear him as he speaks to us in the preaching of his Scriptures, his words that are spirit and life. You hear him in his word of absolution that declares, “Your sins are forgiven.” You hear him not at that ordinary supper table at that road stop near Emmaus, but at his Holy Supper, where he gives you his body to eat and his blood to drink for the forgiveness of your sins. (Here assure of the comfort that forgiveness and reconciliation in the Word and Sacrament bring for each of the uncertainties raised earlier.)

“And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight” (v 31), but not from their
Example . . . and Much More

Text: 1 Peter 2:19–25
Other Lessons: Acts 2:42–47; Psalm 23; John 10:1–10
Sermon Theme: Our Good Shepherd is our example in suffering . . . and so much more!
Sermon Goal: That hearers be enlivened to follow the Good Shepherd with confidence, joy, and hope even when they suffer unjustly in this fallen world.

Hymns:
Shepherd of Tender Youth (LSB 864)
The King of Love My Shepherd Is (LSB 709)
Entrust Your Days and Burdens (LSB 754)
Our Paschal Lamb, That Sets Us Free (LSB 473)

Liturgical Setting

Easter 4 is “Good Shepherd Sunday.” The Psalm for the day naturally is Psalm 23. Along with the Gospel from Jn 10:1–10, the focus is on the Lord, who is our Shepherd. The First Reading from Acts 2:42–47 does not use the shepherd imagery but reminds us that the Good Shepherd has gathered the sheep who hear his voice in the flock of his Church. This Sunday accents the fact that God has raised the Shepherd who was slain to rescue his sheep. Death has no dominion over him nor over those who hear and trust in his voice. Our risen Lord feeds, protects, and guards his sheep who are gathered in his name, and he leads them out of death into life eternal. This is encapsulated in the Collect: “Since you have wakened from death the Shepherd of Your sheep, grant us Your Holy Spirit that when we hear the voice of our Shepherd we may know Him who calls us each by name and follow where He leads” (LSB Altar Book, 603).

Relevant Context

Leonhardt Goppelt describes the context of 1 Peter:

Christians were discriminated against by slanderous accusations. . . . This verbal hostility against the Christians comes from their fellow citizens, also and precisely from their relatives, colleagues, and acquaintances. It is more than personal insult: It takes from them the public respect on which existence in society depended, even more than in our time, and public officials have found action against them appropriate. (A Commentary on 1 Peter, trans. John E. Alsup [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 39–40)

Peter aims to equip Christians to live a life of faithful endurance as the elect and beloved children of God: “Election by God for suffering is the central theological theme of 1 Peter. Although Christians are called to live a righteous life within the framework of their given social institutions, because of their relationship to God they must suffer as strangers and aliens in the world. In God’s eyes, this suffering is grace, in a different category from suffering caused by the sins one has committed (2:19–20; 3:14)” (Udo Schnelle, Theology of the New Testament, trans. M. Eugene Boring [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009], 605).

Textual Notes

V 19: The light of those who are strangers and exiles in this world is one of patient endurance in the face of unjust suffering. Peter speaks of this as a “gracious thing” that happens as the believer is mindful of God.

V 20: This suffering is to be distinguished from the suffering that is brought about by one’s own crimes or misdeeds where the criminal is victim of himself. Peter, rather, refers to circumstances when the faithfulness of the believer is made the victim on account of his or her confession and noble life. To endure this suffering is a “gracious thing” in the presence of God (coram Deo). God is not unmindful of this unmerited suffering and will not let it be wasted in the lives of his children, although its ultimate outcome is not yet clear in the midst of affliction.

V 21: Peter speaks of being “called” (ἐκλήθητε) to this suffering; it is the cruciform shape of the Christian life as those who belong to Christ are called to take up the cross (see Mt 16:24). In the words of Hermann Sasse: “To believe in the cross always means also to carry the cross. A yes to the cross of Christ is also a yes to my cross” (Hermann Sasse, “Theology of the Cross” in We Confess Jesus Christ, trans. Norman E. Nagel [St. Louis: CPH, 1984], 52). Christ’s suffering for us always comes first. Because he has suffered for us, he becomes an example for our bearing of the cross. Luther is instructive here. In his “Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels” (1521), he reminds readers that before Christ is an example, he is a gift (see AE 35:115–25). Preachers would do well to study carefully Ian Siggins, “Gift and Example,” in Martin Luther’s Doctrine of Christ (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 156–64, to avoid confusing Law (example) with Gospel (gift) at this point. Only when Christ is grasped by faith as Savior can he then be taken as the example of a life lived with self-giving love to the neighbor. We are not justified by imitating Christ. But he is the pattern for the life of the Christian in the world.

Vv 22–23: Peter further unpacks the exemplary nature of Christ’s obedient endurance. Reviled, he does not respond in kind but receives the suffering without complaint, only opening his mouth to intercede for those who crucify him (Is 53:7; Lk 23:34). Instead, he entrusts himself into the hands of his Father, who will vindicate his innocence (Ps 31:5; Lk 23:46). He overcomes evil by good (Mt 5:10–11, 38–39; Rom 12:19–21; Heb 5:7–10).

V 24: This verse echoes Is 53:5. Jesus is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. In Christ’s wounds, there is healing for the wounded; in his death, there is life for the dead.

V 25: The pericope is brought to a conclusion with a reference to the “Shepherd and Overseer” of our souls. The imprint of Is 53:6 is on this text as the prophet states that we are like sheep who have gone astray. We are gathered and kept safe in the care of the Good Shepherd (Is 40:11; Jer 23:1–4; 50:6; Ezekiel 34; Zech 11:4–17; Heb 13:20; Rev 7:17).

Sermon Outline

Introduction: Who are the people held up as examples of the good and productive life today? Who is it that we are encouraged to emulate in our own lives? Who comes to mind? Political leaders? Military heroes? Sports figures? Achievers in the fields of science and technology? Accomplished artists? Entertainers? There are problems, though, with any figure who is made a template or model for our own lives. First, as we have so often discovered, those who look good in the public eye often are deeply flawed with their own moral failures. Do you really want to hold up as your example not in order to attain to salvation, but in order to live as redeemed and regenerated children of God in this sinful world.

I. Our Good Shepherd is an example of endurance . . . and more.

A. What is there to endure? Unjust suffering!
   1. This is suffering that comes not from our sin but from the sin of others.
      a. Suffering is expected by those who have done wrong. Criminals have no reason to ask why a punishment is coming to them. This is easily explainable!
      b. The suffering of which Peter speaks issues from actually doing what is good and right in the Lord’s eyes. (The preacher may wish to give some ancient and contemporary examples of martyrdom here to illustrate the point.)
   2. We call this “cross-bearing,” for it is suffering that comes from being identified as one who belongs to the crucified Lord.

B. Christ Jesus is not only an example of endurance, but he is the one who endured for us!
   1. When he was insulted, ridiculed, and reviled, he received it.
   2. In his will to be our Savior, he endures humiliation at the hands of sinners. Recall the aspects of his passion: betrayed by his friend, spit upon, heckled by soldiers and crowds, and so on.
   3. Finally, he endures the shame of the cross. He is unjustly executed as a blasphemer. The One who knew no sin is made sin for us.

C. His cruciform life is the life to which we are called when he says, “Take up your cross and follow me.” We follow in his steps.

II. Our Good Shepherd is the example of forgiveness for those who do us wrong . . . and more.

A. Forgiveness of sins was his mission.
   1. He came into the world to purchase and win the forgiveness of our sins by his death and resurrection. He innocently suffers for our sins and sheds his blood in atonement for our sin.
   2. Throughout his life, he is extending this forgiveness to sinners. (Here the preacher may wish to illustrate this with the healing of the paralytic, the absolution of the woman caught in adultery, and other examples.)

Martin Luther reminds us that before Jesus can be our example, he must be our Savior. The pre-Reformation equivalent to those WWJD bracelets that were popular a few years ago was an “imitation of Christ” piety that saw the essence of faith as living as Jesus lived. Salvation would be acquired by conformity to the pattern of Christ’s perfect life. Over and against this approach, Luther asserted that Jesus is first of all “gift” or “sacrament,” and only secondarily is he an example. Salvation by imitation would still leave us under the Law and in our sin. Luther noted that Jesus is our example not in order to attain to salvation, but in order to live as redeemed and regenerated children of God in this sinful world.

Our Good Shepherd Is Our Example in Suffering . . . and So Much More!

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3. He prays from the cross in the midst of his torture: “Father, forgive them” (Lk 23:34). (Note: For a thoughtful application of this prayer to us, the preacher may wish to read a meditation on this first word of the cross from Edmund Schlink, The Victor Speaks [St. Louis: CPH, 1958], 3–9.)

B. Much more than example, Jesus also forgives us.

1. He is a victim who does not victimize.
2. In this world, those who are victims often become victimizers. History is full of examples of how an oppressed people is liberated only to become oppressors.
3. But Jesus does not make victims of those who persecute him. He bears the sin of the world—and our individual sin—in his body.

C. By Jesus forgiving us, we are released from sin’s power and the compulsion to use our suffering as an excuse for sinning against those who hurt us.

1. Instead, we die to sin and live to righteousness (Rom 6:1–11).
2. Jesus teaches us to pray: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” (Small Catechism, Fifth Petition; cf. Lk 11:4). Our forgiving follows his forgiving us.

III. Our Good Shepherd is the example of entrusting our lives into the hands of a faithful and just judge... and more.

A. Jesus commends his spirit in the hands of his Father (Lk 23:46).

1. The Jewish “now I lay me down to sleep” prayer (Ps 31:5) becomes his prayer.
2. In death, yes, even his God-forsaken death for our sins on the cross, he clings to his Father, trusting in him.
3. We follow Jesus’ example with, in effect, the same prayer in Luther’s Morning and Evening Prayers: “For into your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things.”

B. But much more than example, Jesus is the shepherd and guardian into whose hands we can commend our souls.

1. We have the sure and certain knowledge that nothing will divorce us from his love and care, not even the distress of persecution, the tribulations that are inflicted on us (Rom 8:35–39). Dying, we live with confidence in this promise!
2. These things will not snatch us from the hands of our Good Shepherd. What people intend for evil, God works for the good of those who trust in him.
3. The Good Shepherd who began the good work in us by calling us to faith will bring it to completion (Phil 1:6).

C. We commend ourselves to Christ, comforted by these words of the Formula of Concord on the doctrine of election: “This doctrine provides glorious consolation under the cross and amid temptations. In other words, God in His counsel, before the time of the world, determined and decreed that He would assist us in all distresses. He determined to grant patience, give consolation, nourish and encourage hope, and produce an outcome for us that would contribute to our salvation. Also, Paul teaches this in a very consoling way. He explains that God in His purpose has ordained before the time of the world by what crosses and sufferings He would conform every one of His elect to the image of His Son. His cross shall and must work together for good for everyone, because they are called according to God’s purpose” (FC SD XI 48–49).

Conclusion: Thank God that we have more than a good example in Jesus Christ! We have a Good Shepherd, who was put to death for your sins and raised again for your justification. Knowing that he has loved us with such an everlasting love even to the point of being given over to suffer death on the cross, we can live as those who are conformed to his image, pressed (as painful as it may be at times) into that image. He is an example for the life of faith in the Father and love for the neighbor. But even better, he is the Shepherd who has rescued us, reconciling us to his Father, and even now by his Gospel enlivening us to live in him and for him. Amen.

EASTER 5, MAY 10, 2020

Scenes of God at Work

Text: Acts 6:1–9; 7:2a, 51–60

Other Lessons: Psalm 146; 1 Peter 2:2–10; John 14:1–14

Sermon Theme: God is at work in the mundane and the marvelous.

Sermon Goal: That the hearers may trust that God is at work in their lives.

Hymns:

Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice
(The Son of God Goes Forth to War
We Sing for All the Unsung Saints
Forth in Thy Name, O Lord, I Go

Liturgical Setting

In the Collect of the Day, our prayer is “that among the many changes of this world our hearts may be fixed where true joys are found.” In both the Gospel and the First Reading, we see the changes of this world and the person, Jesus, in whom true joys are found.

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In the Gospel, Jesus prepares his disciples for his Passion. He does not focus on the Passion, however, but directs the disciples’ attention to their relationship with him. In the midst of all the changes that will happen after his crucifixion, Jesus promises his disciples that his relationship with them will continue and that they will do “greater works” in his name. Indeed, after his resurrection and ascension, Jesus sends his Holy Spirit upon the Church, and the mission of God continues as the Word of God is brought by apostles and disciples to the ends of the earth.

In the First Reading, we have an example of how God does this “greater work” through Stephen. The lectionary offers us selections of the account in Acts where, like the Passion of Jesus, the changes of this world are deadly. Stephen, “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (6:5), begins service in the church, and immediately persecution arises. Amid these deadly changes, Stephen’s heart is fixed on Jesus (7:55), the one in whom true joy is found.

**Textual Notes**

The account of Stephen has been edited for the sake of time in the context of the worship service. This means that worshipers will not know that Stephen’s public dispute with the synagogue of the Freedmen (6:9) has led to his trial before the council (6:12) and that Stephen’s address to the council consists of much more (7:2–50) than his mere denunciation of his hearers (7:51–53). This poses a problem for a preacher. How do you preach from this abbreviated account?

The sermon that follows uses the analogy of a movie preview that captures the most important scenes of a film to help the hearers see how this abbreviated account of Stephen offers us a glimpse of the main event, God’s saving work in the midst of human suffering. The main point of the sermon—that God is working in the lives of people out in the world—is very similar to the main point that Stephen is proclaiming in the speech that has been left out of the reading: “The Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands” (7:48). Our Lord Jesus Christ rules over all creation, and God is at work in the mundane and marvelous experiences of life.

**Sermon Outline**

GOD IS AT WORK IN THE MUNDANE AND THE MARVELOUS.

I. God at work in the mundane (6:1–9)

II. God at work in the marvelous (7:54–60)

**Sermon**

When I rent a movie online, whether through Netflix or Amazon or Redbox, I have this habit of watching the trailers. Just looking at the title and the description is not enough for me. I want to watch the preview and see if the movie is worth watching.

What I love about previews is that they often take some of the most powerful scenes of the film and weave them together in a way that gives you a glimpse of what the movie is about. Previews show you moments of great action or emotion woven together in the bare outline of a story.

You see a car veer off the highway and fly into the air. A husband cradles his wife, his eyes closed, with tears streaming down his face. There is a hand raised from a hospital blanket and placed upon the head of a newborn child. The husband, much older now, sits at an NBA game and watches his son take the winning shot. From this preview, you know that the movie is going to be about a father and son making it through the hardest of circumstances. A preview gives you the basic outline of the story by showing the major turning points.

In our reading from Acts this morning, we have the account of Stephen’s stoning. Yet, I want you to notice something. We don’t have the full story. Since it would take too long to read the whole account from Acts, we have excerpts. Scenes. We have highlights from the film. So, not only has Stephen been stoned; now he’s been spliced.

First, we see Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. He’s set apart in the church to distribute food. Next, we see him not distributing food but doing great signs and wonders. Then, he’s seized by religious leaders. Next, Stephen is hoarse and tired after giving a long speech. We overhear his closing words of condemnation. Then, we see him stoned. And, just for a moment, high above the sky, we see Jesus. Standing at the right hand of God.

This story has it all. Care for the poor. Miraculous powers. Murderous threats. Impassioned speech. Glory shining in the heavens and blood flowing on the earth. And somehow, God is ruling amid all these things. But what is God doing?

This morning, we are going to take a moment to meditate on scenes of God at work. We will see how GOD IS AT WORK IN THE MUNDANE AND THE MARVELOUS and trust that God continues to work in our lives today.

I.

As the text opens, notice how Luke directs our eyes from the apostles to Stephen. Luke wants us to see the various ways in which God is at work. It would be easy to see God’s work as happening among those who dedicate themselves to reading and teaching the Scriptures. And it would be easy to see God at work among disciples performing miraculous signs and wonders. But those who give food to the poor? What is so special about that? Yet that is what Luke is interested in. He names all the people who are called to give food to the poor. He notes the importance of the Spirit being among the people who are chosen to do this task. And even though Stephen was doing miraculous signs and wonders, Luke doesn’t tell us what those signs and wonders were.
What Luke focuses on is that Stephen was chosen to distribute food to the poor.

It is as if Luke was looking at our congregation today. He sees the pastor, studying the Scriptures and getting ready for a sermon, and then a parishioner able to coordinate extraordinary mission trips, and then, over in the corner, one parishioner standing by a table gathering jars of peanut butter for the food pantry. And Luke stops and speaks about that person. The Holy Spirit is involved in all these things—in the Word that is proclaimed and in the working of mission and in the acts of service—but Luke wants us to see God at work in the mundane. Luke wants us to see that parishioner gathering food for the poor and know that God is there.

When Christ came into this world to bring about salvation, his work extended from the marvelous to the mundane. Yes, he walked on water, gave the blind sight, raised the dead . . . but he also welcomed children, asked his disciples to watch a widow giving two small copper coins to the church, and talked with a woman at a well. “Every hair of your head is numbered,” Jesus said. “And not a sparrow falls to the ground but your heavenly Father knows it” (see Mt 10:29–30).

So often, we can pass by the simple ways in which God works in our lives, and yet Luke, in this scene from the story of Stephen, asks us to see that God is at work in what our world would call the mundane. When Jesus suffered for our salvation on the cross, he took upon himself every sin, great and small, that he might bring us into God’s kingdom, where we experience every wonder, great and small.

II.

Not only does God work in the mundane, but he also works in the marvelous. Later in the account, we have scenes from the death of Stephen. Here, we see God at work in a marvelous way.

Accustomed to the way movies work, we might expect God to come into this account of Stephen and perform some mighty act of deliverance. God, the superhero, could rescue Stephen from the rubble and bring about a happy ending here on earth. But God doesn’t intervene like that. And God also doesn’t just sit back in the heavens, unconcerned about the things that are happening on earth.

No, God works. But he works in a marvelous way. God works in a way where the marvelous and the murderous are woven together with one another, and Luke wants us to know that God works wonders in the suffering of this world.

Listen to how Luke tells the story. Stephen is dragged out of the city and stoned. When this happens, he falls to the ground. Yet, when Luke records this, he tells us that Stephen bends his knees. He kneels in reverence to God. You would think there would be a difference between being knocked to the ground with stones and kneeling in prayer. But, according to Luke, sometimes they look the same.

As Stephen is dying, he cries out. We can see the scene. A man is hit with stones and cries out in pain. Yet, when Luke records this, he asks us to overhear not screams of pain but a prayer of faith. Stephen cries out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60). As Stephen dies, we hear echoes of Calvary—Jesus crying out, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34). Finally, when Stephen breathes his last breath . . . when Stephen dies from stoning . . . Luke tells us that he falls asleep.

Luke reveals that there is nothing beyond the reach of God. Stephen is bloody, stoned, suffering, and dying, and yet God is at work in a marvelous way. God is able to enter into conflict, into suffering, even into death itself, and nothing can stop his work of love.

Jesus entered into this world, suffered, and died in order to take away all sin. And in rising from the dead, he revealed to us that he has conquered all sin, all evil, even death itself. Nothing can separate us from God’s love.

God is at work in the world. Not in the way skeptics say—hovering above the world, never touching down in the lives of real people, merely a figment of our imagination. And not in the way some people think—entering into situations of suffering and making it all better. No, God is here, in the midst of suffering, transforming that suffering into the glory of his kingdom. As Stephen is joined to the suffering of Christ, he is also joined to the glory of Christ. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, who is active and at work in our lives and in his world.

This, in fact, was the whole point of Stephen’s speech. Although it has been cut out of our reading, Stephen’s speech focuses on this wonderful work of God. Stephen proclaims that God “does not live in houses made by men.” Rather, God is known by his powerful word that is at work in all places of the world. Abraham in Mesopotamia. Moses at Mount Sinai. Israel in the wilderness. Even now, in Jerusalem, after the crucifixion of Jesus, God is making himself known. When persecution arises, as it will, the disciples will be scattered from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and to the ends of the earth. But God will be there. Doing his work. Bringing to all people the saving work of Jesus, who has died and risen and ascended into heaven and now rules over all things.

Previews have a purpose. They are there to encourage you to watch the film. So, too, these scenes from the life of Stephen have a purpose. They encourage you to see God at work in your world.

Now, to be clear, this reading from Acts is not like a movie that we can choose to see or not. God is at work in our lives. We have no choice about that. God rules over all things and works in our world. He created us, claimed us as his own in our Baptism, calls us to serve him in our various vocations, and promises to raise us up to live with him in the new creation.
Often, however, we don’t think about God at work in our lives. That is, we have scenes of him working on Sunday, through Word and Sacraments, but then forget about him during the week. We look at the food on our table and remember buying it at the store. We don’t see God at work through farmers and grocers to feed us. We look at the paperwork mounting on our desk and wonder how we are going to get it all done. We don’t see God at work, calling us to our vocation as an administrative assistant in this world.

The beauty of this preview of Stephen, as short as it is, is that it assures us of God at work in the world. God is not distant from the world, and he is not always bringing about the happy ending that we desire. But God is at work. Nothing—not even death—can separate his people from him. And everything—even death—can be used by him to share his message with the world.

These scenes from the life of Stephen, then, invite us not to sit in front of a movie but rather to enter into the world, knowing that God is at work in the mundane and the marvelous in our lives. Amen.

EASTER 6, MAY 17, 2020

An Inspiring View

Text: 1 Peter 3:13–22

Other Lessons: Acts 17:16–31; Psalm 66:8–20; John 14:15–21

Sermon Theme: God calls us to see our lives in light of the death and resurrection of Christ.

Sermon Goal: That the hearers might endure the difficulty of discipleship with confidence in Christ.

Hymns:

Our Father, Who from Heaven Above LSB 766
Jesus Lives! The Victory’s Won LSB 490
Jesus Christ, My Sure Defense LSB 741
Sing with All the Saints in Glory LSB 671

Rev. David R. Schmitt, PhD, The Gregg H. Benidt Chair of Homiletics and Literature, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri

Liturgical Setting

One theme that arises from the readings for this Sixth Sunday of Easter is the work of the Holy Spirit guiding Christians to make a defense of their faith. In the Gospel, Jesus promises his disciples the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, the truth they will come to confess boldly. In the Epistle, Peter encourages Christians to make a defense of the hope that they have. And in the First Reading, Paul offers a defense of his teachings on the Areopagus.

Another theme, much less prominent, is found in the Verse and the appointed Psalm for the day. In Psalm 66, the psalmist praises God for bringing his people through trials. Likewise, in the Verse, Christ’s resurrection gives Christians hope in the midst of tribulation. This sermon study, based on the Epistle, will join these two themes by focusing on how the death and resurrection of Christ referenced in the second half of the text (1 Pet 3:18–22) give Christians confidence to witness in the midst of the suffering discussed in the first part of the text (3:13–17).

Textual Notes

Logically, the text is divided into two sections. First, Peter describes how Christians respond to suffering (vv 13–17), and then he offers the ground or the reason for such a response (vv 18–22).

By doing this, Peter anchors our present life of hopeful witness in the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. Because Christ died and rose for us (v 18), descended into hell to proclaim his victory over all powers (v 19), and ascended into heaven where he reigns over all things for all time (v 22), we live with confident hope in the midst of present suffering (vv 13–17).

In a sense, Peter takes a small moment of our life in this world (suffering for doing what is right) and places it in a much larger vision of the life of Christ (suffering for our sins, dying, rising, and ruling over all powers in heaven, on earth, and under the earth for us) so that we are inspired by this larger vision and continue to live in hope.

V 14: “for righteousness’ sake.” Peter qualifies the type of suffering that he is discussing. This is not just any and every kind of suffering that people endure, and certainly not the suffering that comes from doing evil, but rather suffering that arises from following Christ, from “doing good” (v 17). In 1 Pet 2:24, Peter speaks about this “righteousness” as he links the death and resurrection of Christ to our dying to sin and living “to righteousness.” Similarly, in the previous quotation from Psalm 34, Peter recalls how God’s eyes are on the “righteous” whose lives are described in the psalm.

V 18: “For Christ also suffered once for sins.” The word “also” (kai) provides a link with the previous section. Followers of Christ will suffer like Christ himself suffered (cf Mt 16:24). Yet, at this point, Peter is making an important distinction. The suffering of Christ is unique. It is “once for sins.” The emphasis upon the singularity of this suffering and its connection to “sins” highlights the vicarious and substitutionary nature of Christ’s death, “the righteous on behalf of the unrighteous” (cf 2:24).

“That he might bring us to God.” Here, Peter emphasizes the purpose of Christ’s death: to bring us into the presence of God. As the church prepares for Ascension, this image takes on deeper meaning. At Christmas, we emphasize God
coming to humans in the incarnation; now, as we approach the Ascension of Our Lord, we emphasize humans coming to God as Jesus ascends into heaven, bringing our humanity to God and giving us access to the Father (cf 1 Pet 1:21; Eph 2:18).

V 19: “proclaimed to the spirits in prison.” While there is much controversy surrounding this verse, Christ’s proclamation can be understood as an announcement of God’s victory over the devil and all his might (FC SD IX).

Sermon Outline
1. Our confidence to endure
2. An inspiring view of Christ
3. Our difficulty in discipleship

Sermon

Alex Honnold is known for free-soloing. You can easily find a picture of him climbing a rugged cliff, suspended high above the ground. What is interesting about these pictures is the tension between the struggle of the rock climber and inspiration of the setting.

Looking at the rock climber, we see Alex, with only his hands and his feet holding him to the stone. His body leans into the rock, his hands are lodged in a crevice, and his face is close to the stone.

Looking at the setting, however, we see what inspired him to do this. The vast expanse of rock jutting up into the sky. The beautiful expanse of clouds above him. The deep and varied landscape below him.

In one picture, we see the tension of free-soloing. Alex’s vision is limited. His struggle is intense. But the world is much larger than his limited experience. He is part of a beautiful creation that evokes awe in those who see.

While Alex Honnold is not a Christian, his experience is similar to that of Christians. Discipleship is difficult. Its struggle is intense. We find ourselves drawn into the difficulty of discipleship, with our face pressed against the wall, and we need one small glimpse of that larger vision, that inspiring view that carries us on.

In our text this morning, Peter writes a letter to the churches and offers them an inspiring view. Peter is writing to churches in various cultural settings: Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1:1). While these are different churches in different cultures, one thing is common among them. They are all struggling. They are all having difficulty with discipleship. As Christians, they struggle with how faith interacts with the world. And Peter’s letter offers them an inspiring view. He offers a larger vision of God’s glorious work in Christ that helps them endure.

We will meditate on Peter’s words this morning with the goal that confidence in Christ will encourage us to endure the difficulty of discipleship.

3.

Christians can sometimes interpret suffering in their life as if something were wrong. Bill and Janel were having trouble with their friends. They had been part of a group of couples for years. Their children had been in scouting together; they had watched their kids play in soccer games and baseball games, basketball and volleyball; they had celebrated graduations from high school and college, weddings, and the birth of grandchildren. Now, however, with all those years behind them, it seemed like things had changed. Everything was becoming political.

Events reported on the news became sources of argument. Bill and Janel tried to articulate how they as Christians would react, but their faith was putting a strain on their friendships. Bill and Janel were wondering if they should just keep their faith to themselves. “I must be doing something wrong,” Bill once said. “Having friends that you can be honest with should not be this hard.”

But it was, and it is. When our Lord called us to follow him, he called us to take up our cross. Discipleship is not easy. Not now. Not ever. Satan would tempt us to believe that we are doing something wrong, to believe that the Christian life should be easy and, if it is not, to believe that we should just be quiet about our faith. Peter, however, offers us a different vision. Peter encourages us to “always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet 3:15). Why? Because we know the power of God that is ours in Jesus Christ.

Peter offers us a way of dealing with the difficulties of discipleship. Peter encourages us to look to Christ.

2.

When we think about the disciple Peter, we often think of what he did. We remember how Peter wanted to walk on water, how he wanted to build booths on the Mount of Transfiguration, how he claimed he would follow Jesus unto death, how he denied Jesus in the courtyard, how he called us to take up our cross. Discipleship is not easy. Not now. Not ever. Satan would tempt us to believe that we are doing something wrong, to believe that the Christian life should be easy and, if it is not, to believe that we should just be quiet about our faith. Peter, however, offers us a different vision. Peter encourages us to “always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet 3:15). Why? Because we know the power of God that is ours in Jesus Christ.

Yet, Peter does not ask us to consider what he did as a disciple. Instead, he asks us to consider what he saw. At the end of his letter, Peter writes, “I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ” (5:1). Peter wants to be remembered not for what he said and did but for what he was: a witness of the sufferings of Jesus Christ. As a witness of the sufferings of Christ, Peter
has seen something. Something that he wants to share with Christians.

Peter has seen how God enters into suffering and triumphs over it. God is able to use suffering in his kingdom. Suffering is not something insurmountable for God.

As Peter writes to Christians who are suffering in their discipleship, Peter reminds them that God works salvation through suffering. He says, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God" (3:18). Through Christ’s sufferings, sinners were brought to God. Without the sufferings of Christ, we would remain in our sins, separated from God by what we say, think, and do. But because of the sufferings of Christ, because of his death upon the cross, the wrath of God is appeased. The Righteous One has died for the unrighteous that we might be members of the kingdom of God.

Christ Jesus took on suffering. He struggled with the power of sin, death, and the devil. He died that we might be saved, and he rose from the dead that we might know that nothing can separate us from the love of God and nothing can overcome God’s work in the world. Jesus Christ is able to enter into suffering and work through it to bring about the reign and rule of God. Although our situations of discipleship may be difficult, we can endure them with confidence in the working of God. Our Savior, Jesus Christ, is able to enter into suffering and use it for his purposes. We therefore need not fear or flee from situations of difficulty but rather follow our Savior, confident in his power.

1.

Albrecht Altdorfer was an engraver and painter working in Germany around the same time as Lucas Cranach. Altdorfer was known for his ability to juxtapose biblical scenes with vivid landscapes. In his work, you will see Jesus and his disciples in moments of suffering, and around them, there is a much larger landscape of vivid colors. Such juxtaposition captured the tension of Christian living. Suffering for the faith always occurs within a much larger vision of God’s work in the world.

In one painting, Altdorfer depicts Jesus praying in Gethsemane. The painting is both powerful and instructive. In the painting, you see the disciples in the foreground. Peter, James, and John are asleep. Peter rests on a rock, with his back to the scene. John is asleep on his back. James is looking downward. Behind them, in the center of the painting, is Jesus. He is kneeling before the face of a cliff and an angel is bringing him the cup of suffering he will drink. Finally, much further in the distance, behind Jesus, we see a delegation. They come out of a background lit with the fires of hell. Led by Judas, we see the religious leaders and the temple guard about to come and seize Jesus.

What is amazing about this painting is the way the arrangement of the figures teaches a lesson. The disciples are obviously defenseless, having fallen asleep. John is actually lying on his back, facing those who are coming to arrest Jesus, his entire body left wide open to attack. And yet, kneeling between the disciples and the forces of darkness is Jesus. His prayer is their defense; his willingness to bear the cup of God’s wrath is their salvation; his weakness and willingness to bear the wrath of God are the power of God that protects his people.

Because Jesus stands between the disciples and the forces of darkness, nothing will be able to come to them that has not come through Jesus. Jesus is the Victor, having triumphed over all evil in his death on the cross and his resurrection from the grave. All suffering that comes to us has already been conquered by him.

In his letter and in our text, Peter gives us a glimpse of this glory of God. He relates to the churches how Jesus not only suffered for their sin but how he rose from the dead in victory over all evil. He descended into hell to proclaim his victory over the powers of hell, and he ascended into heaven, is seated on the right hand of God, where he now rules over all things.

This is our larger landscape. This is our larger vision. When suffering enters our lives, when difficulties endanger our discipleship, Peter encourages us to see this larger vision of our risen and ruling Lord.

**God Calls Us to See Our Lives in Light of the Death and Resurrection of Christ.**

What is it like to endure the difficulty of discipleship with confidence in Christ? Consider Melissa. A college student. She has chosen not to be quiet about her faith. In a writing class where students are asked to journal in response to reading assignments, she uses her journal to express her faith. She reflects on how she, as a Christian, responds to these readings. Her journals have not always been well-received. She tries to write with “gentleness and respect” but, through arguments with other students, she is learning to do that better.

She remembers what it was like at confirmation. Her pastor had her read a personal confession of faith before the congregation. She was so nervous back then. Now, however, that seems so simple—talking to other Christians about what you believe. That’s nothing compared to sharing your faith with those who do not believe. Little did she know how important that lesson in confirmation would become to her. Faced with the difficulty of discipleship at college, she found confidence in Christ. She struggled to put her faith into words, trusting in the one who suffered and rose and even now rules over all things for her. Amen.
Happy Endings

Other Lessons: Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47; Ephesians 1:15-23
Sermon Theme: Ascension helps us celebrate three ends.
Sermon Goal: That hearers, like the disciples, praise God for the fulfillment of Christ's mission to save and, by the promised Holy Spirit, bear witness to him to the ends of the earth.

Hymns:
Up through Endless Ranks of Angels LSB 491
On Christ's Ascension I Now Build LSB 492
See, the Lord Ascends in Triumph LSB 494
Look, Ye Saints, the Sight Is Glorious LSB 495

Reverend Ralph Bloomenberg, DDiv, senior pastor, Immanuel Lutheran Church, Seymour, Indiana

Liturgical Setting

The Ascension of Our Lord celebrates the fulfillment of Christ's work to save sinners by his birth, life, ministry, death, rising, and return to the right hand of God. Falling on a Thursday, since Scripture says that he ascended forty days after his resurrection, the ascension may be the most neglected of the key events in the life of Jesus. However, it contributes critical teachings that bridge not only the seasons from Easter to Pentecost, but the work of Jesus to the work of his Church.

Relevant Context


Before Lk 24:44, we learn that Jesus has appeared to, walked with, and taught the disciples on the way to Emmaus, explaining what his suffering, death, and rising meant. He was revealed to them in the breaking of the bread and then suddenly disappears from their sight. As the other disciples are talking about these events, Jesus suddenly appears to them also (24:36). He again proves that he is risen flesh, not a spirit, encouraging them to touch his hands and feet. Further proof is given as he eats fish (24:42–43). Having proven that he is risen and alive, he explains to his disciples in our text how his ministry fulfills the Scriptures—before he disappears once again from sight and this time ascends into heaven.

Textual Notes

V 44: Luke is concise in relating the appearances of Jesus following his resurrection. His point is not an exhaustive listing of events, but the evidence that shows beyond a shadow of a doubt that the once crucified and dead Jesus is again alive. Jesus had taught extensively in the Upper Room where the disciples gathered for the Passover. Now he has eaten with them for the final time before ascending, and he teaches them again. From first to last, his life and work has fulfilled Scripture, which testifies to Jesus, the Word made flesh.

V 45: True comprehension of what Jesus teaches is not just an act of the mind. It is an act of God to “open the mind” (διανοίγω τὸν νοῦν) to understand Scripture and the acts and ways of God. As Luther explained, “I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel” (Small Catechism, Third Article).

V 46: The disciples have been students of the Scriptures from their youth and have known its contents. However, Jesus now gives them understanding of it by showing them how Scripture points to and is fulfilled in his suffering, death, and rising.

V 47: Proclaiming the message of repentance and forgiveness in Jesus’ name is the chief work of those who have been made witnesses of what Jesus has done and said. In this way, the Church will continue the work of John the Baptist, who pointed out the need for repentance and pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. The work of proclaiming Law and Gospel is still the work of Jesus, who is the Head of the Church, and who will send his Spirit to enable the Church to bear witness.

V 48: These disciples are the first μάρτυρες, “martyrs,” the Greek word we translate as “witnesses.” The second book of Luke, the Acts of the Apostles, will show how the Spirit worked through their witness to Christ in the Scriptures to bring faith. It will also illustrate how the witnesses, like Jesus, will suffer much for his name (Acts 9:16; also 5:40–41; 7:54–60; 8:1; 12:1–2; 14:19–20; 16:19–24).

V 49: It is crucial that the disciples seek not to do this important work on their own. They are to wait for the promise of the Father, the Comforter, the Holy Spirit. As without the Spirit there is no faith, so without the Spirit’s gifts and power, there will be no effective proclamation. Jesus, who is sent by the Father, will send (ἀποστέλλω) the promise of the Father to the disciples, which will make them
apostles—“sent ones”—starting from Jerusalem, and then out to the nations. Jerusalem, the place where Jesus suffered, was crucified, and rose from the dead, will be the epicenter of the worldwide mission.

Vv 50–53: After teaching, Jesus takes the disciples to Bethany. After blessing them, he departs from them. They show obedience of faith, worshiping the one who is the temple of God, which was torn down and rebuilt in three days, and then returning to the Jerusalem temple to praise God and wait for the promise of the Father. Just notes (Luke 9:51–24:53, 1056) that the raising of Jesus’ hands recalls Moses’ hands lifted in victory (Ex 17:11) and Aaron blessing the people (Lev 9:22). Three times the verb bless (εὐλογέω) occurs in verses 50–53.

Sermon Outline

Ascension Helps Us Celebrate Three Ends:

I. The end of Christ’s mission on earth.

II. The ends to which we are to go with the Gospel.

III. The promise that he will be with us to the end of time.

Sermon

If you like books or movies, you know that one of the most important parts of a good story or film is the ending. What happens to the characters? Do they live happily ever after? Is there a tragic ending? Most people like happy endings.

On Ascension Day, we celebrate a happy ending to the mission of Jesus that liberates humans from sin and death. But we also hear him say, “I am with you to the end of time,” and “you are witnesses to the ends of the earth.” So today,

Ascension Helps Us Celebrate Three Ends:

I.

First, the ascension of Jesus marked the ending of his mission. Jesus had willingly come down to earth as a little human baby. It took more than thirty years to earn our liberty. And it was hard work—living a perfect life, proclaiming the kingdom, doing miracles, suffering pain, being crucified on a cross and buried in a tomb, rising to life. “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (vv 44–45).

After his resurrection, for forty days Jesus proved he was really alive. Then, it was time to ascend to heaven to a hero’s welcome. “And [Jesus] led [the disciples] out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven” (vv 50–51). Nations honor returning heroes with parades. For his enormous victory, Jesus was honored by being seated at the right hand of the throne of God. His sacrifice was accepted, the work of salvation done!

But the disciples weren’t so ready for the words “The End.” As happy as they were to see Jesus’ triumph, they were also bewildered about losing him as their leader.

The challenge for Jesus was to show how the end of his physical presence was not the end of an illustrious career. Jesus was not going to go into retirement. He was going to remain active through the disciples for the purpose of accomplishing the saving of people. So he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (vv 46–48).

Christ’s mission to liberate the world was complete in one way. “It is finished,” Jesus said from the cross, and it was (Jn 19:30). It is. But in another way, Jesus’ mission was just beginning. There was no more dying to be done for sins. Yet, that salvation was to be proclaimed to the end of the earth. “You will be my witnesses . . . to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

II.

This is the second end to think about on this Ascension Day—the extent, the limit, how far it is that we are to go with the good news. For years, we have had the vaccines to prevent polio. But in some parts of the world, people didn’t know it and so still suffered horribly from this cruel disease. It was necessary to bring knowledge and medicine to them. So it is with the message of forgiveness in Christ. If it’s to be helpful for people, they need to know what it is. For it to be helpful for you, someone had to bring you the message. It may have been a friend, a parent, a preacher, a teacher.

It is through the sharing of that Word that the Holy Spirit opens hearts and minds to believe and to live. Luke 24 spoke of how Jesus opened the disciples’ eyes to the truth about him in Scripture. In Ephesians, Paul prays that their “hearts and minds may be opened” to see the great riches of salvation that are theirs through faith in Christ.

We are, in a way, in the delivery business. Delivery businesses are booming with online sales. Trucking companies don’t produce anything; they deliver objects others have made. Trains deliver tons of grain and coal and cars that have been produced elsewhere.

The church is in the delivery business, not the manufacturing business. We do not make our own salvation. We cannot make another person’s salvation. We are here to deliver what Jesus bought and paid for and wants to be given freely to the world.

And so Jesus says in our text not “you are observers,” but “you are witnesses.” To be a witness of a crime can be a life-changing experience. To be a witness of what God has done in Christ also changes our life. We, of course, were not there.
with the first disciples to see Jesus on the cross and, after Easter, to see him ascending. But by the power of the Holy Spirit, we have firsthand knowledge of who Jesus is, and what it means to be forgiven. We know our destiny as a Christian is to share the eternal joys of Christ in his kingdom, for he will come back to take us to be with him.

Until he comes again, the purpose of your life is to be his witness, sharing the Gospel through which disciples are made—to the ends of the earth, and until the end of time. There is no higher purpose, no greater reward in life, than to have been the instrument through whom God gave the gift of life and freedom in Christ.

III.

But clearly, we cannot do it without his help. And so Jesus gives us the third end to think about: “I will be with you always, to the very end of the age” (see Mt 28:20). Christ is with us to the end of time. He loves us to the end. Why? Not only to preserve and protect his people, but so that our mission may be accomplished.

Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to us to give us the power to be effective witnesses of what Jesus said and did. Every time Clark Kent had a mission, he went into a telephone booth to strip off his ordinary business suit, revealing his official Superman clothes. He could only stop locomotives and lift skyscrapers when he was properly clothed in the outfit that revealed his true identity.

As Christians, we are clothed by God with the Holy Spirit, so that we can do what he asks. In Baptism, we are clothed in Christ. His promise to be with us always is literally true—for he never leaves. He does not promise that we will leap tall buildings or even do miracles. But he will give us the words we need to say. Through his Word, he empowers us to do what he asks us to do. "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17).

You and I may wonder about just how much God can do through the life of one person. Well, just look at what happened when the disciples did what they were told: “And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (Lk 24:49). They received that power on Pentecost. Thousands became believers.

And we have advantages they did not have: the opportunity to share our faith freely, to gather for worship without fear of reprisal. We have a prosperity they couldn’t have dreamed of, means of communication that literally enable us to bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth, if only we had the will to do it.

Do you like happy endings? With movies, writers and the director decide how it ends. But in real life, God allows us to help write the end of stories. Those who die without faith in Jesus will have a miserable eternity. But all who trust in Jesus will have a happy and blessed ending to their life—eternal peace and joy! The ascension of Jesus is a happy ending to his earthly ministry, but it is more. It reminds us of our unfinished mission to bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth through our witness and gifts. And it reminds us that until the end of time, Christ is with us, that we may be faithful and effective witnesses. Amen.

EASTER 7, MAY 24, 2020

Reality Check

Text: 1 Peter 4:12–19; 5:6–11
Other Lessons: Acts 1:12–26; Psalm 68:1–10; John 17:1–11
Sermon Theme: The reality of Easter prepares you for the reality of discipleship.
Sermon Goal: That hearers will have encouragement and hope in the midst of their fiery trials.

Hymns:
Christ Is the World’s Redeemer LSB 539
We Know That Christ Is Raised LSB 603
Why Should Cross and Trial Grieve Me LSB 756
I Walk in Danger All the Way LSB 716

Rev. John A. Fale, emeritus,
LCMS Office of International Mission, St. Louis, Missouri

Liturgical Setting

Each Lord’s Day is a witness to the resurrection of Jesus. Christians live with the reality of our Lord’s victory over sin, death, and the devil. That reality causes us to “be glad,” “exult before God,” and “be jubilant with joy” (Psalm). But we also live in the reality that until Jesus returns for the judgment, we are “in the world” (Gospel, Jn 17:11), bearing witness to the cross of Jesus and his resurrection so that others may also receive the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. And because we bear Christ’s name, we share in his sufferings (Epistle, 1 Pet 4:13). We are attacked and harassed by the devil, who seeks to devour us (5:8). Therefore, we gather as the body of Christ in worship to hear our Savior’s word of forgiveness and strength, just as his apostles did. Word and Sacrament are the means by which we can resist the devil, standing firm in our faith (5:9). The juxtaposition of the propers is thus striking—joy and suffering. Peter gives us the synthesis: Blessed with the name of our triune God, we can rejoice in our sufferings, glorifying God as Christians (4:16).

Relevant Context

Note the shift of emphasis in Peter’s pastoral admonition in this chapter. In 1 Pet 4:1, Peter refers to suffering that
comes from our sinful passions and lusts of the flesh in our individual conduct. Verses 7–11 reference God being glorified in the way that we conduct ourselves with one another as stewards of his grace. Then verses 12–19 address suffering because Christians follow Jesus. That suffering can come at the hands of individuals who insult us or as the direct attacks of Satan himself. (As a parenthetical note, in my work providing pastoral support for LCMS international missionaries and their spouses, I hear from them repeatedly that they encounter the presence of darkness and evil in ways that they had never before experienced. The evil is palpable, some say. I have often provided pastoral encouragement to them using this very pericope from 1 Peter.)

Textual Notes

4:12: πυρώσει, “fiery trial” or “fiery ordeal.” This is the second time in the letter that Peter mentions the idea that our faith, which is more precious than gold, is tested (see “tested by fire” in 1 Pet 1:7). Fiery ordeals were experienced by David, Isaiah, and other faithful people of God (Ps 11:5; 17:3; 26:2; 66:12; Is 48:10). Importantly, these messianic references reveal that Jesus was subject to the crucible of suffering as part of our vicarious atonement. Only Messiah would be able to confess before God, “You tested me and found nothing (wrong) in me” (see Ps 17:3). His faithfulness is imputed to all Christians as our righteousness before God. Luther notes, “God inflicts no glowing fire or heat—cross and suffering, which make you burn—on you for any other purpose than ‘to prove you,’ whether you also cling to His Word” (AE 30:126). This is the way God deals with all whom he loves (Prov 3:12; Heb 12:6). Therefore fiery trials should not surprise us. Quite the contrary.

4:13: Sharing in the sufferings of Jesus is a blessing of which we are not worthy. Peter confessed this in Acts 5 after he was arrested and beaten for witnessing that Jesus is the Christ. Were we not reminded of this and other words of encouragement from Peter, we could become quite despondent, even angry with God, as we see this suffering as a curse instead of the blessing he intends, and succumb to leaving the faith. This ubiquitous suffering among God’s people is one classic example of Luther’s theology of the cross. Only a theology of the cross can call suffering a good thing. Only a theology of glory can call suffering for Christ a bad thing.

4:14: Again, we are blessed when insulted for the name of Jesus, as we are unconditionally assured that during those times the Spirit of God rests upon us.

4:16: The focus of suffering as a Christian is indeed a matter of a theology of the cross. There is no shame in this suffering, no matter how much the Christian is insulted or ridiculed. Rather, it is an opportunity to glorify God in our suffering for Jesus, even as Jesus noted that he glorified the Father in his suffering (Jn 17:1–5).

4:19: Note that this type of suffering, which is not sought out but given by God, is according to his will for us. The Formula of Concord offered good pastoral reflection on the relationship of suffering and the doctrine of election, all for the blessing of those whom God has elected to faith (FC SD XI 45–49; quoted in this issue, p 40). This is pure Gospel. Therefore, in the midst of suffering, we entrust our souls to our faithful Creator and go about our vocational calls, doing good to our neighbor and leaving the insults to God’s care.

5:6–11: These concluding remarks from Peter are a conclusion to the entire letter, especially applicable to the subject of suffering as a Christian. We are powerless, having no control when others choose to insult us. At times, it feels as if there is no end in sight. I can only imagine what it is like for Christians in parts of the world who endure severe persecution. We are powerless, but God is not. Therefore we can safely humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God. In his time, he will bring an end to all of this and exalt his elect. In the meantime, we can give attention to what we can do: cast our cares upon God in prayer, be watchful of our adversary the devil, resist him, and know that the universal Church experiences the same suffering. Then, with peaceful hearts, to know with all confidence that after we have suffered “a little while” compared to the time of history, the God who has elected us will restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish us.

Sermon Outline

The Reality of Easter Prepares You for the Reality of Discipleship.

I. The reality of Christian discipleship is suffering.

II. Your suffering as a disciple of Jesus reveals your need for God’s mercy.

III. Christ’s resurrection gives you encouragement and hope to remain vigilant in the midst of trials.

Sermon

“Read the fine print. Know what you’re getting into.” These are words of caution for anyone signing a contract. Many a person has been surprised by a contract when she or he learned that something was written “in the fine print.” Some very popular preachers today on every continent attract devotees by assuring people that followers of Jesus will be blessed with good health, wealth, and security if only they believe. It is then a blow to their listeners’ faith and confidence in Jesus when they experience suffering and trials. Upon closer examination of Scripture with faithful pastors or friends, they realize that Jesus never promised such a thing. In fact, as we shall see, Jesus said something much different. The reality is that Christians will suffer for the name of Jesus. But in the midst of suffering and trials,

The Reality of Easter Prepares You for the Reality of Discipleship.

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I.

From the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry as he called the first apostles, he spoke in very frank terms about what would happen to them because they followed him. They would be reviled, persecuted, and evil things would be said about them because they followed him. Jesus told them to rejoice and be glad when those things would happen, because their reward would be great in heaven (Mt 5:11). At other times, he told the disciples that they would be handed over to authorities to be beaten and punished. They would be hated by the world (Jn 15:18–19). Jesus also spoke of another kind of severe suffering for those who follow him. Shortly after Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper with his disciples, Jesus spoke to Peter: “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail” (Lk 22:31–32). Jesus never hid the reality of suffering for his name’s sake from his disciples. In fact, he was quite graphic in describing the details.

But Jesus prepared his apostles for those times of suffering with encouragement and hope. As Jesus was in the Upper Room with his disciples on the night when he was betrayed, he told them, “I have said these things to you to keep you from falling away.” Now listen closely to what follows immediately: “But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes [that is, persecutions] you may remember that I told them to you” (Jn 16:1, 4). Then, right after Jesus told the disciples these things, he told them that the time had come when they would scatter out of fear, leaving him all alone. “Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace” (16:32–33). Additionally, Jesus assured the disciples that he would continue to pray for them (Lk 22:32; John 17).

This kind of straight talk about their suffering, along with Jesus’ word of encouragement and comfort, would become very important to the apostles as they would continue the teaching of Jesus through their apostolic office. At the time, they did not have a clue about what kind of suffering they would need to endure, even though they heard the words. But the Holy Spirit would bring these words of Jesus to their remembrance after Jesus was raised from the dead and the days following (Jn 2:22; 12:16). In time, the apostles lived the reality of suffering for the name of Jesus.

You know this reality too. (Here insert specific examples of sufferings your members experience.)

II.

The apostles continued this kind of frank talk about suffering for Jesus’ sake as part of their catechetical instruction to the church, especially as it began to grow and was increasingly dispersed. The opening of Peter’s pastoral letter indicates it is written “to those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1 Pet 1:1).

Peter’s letter to Jewish and Gentile converts in Asia Minor was to provide pastoral instruction about the Christian life in Jesus, including the reality of suffering.

Just as Jesus told the apostles that he wanted them to know suffering was in store for them so they would not fall away, Peter echoes this reality in a pastoral way in our text, as if to say, “he who has ears to hear, let him hear”: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (4:12). Today we might say, “Forewarned is forearmed.” When you are persecuted for following Jesus, when you are reviled, insulted, shunned, shut out, ridiculed, arrested, imprisoned, put to death, sifted as wheat by Satan through severe trials, do not be alarmed. There is no need to ask God why this is happening to you. There is no reason to be ashamed. This kind of suffering as a Christian is an uncomfortable, hot, fiery trial to test you, Peter writes. When metals and ore are heated in the testing pot, it can be determined what their makeup is. Spiritual trials test us, revealing our makeup. These fiery trials were often experienced by people of faith in the Old Testament. For example, God said to Israel through the prophet Isaiah, “I have refined you… . I have tried you in the furnace of affliction” (Is 48:10).

Fiery trials show us how weak and helpless we are. They reveal how utterly dependent we are on God’s grace and mercy, and how much we need the prayers of Jesus so that we may bear them. When we are in the midst of these trials, we are often driven more deeply into God’s Word and prayer. We yearn more for words of comfort and hope as we hear God’s Word and receive the body and blood of Jesus. It is only then that we are able to rejoice in our sufferings. It is then, as we hear the voice of God speak to us just as clearly as Jesus spoke to the apostles, that we are reminded we are not alone through these trials. That gives us a whole new perspective. We can confess with assurance and joy, “The Spirit of glory and God rests upon me. I am blessed when I am insulted, for I share Christ’s sufferings. He has counted me worthy to suffer for his name.” So we need not despair in our suffering as though God were punishing us. It is quite the opposite. Rather, as Peter urges, we entrust our soul to the faithful Creator so we can go about doing the good that he has called us to do. We can let go of worrying about suffering and cast all of our anxieties on Jesus because he cares for us.

The life of a Christian is secure in Jesus. However, Peter urges us, we must be watchful because we have an enemy who seeks to rob us of our Easter joy and our faithfulness to Christ.

III.

Peter reminds us to remain vigilant. This is no game of make-believe. Satan is real. Be watchful. Martin Luther noted that the world is the realm of the devil and we would be wise to regard our life as if we were staying in a hotel where every
other guest was a robber. We would do whatever we could to protect ourselves and likely not get much sleep. In other words, we would be on our constant guard (see AE 30:140).

Make no mistake. Satan is our adversary, prowling around like a lion. If you’ve watched TV programs of nature where lions are in the wild, or even observed a yard cat, you know that they see their prey long before the prey is aware. The lion studies the movements and stealthily creeps along the tall grass until the prey is not paying attention. Then it springs forth and sinks its teeth and claws into its prey, putting the death grip of its jaws around the throat.

Not only be watchful, but resist Satan when he tempts you. Peter says, remaining firm in your faith. Hold onto the Word of God in your heart and use it as Jesus did during his temptations from Satan. Do not give up or let go of the Word for anything. And know that you are not alone. Not only does the Spirit of God rest upon you and go with you through these fiery trials, but countless Christians join you as well. The same type of suffering is experienced by your sisters and brothers in the faith throughout the world. Yes, you truly can, as Peter writes, “[cast] all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you” (5:7).

Satan is not in charge. The world, who serves as Satan’s puppet, is not in charge. It may appear that way, as he and the world inflict all sorts of warfare on Christians. But Jesus demonstrated that he is Lord of lords. Scripture tells us that Jesus descended into hell to announce his resurrection victory to all, right under the nose of Satan. Satan used worthless people to lie about Jesus and falsely accuse him, resulting in his crucifixion, but the reality is that no one took Jesus’ life. He laid down his life willingly to be the perfect sacrifice for sin. What Satan intended for destruction, Jesus used for our salvation. When Jesus breathed his last, our sin fully atoned, Satan thought Jesus would be buried and forgotten as some misfit. But the Lord of Life would not be contained. Having destroyed the curse of sin, Jesus burst forth from the tomb, swallowing up death and giving in its place everlasting life. He lives! He lives! Therefore, Peter says, “after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever” (5:10–11).

There is no fine print to be concerned about in your discipleship of Jesus. No gimmicks. It is a reality that you will suffer trials for the name of Jesus. But they will not last forever. At the right time, Jesus, the mighty hand of God, will exalt you. He will restore you, confirm you, strengthen you, and establish you. Your suffering will be over, and you will be with him in the everlasting paradise that he has prepared for you, rejoicing with gladness as his glory is revealed. Amen.
celebration for the fulfillment of God’s promises to deliver his people. This is reflected in the conversations that people were having during the festival (Jn 7:25–27, 40–52). Little did they realize that the Savior was standing in their midst.

The Feast of Booths or Tabernacles, which occurred in the fall of the year (September–October on the Gregorian calendar), was about six to seven months before Passover. The setting of John 7 is the last feast that Jesus would attend and preach in the Jerusalem temple before his final week of earthly ministry, the week of the next Passover. Fifty days after Passover, the Feast of Pentecost was observed.

Textual Notes

V 37: Note the eschatological significance of “the last day of the feast, the great day.” The last day of the Feast of Booths was the greatest day, as the feast came to a climax with water from the pool of Siloam poured out in the temple, commemorating God’s provision when water flowed from “the rock at Horeb” (Ex 17:6) in the desert wilderness to quench the thirst of his people and their livestock. There would have been great commotion as the trumpets sounded loudly and the people sang the ancient hymns of the psalter. Zechariah’s prophecy also references a last day, the day of Jesus’ crucifixion as Israel looks upon “him whom they have pierced” (Zech 12:10). “On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness” (Zech 13:1).

In light of the loud festivities and crowd in the temple on “the great day,” twice Jesus ἐκράξεν, “cried out,” to the crowds (vv 28, 37) with a sense of urgency and with a volume so that he could be heard (cf Mt 14:30; Jn 12:44; Acts 7:60). He had something vitally important to tell them.

V 38: Jesus is likely not quoting a particular Scripture verse; rather, he is capturing the truth of what was proclaimed by the Old Testament prophets before him. There is ample reference in the Old Testament to highlight this, not only from the events of Exodus 17, but also from the Book of Isaiah (for example, ch 58) and Zechariah (13:1; 14:8).

V 39: This verse is the clear connection of this Gospel text to the Church’s celebration of Pentecost. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to feel our spiritual thirst and to drink from the water that Jesus gives, and he becomes in that person “a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:14). With our spiritual thirst quenched by Jesus, believers become “rivers of living water” to all whom God places into our lives and through whatever vocational station in life we occupy as we serve our neighbor. Serving our neighbor with compassionate and tangible expressions of mercy and inviting people to receive the spiritual refreshment of the Living Water does not need to be forced or prescribed. Rather, the Holy Spirit enables gushing, reckless, overflowing rivers of water to pour forth from hearts of compassion for others who thirst. This is precisely what occurred on the day of Pentecost, ten days after Jesus’ ascension, and would continue ever after in the lives of Christians, beginning with the events most clearly articulated by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles.

“Jesus was not yet glorified” is the organic Gospel connection between the three feasts. Six or seven months from the events of this text, Jesus will be glorified by God during Passover as he lays down his life to atone for the sin of the world and as he is lifted up in his resurrection (Jn 12:27–33; 13:31–32; 17:1–5). The Holy Spirit, given out on Pentecost, enabled the apostles to reveal Jesus as Messiah to people of many languages as they gathered for this feast.

Truly, the Holy One of God, who was our substitute under the Law and the curse of God’s condemnation of sin, became sin for us. As Jesus underwent agonizing torture at the hands of ruthless men through beating, scourging, and crucifixion, in thirst his dried tongue stuck to his jaw. The Living Water became the sinful, desolate spiritual thirst of humanity and suffered its effects to atone for our sin. He was “poured out like water” for us (Ps 22:14–15) so we could drink from the river of his delight (Ps 36:8). Indeed, when Jesus’ side was pierced after his death on the cross, water and blood gushed forth as a cleansing river for the forgiveness and healing of the sin of the world (Zech 13:1). The Holy Spirit flows out of the Christian’s heart as a river of living water.

Sermon Outline

2. Jesus cries out to us an invitation to quench our spiritual thirst with the true water of life: himself.
1. To all who drink of him, Jesus gives his Holy Spirit, who flows from our hearts as rivers of living water.

JESUS QUENCHES OUR SPIRITUAL THIRST AND ENABLES US TO BE RIVERS OF LIVING WATER.

Sermon

One of the most agonizing experiences we can have is to see someone suffer, especially if it’s a close loved one. It’s absolutely heart-wrenching. We wish we could do something to help. More devastating, perhaps, is if someone we love is suffering because of his or her lifestyle or behaviors and won’t admit it. While there’s not much we can do, still our heart aches because we love the person.

2. How much more agonizing it was for Jesus as he attended the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths, which is the context of our Scripture text. The Feast of Tabernacles was an eight-day commemoration and celebration of God’s merciful provision as the people of Israel were brought out of captivity in Egypt and entered the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. As the children of Israel and their livestock suffered from thirst, God commanded Moses to strike a rock in the middle of the desert, and water miraculously gushed out.
God wanted to teach the Israelites through this object lesson that he would always provide for his people and that they should not doubt him. God then commanded them to gather once a year in Jerusalem to commemorate his abundant provision for their thirst. As you can imagine, God used this feast as an opportunity to remind them that he would satisfy their spiritual thirst in the sending of the Messiah. For a thousand years, faithful Jews made the trip to Jerusalem not only for the celebration, but with the hopeful expectation that Messiah might finally reveal himself at the event.

Imagine the agony on Jesus’ heart at this moment. For two and a half years, he has been preaching, calling people to repent because God’s kingdom was at hand. He performed miracles as signs for people to see that he is, indeed, the promised Savior. He openly stated that he is the fulfillment of Scripture’s prophecy, that he was sent by the Father to redeem the world from sin. Yet most, especially the religious leaders, rejected him. John notes in this same chapter of his Gospel that even Jesus’ own brothers rejected him at this time. I can only imagine how much it hurt Jesus to be rejected by his own family. Nevertheless, from the compassionate heart of Jesus flowed living water.

Now, as Jesus is in the midst of temple celebrations with water pouring out around the altar, trumpets sounding, people singly loudly, Jesus stands up and cries out even louder, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water’.” (vv 37–38). Once again, Jesus demonstrates the love and compassion of God. God wants all of his creation to be saved; therefore, Jesus will not give up. He calls out to all who are spiritually thirsty to come to him. He boldly claims that he is the source of salvation. He is the true water of life.

John adds that Jesus said these things “about the Spirit, whom those who believe in him were to receive” (v 39a). The day of Pentecost recorded in Acts 2 was a fulfillment of Jesus’ word, because, as of this Feast of Booths, “the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (v 39b).

The Feast of Tabernacles in our text is just six to seven months before the next feast, the Feast of Passover. It was the last feast that Jesus would attend. By the end of Passover, Jesus was the sacrificial Lamb of God, to take away the sin of the world. Here, Jesus would be glorified by the Father as he was crucified, bearing the sin, death, and spiritual thirst of all creation as our substitute under God’s righteous wrath and condemnation, so we could have spiritual life and our thirst quenched. Meditate on this: The One who is the source of living water suffered such thirst, was so dehydrated during the whole ordeal on our behalf that his tongue stuck to his jaw (Ps 22:15). As the Fountain of Life died on the cross and a soldier pierced his abdomen, blood and water flowed out of his lifeless body to cover sin and give life to all who would believe that he is the Savior of the world. Jesus’ atonement for sin was for all.

1.

Jesus gives his Holy Spirit to all who drink from him, believe his Gospel, and receive him through the promises of his Word and Sacraments. One could say that each Sunday is a Feast of Tabernacles. Each Sunday is a Feast of Pentecost. You receive the Holy Spirit as you hear, in a language you can understand, the Good News of Jesus as the living water, who satisfies your spiritual thirst. People throughout the world today are hearing the Gospel proclaimed in their own heart language, just as they did on the day of Pentecost. It is only through the Holy Spirit’s saving work that anyone is able to recognize their spiritual thirst, come to Jesus, and receive his merciful forgiveness in the waters of Baptism, in the Words of Absolution, and in the very body and blood of Jesus that was shed for them on Calvary’s cross.

The Holy Spirit is the one who keeps you in this faith in Jesus. The Law of God and life itself remind you of your spiritual thirst. The problem is that your sinful nature will always want to turn away from Jesus and deny your thirst or search for spiritual fulfillment from other places. As your pastor, I cry out to you as Jesus did in our text. Don’t deny your brokenness and spiritual thirst. Don’t pretend that everything is okay as you secretly try to hide your guilt and shame and pain. Please don’t try to fill emptiness in your soul with unhealthy relationships, consume your life and time working for things that eventually are destroyed, or mask your pain through drugs and alcohol. Rather, come! Hear the invitation of Jesus. Come to Jesus, the living water, and receive his mercy. Drink deeply. Drink often. He will fill you, not with just a trickle or little stream of water, but with an overflowing river of his Holy Spirit.

Refreshed and renewed from Jesus’ heart of living water, out of your redeemed heart flows the Holy Spirit like a raging river of mercy to go with God’s benediction and be a blessing to your family, to your neighbors, to wherever you work and share the mercy that you have received freely. Help your family. Help your neighbor. Help those with whom you work. Support efforts of mission and mercy. That’s what the first Christians did. And when you’re asked, “You seem different. What’s gotten into you?” you can speak to them about Jesus. You can invite them to drink of Jesus. You can invite them to join you, here, where

**JESUS QUENCHES OUR SPIRITUAL THIRST AND ENABLES US TO BE RIVERS OF LIVING WATER.**

Jesus will fill them with rivers of living water too. Amen.
We certainly live among the Bible’s trees! The Bible reports God creating trees on the third day (Gen 1:11–13), and trees apparently survive the Last Day’s annihilation of the present ground and sky to reappear on the new earth under the new heaven (Is 65:17; 66:22; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1–2), such as in the new Jerusalem (Rev 22:1–20). So the Bible’s trees are relevant to us. In fact, considering them helps us realize why we need a Savior, how God provided a Savior for us in Jesus, who died on the cross, and how the saved lives of repentant believers look.

This series consists of nine sermons, but not all nine need be used. The series is very flexible. For example, the nine may be distributed to Ash Wednesday, the five subsequent midweek services, Holy (Maundy) Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter, either the Vigil, sunrise service, or Divine Service. Or, in order that Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter services may follow their prescribed propers, five trees may be chosen for the five subsequent midweek services that would otherwise lack their own propers. Further, circuits or other groups of pastors participating in a round-robin need not necessarily preach the sermons in the biblical order listed.

The sermons are primarily based on the recommended psalm and two readings (some of which are used in the regular lectionary series while others are not, and some of which are considerably longer than the usual lectionary readings). In some cases, the sermon makes reference to the recommended hymn. If, in addition to the Collect of the Day, another collect for Lent is desired, one might consider any of the sixteen Additional Collects for Lent on pages 105–10 of The Lutheran Liturgy (the old TLH “Altar Book”).

Depending on one’s definition, many other “trees” could have been included: the burning bush (Ex 3:1–4:17), Absalom’s tree (2 Sam 18:10), trees decorating the temple (1 Ki 6:29–32, although these are mentioned in passing in one of the provided sermons), Elijah’s broom tree (1 Ki 19:1–18), Jonah’s vine (Jonah 4), Zacchaeus’s tree (Lk 19:1–10), the palm trees (whose branches are mentioned as in Palm Sunday’s Jn 12:12–19 and All Saints’ Day’s Rev 7:9–17 readings), and Judas’s tree (Mt 27:5–10; Acts 1:15–26). Perhaps one or more of these actually appeal to the reader as the bases for sermons he would like to substitute into this series. There are, in fact, almost enough trees for another full Lenten sermon series. Given the centrality of the tree to the whole of biblical faith (1 Cor 2:2) and certainly to the season of Lent, that’s no surprise!

ASH WEDNESDAY

Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil

Psalm 1 (antiphon v 3); Genesis 2:8–9, 15–17; 3:1–24; Deuteronomy 30:15–20
Hymn: LSB 569 or 572

Sermon Outline

Considering the TREE OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL, WE REALIZE THAT, ALTHOUGH WE DO ONLY EVIL, WE HAVE LIFE AND EVERY OTHER GOOD IN CHRIST.

I. We do only evil.
II. We have life in Christ and every other good.
Sermon

Unless we are more environmentally minded than most, we may only care about the trees we see and experience on a daily basis, such as the ones that drop sap or leaves on our cars, shade our homes, and paint our landscapes. You may be able to think of other such examples. Although we may not see them every day in the same way, the Bible’s trees are nonetheless relevant to us. In fact, considering them helps us realize why we need a Savior, how God provided a Savior for us in the person of Jesus Christ, and how the saved lives of repentant believers look. This repentant season of Lent, our special sermon series is themed “Living among the Bible’s Trees.” We begin that series by considering the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Considering the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, We Realize That, Although We Do Only Evil, We Have Life and Every Other Good in Christ.

I.

Although the first chapter of Genesis narrates God’s creating fruit trees in general and mentions his giving all those trees to the first man and woman for food (Gen 1:11–12, 29), the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is the second of two specific trees mentioned in the Bible, as we heard in the First Reading. This particular fruit tree God’s Word set apart; it was “fenced,” as it were, by his Word,1 which told the man not to eat of it, under penalty of physical and spiritual death. The man and later also the woman apparently were to honor God with obedience to his Word that expressed his will regarding the tree. They were to work and keep not only the garden but also God’s commands concerning the garden and their relationship to it.2

Tragically, the serpent tempted the woman to doubt God’s Word spoken to her by her husband and pastor regarding this particular tree. Since she considered the tree’s fruit good for food, a delight to the eyes, and desirable to make one wise, she took the serpent up on his tempting suggestion and also gave some of the fruit to her husband who was with her. They both disobeyed God by eating of it, and they both suffered the consequences for their sin, including being banished from the garden.

Through the centuries, art has usually depicted the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—and culture has usually referred to it—as an apple tree, but we really do not know what kind of fruit tree it was. Nor do we know much about just how the tree lived up to its name, although there are various speculations.3 Certainly before the man and woman ate of the tree, God’s Word revealed to them what was good and what was evil. And later, presumably out of pious concern for the truth in this regard, King Solomon’s request for an understanding mind to discern between good and evil pleased the Lord (1 Ki 3:9). So, people knowing the difference between good and evil cannot itself be the problem. Maybe all we can say for sure about the man and woman’s eating of the tree is that doing so changed for the worse their relationship to God and their relationship to each other.4 As their physical and spiritual descendants, we by nature suffer from those same consequences of their sin, and our sinful natures lead us to add sins of our own. This, of course, is what we confessed tonight by receiving ashes on our foreheads, and what we were reminded with those words, “For you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:19).

Unlike the first man and woman, we are not purely good to begin with, but we all by nature are dead in our trespasses and sins. We are dead in our trespasses and sins regardless of our age. Any so-called “age of accountability” or “age of discernment” or “age of discretion” is imagined; ignorance of good and evil has never been an excuse, and no one is truly ignorant anyway. God’s Word continues to reveal to us all what is good and what is evil, and so, like the man and woman, we all also are to honor God with obedience to his Word. But apart from faith in God, by nature all we can do is dishonor him with disobedience to his Word. Our Psalm presented well the two ways: (1) the way of sinners, walking in the counsel of the wicked and sitting in the seat of scoffers, or (2) the way of the righteous, delighting in the “law” (or “teaching”) of the Lord and meditating on it day and night. The wicked are like the chaff that the wind drives away; they do not belong to the Lord’s Church and will not withstand his judgment but perish. The righteous are like trees that do not wither, because they are planted by streams of water and bear their fruit in its season; the Lord knows them and blesses them.

II.

The righteous are righteous when, as God enables them to do, they turn in sorrow from their sin and trust God to forgive their sin for Jesus’ sake. Jesus is the Seed of the woman, who bruised the head of the serpent to the point of defeat—a smackdown from which the serpent ultimately will never arise—since, even as the serpent bruised Jesus’ heel to the point of death on the cross (Gen 3:15), Jesus did arise and lives forevermore. Jesus perfectly honored God with obedience to his Word, and on the cross he paid the price for our failure to do so. Jesus’ sacrifice fulfills the animal sacrifice God made for skins to cover the man and woman’s shame. The fear of the Lord in the form of faith in Jesus is the wisdom we need in order to be forgiven (Prov 1:7).

As God’s Word set apart a particular fruit tree that ended up being the cause of the man and woman’s physical and spiritual death, so God’s Word now sets apart other ordinary things to be the cause of our physical and spiritual life, if we do not reject them. God so works life for us through his read and preached words of Holy Scripture, through the water...
and the Word of Holy Baptism, through the words and rite of individual Holy Absolution, and through the bread that is Christ’s body and the wine that is Christ’s blood in Holy Communion. These Means of Grace enable our repentance and faith, give us the forgiveness of sins, and result in our honoring of God with obedience to his Word. Considering the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, we realize that, although we do only evil, we have life and every other good in Christ.

In the Second Reading, God set before the people of Israel, whom he had delivered from slavery in Egypt, blessings of life and curses of death and called the people to choose life. Likewise, God sets before us, whom he has given physical and spiritual life, the same blessings of life and curses of death and calls us to choose life. In that regard, the scenario is largely the same as it was for the man and woman facing the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Apart from the First Reading, Holy Scripture never again mentions that tree, and so it remains somewhat shrouded in mystery to us. Likely part of God’s salvation for us by grace through faith in his Son, Jesus Christ, is that we do not have to deal with that tree eternally. Rather, whatever might bring death has been removed from us, and so, as we are “Living among the Bible’s Trees,” we have only life in Christ and all the good that life brings! Amen.

LENTEN MIDWEEK 2

Great Trees of Mamre near the Machpelah

Psalm 96 (antiphon vv 12b–13a); Genesis 18:1–33; 23:1–20
Hymn: LSB 798

Sermon Outline

Considering the Great Trees of Mamre near the Machpelah, We Realize That, Though We Deserve to Be Deserted by God, We Are Blessed in Abraham’s Offspring, Jesus Christ.

I. We deserve to be deserted by God.
II. We are blessed in Abraham’s offspring, Jesus Christ.

Sermon

In the fall of 2018, a shooting left a dozen people dead at a country music bar and, a day later, a wildfire raged through this same community of Thousand Oaks, California, forcing hundreds to evacuate. The mayor of this city, Andy Fox, referred to what he called the strongest of trees for which his city was named and said the people of Thousand Oaks would show their strength through their resilience after the crises. In their pasts, other people have also faced notorious violent crimes and threats from wildfires as they lived in their wooded communities. But whether or not we have faced such crimes and threats, all of us also live among the Bible’s trees, such as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that we heard about last week and the “oaks” of Mamre near the Machpelah that we hear about this week, as we continue our special Lenten sermon series, “Living among the Bible’s Trees.”

Considering the Great Trees of Mamre near the Machpelah, We Realize That, Though We Deserve to Be Deserted by God, We Are Blessed in Abraham’s Offspring, Jesus Christ.

I.

Our text begins, “And the Lord appeared to [Abraham] by the oaks of Mamre” (Gen 18:1). With a number of different original Hebrew words in use, instead of “oak” trees, translators sometimes call these trees “great trees” or “Terebinth,” and so we might at least say that the trees of Mamre were notable for their size. At some point, Abraham had moved his tent by these trees of Mamre near Hebron, and as he settled there he also built an altar to the Lord (Gen 13:18). In Genesis 18, the Lord’s appearance to Abraham by those great trees of Mamre told us, among other things, that the Lord reiterated his promise of a son for Abraham and Sarah, this time in Sarah’s hearing (compare Gen 17:15–21).

In Genesis 23, our second reading from Genesis, we heard about Abraham’s acquiring, in a typical protracted negotiation under Hittite law, the land just east of Mamre, with its trees and the cave of Machpelah, which Abraham wanted for a burying place, initially for Sarah. Later it was also used for Abraham himself (Gen 25:9–10), their son Isaac (Gen 35:27, 29), Isaac’s wife Rebekah, their son Jacob, Jacob’s wife Leah (Gen 49:29–32; 50:13), and perhaps also Jacob’s son Joseph (Gen 50:25; Ex 13:19; Heb 11:22; cf Josh 24:32 and Acts 7:15–16). In the thousands of years since these burials, locations of both Abraham’s “oak” and the cave of the Machpelah have been and still are thought to be known. It was even claimed that one of the trees in that place went back all the way to creation. That seems far-fetched, but historical reports and archaeological evidence attesting to this as the site of Abraham’s cave do go back centuries before the time of Christ.

As sad as the loss of that oak or any other single tree might be, sadder still is humanity’s loss of access to the whole garden of trees that, in the beginning, God created for our first parents and for us. Sadder still is the death our first parents died and we ourselves will die, and deservedly so. You may recall that God himself had driven out Adam and Eve and, at the east of the Garden of Eden, God placed...
the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life (Gen 3:24). For Abraham and his household, the great trees of Mamre were an oasis in the desert, a reprieve from the sun and heat, and a place to rest, but these trees were nevertheless also a reminder of the better garden lost through sin.10 Before the fall, there was no oppressive heat, no need for an oasis in the desert; the warmth of the sun was always only welcome. Much worse, in the time after Abraham, the shady oases under similar large trees became sites of sin, especially prostitution in the fertility rites of false worship (Is 1:29; 57:5; Ezek 6:13; Hos 4:13–14).11

You and I may not participate in such prostitution as the fertility rites of false worship, but we no doubt sin in other ways—thoughts, words, and deeds against the Sixth and First Commandments and against all the other Commandments, as well. Thoughts of other men or other women. Words of jokes or suggestive comments. Deeds of spending our income in ways that show God isn’t always first in our lives. Greater than the loss of access to the Garden of Eden’s trees is the death our first parents died and we ourselves will die, and deservedly so because of our sinful nature and of all our sin. In the First Reading, God did not hide his judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah from Abraham, and neither does God hide his judgment of others’ and our own sin from us. In interceding for Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham confessed his own origin from dust and destination to ashes.12 Enabled by God, we do well to do the same: repent, at least figuratively in dust and ashes, this Lenten season and always. For when we repent, God forgives our sinful nature and all our sin. God forgives our sins against the Sixth and First Commandments and against all the other Commandments. God forgives all our sin, whatever our sin might be. God forgives us for the sake of Abraham’s greatest offspring, Jesus Christ.

II.

The Second Person of the Blessed Trinity in human flesh descended from Abraham; Jesus Christ is the offspring of Abraham in whom all the nations of the earth are blessed. Jesus was born, lived, and died on the cross in order to save every person from his or her sin, including you and me. Out of his great love for you and for me, Jesus gives his perfect life in place of our imperfect lives; Jesus died the death our sins deserve, so that we do not have to die eternally. And Jesus rose from the dead and thereby showed his victory over sin, death, and the power of the devil for us. Abraham’s intercession and mediation for Sodom and Gomorrah may have led to the saving, in the end, of three lives—his nephew Lot and Lot’s two daughters (Gen 19:15–26)—but Jesus’ intercession and mediation for us leads to the saving of a far greater number of lives, as we repent of our sin and receive his forgiveness through his Means of Grace.

Remember in the First Reading Abraham providing unleavened bread for the Lord and those with him? That especially points us to the Sacrament of the Altar, where unleavened bread is the body of Christ given for us and wine is the blood of Christ shed for us, giving us the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. But better than the meal Abraham served the Lord under the great trees of Mamre, at this altar and its rail the Lord himself serves us. Here he has fellowship with us, all of us who are brought into his household, not by the covenant of circumcision made with hands (cf Gen 17:1–27) but by what the divinely inspired St. Paul calls the circumcision made without hands, the circumcision of Christ. In Holy Baptism, we are buried with Christ and raised with him through faith (Col 2:11–12). This house of God is the oasis in the desert of our lives, for here we have rest and refreshment, as Abraham and the Lord had under the great trees at Mamre. Considering the great trees of Mamre near the Machpelah, we realize that, though we deserve to be deserted by God, we are blessed in Abraham’s offspring, Jesus Christ.

The trees near the cave of the Machpelah no doubt helped locate the cave where Sarah and the others were buried. Abraham’s purchase of that burying place proceeded from his faith—his faith in God’s promise not only to give the land to his descendants but also to raise the dead on the Last Day. God similarly gives us faith to live in our callings, including our callings as faithful spouses and relatives burying loved ones; the regard we show for the body God has created, redeemed, and sanctified gives clear witness to the sure and certain hope of the resurrection. God gives us faith, too, to serve in our callings as faithful employees or students and in all of the other life settings. God makes us to be what Isaiah referred to as “oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified” (Is 61:3).13 And after the resurrection of the dead, our access to the tree of life is restored in the heavenly Jerusalem that comes down out of heaven from God (Rev 21:2; 22:1–2).

Months after the shooting and fire in Thousand Oaks, local high schools participated in a marching band showcase because the shooting and fire had cut their regular marching band season short. The event was in fact much more than a marching band showcase. For the Thousand Oaks community, it was a commemoration of everything they had been through and a celebration of all they could do together.14 Music is also often part of our celebration when God brings us through everything he permits us to face. For example, the antiphon for our appointed Psalm today (Ps 96:12b–13a) describes the trees of the forest as if human, singing for joy because the Lord comes to judge the earth. While that judgment means eternal condemnation for the unrepentant, by God’s grace for the sake of Jesus Christ, that judgment also means eternal salvation for those of us who repent. Amen.
Oak at Ophrah

Psalm 78 (antiphon v 4); Judges 6:1-40; Matthew 12:38-42
Hymn: LSB 424

Sermon Outline

Considering the Oak at Ophrah, We Realize That, Though We, like Gideon, Sin by Seeking Signs and Testing the Lord, Jesus Saves All Who Believe from Sin, Death, and Satan.

I. We, like Gideon, sin by seeking signs and testing the Lord.
II. Jesus saves all who believe from sin, death, and Satan.

Sermon

Maybe something like this has happened to you: You move to a new place and, when you ask for directions, someone answers in a way that depends on an old landmark that’s no longer there. For example, maybe the person said something like, “Go down this road until you get to where that big, old oak tree used to be before it was cut down, and then turn left.”

Well, maybe no one asks for directions anymore at all—everyone uses their smartphones now—and Google Maps certainly is not going to use a cut-down oak tree as a landmark. But in the First Reading, a terebinth (ESV) or oak tree (KJV, ASV, NIV, NASB) at Ophrah, a town that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, served at least at that time as a landmark, not unlike the great trees of Mamre near the Machpelah. Under the oak at Ophrah, the Angel of the Lord came and sat while Gideon was beating out wheat in a winepress, attempting to hide it from the marauding Midianites. The conversation that ensued between the Lord and Gideon, Gideon’s later testing of God by asking for signs, and the scribes and Pharisees’ much later asking of Jesus for a sign are all relevant for us who are, as it were, “Living among the Bible’s Trees,” the theme for our special Lenten sermon series. Tonight,

Considering the Oak at Ophrah, We Realize That, Though We, like Gideon, Sin by Seeking Signs and Testing the Lord, Jesus Saves All Who Believe from Sin, Death, and Satan.

I.

The Lord called Gideon to be a “judge” or “leader” of at least a group of the Israelites when they cried out to him on account of the Midianites. The Lord had given Israel over to Midian because, despite all he had done in delivering them from Egypt, the people had not obeyed the Lord’s voice but had done what was evil in his sight. As you may know, the Book of Judges is replete with similar cycles of the people straying from the Lord, being oppressed, crying for deliverance, and being provided a judge (or “deliverer”). The generation after Joshua apparently had not been well-formed in the faith, as they, in general, did not know the Lord or the work that the Lord had done for Israel (Josh 2:10). Yet, as we heard in the reading, Gideon had heard of the Lord’s wonderful deeds. Apparently, he could not reconcile what he had heard about the Lord with what the people were now experiencing. Perhaps somewhat ironically,1 the Angel of the Lord called Gideon a mighty man of valor, though Gideon’s response suggested that he would be anything but brave in war. Gideon was insecure and reluctant to answer the Lord’s call, asking for a sign of the Lord’s power and willingness to help Gideon save Israel.

Of course, Gideon is not alone in history either in asking the Lord for signs of proof or in putting the Lord to the test, trying to make the Lord prove himself. The second-longest psalm, Psalm 78, which we chanted earlier, tries to teach the next generation by recounting the glorious deeds of the Lord so that they would not, like the previous generations, forget his signs, rebel against him, and test him. Nevertheless, in Jesus’ day, the Jewish leaders ignored the signs Jesus did, rejected him, and asked for other signs. We may similarly seek signs, at times reject Jesus, and ignore those signs that he does give us. By nature, we are part of the same evil and adulterous generation as the Jews of Jesus’ day. And, like the Israelites of Gideon’s day, all too often even we Christians do not obey the Lord’s voice but instead do what is evil in his sight. Unless we repent, as God calls and so enables us to do, we will be like the unrepentant scribes and Pharisees at the judgment, condemned by those Gentiles who answered God’s call to repent through Jonah and Solomon. But, when we repent—when we turn in sorrow from our sin, trust God to forgive our sin, and want to do better than to keep on sinning—we receive God’s forgiveness. He forgives our ignoring his signs, rejecting him, asking for other signs, or whatever our sin might be. God graciously forgives all our sin on account of the death of his Son, Jesus the Christ.

II.

Greater than Jonah and Solomon, Jesus is the Son of God in human flesh. The same “Angel” or “Messenger” of the Lord, who in a preincarnate form came and sat under the terebinth or oak at Ophrah, Jesus himself saved Israel and all people from sin, death, and the power of the devil. Jesus lived the perfect life we fail to live, and on the cross he himself died in our place the death that we deserve on account of our failures. And Jesus did not stay dead, but, as the greatest sign of all, after parts of three days and nights in the belly of the earth, he rose from the dead and declared his victory.

As God repeatedly showed mercy and graciously forgave the Israelites whom he brought out of Egypt and brought
into the Promised Land, so not only this Lenten season but always God repeatedly shows mercy and graciously forgives all who cry out to him in repentance. God eagerly forgives you all your sins!

And God gives you miraculous signs of his forgiveness so you do not have to doubt his gracious favor toward you or otherwise put him to the test. God gave Noah the rainbow (Gen 9:12–13, 17) and Abraham circumcision (Gen 17:11). God gave Gideon miraculously consumed broth and unleavened bread, the wet fleece, and then also the dry fleece. God gives us all together his read and preached Word, and with bread and wine that are Christ’s body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar. Better than the reminders of old covenants—entrance rites that only directly benefited some and were one-time signs of God’s favor—God’s Word and Sacraments are means of his grace that connect us to the new covenant. These means are directly available to all, and can and should be returned to as often as we need his forgiveness—which is pretty often, considering we daily sin much and, apart from his forgiveness, surely deserve nothing but punishment (Small Catechism, Fifth Petition).

Not everyone is called by the Lord to “judge” or “lead” Israel as Gideon was. But, forgiven by God through his Word and Sacraments, we serve in the vocations to which God calls us by doing the good works he gives for us to do. And, like Gideon, our faith will know “moments of uncertainty as well as heights of greatness.” Especially at those “moments of uncertainty,” we can be encouraged by the Lord’s patience with Gideon, whom the divinely inspired author of Hebrews seems to suggest was made strong out of weakness (Heb 11:32–34). And as was the case with God’s testing of Abraham (Gen 22:1; Heb 11:17), God’s testing of us is for the purpose of refining our faith and drawing us closer to him (Heb 12:5–11). So considering the oak at Ophrah, we realize that, though we, like Gideon, sin by seeking signs and testing the Lord, Jesus saves all who believe from sin, death, and Satan.

Even with landmarks such as the oak at Ophrah, navigating our way at times can be difficult as we are “Living among the Bible’s Trees.” Yet, we are not alone! The Lord is with us! In sharp contrast to his early success, Gideon and his family were later ensnared by a foolish act of idolatry—even if under a best construction it may have been well-intentioned (Judg 8:27). Despite that sin, the author of Hebrews can still commend Gideon through his faith and speak of his being made perfect (Heb 11:39–40). In this life, neither he was perfect nor are we perfect. This Lenten season and always, we are humbled in repentance to live only by grace through faith. To that end, we close now by praying as we sang in the Office Hymn: “No binding sign we ask, No wonder from above. Lord, help us place our trust alone In Your unswerving love” (LSB 424:3). Amen.

### LENTEN MIDWEEK 4

#### Jesse’s Tree

Psalm 80:8–19 (antiphon v 19); Isaiah 6:1–13; 10:33–11:16

Hymn: LSB 342

#### Sermon Outline

**Considering Jesse’s Tree, We Realize That,**  
**Though We, Like the People of Judah and Jerusalem, Are Laden with Iniquity, Jesus, the Shoot and Branch of Jesse, Comes Forth and Conquers for Us.**

I. We, like the people of Judah and Jerusalem, are laden with iniquity.

II. Jesus, the Shoot and Branch of Jesse, comes forth and conquers for us.

#### Sermon

During Advent, First Presbyterian Church in Tyler, Texas, hangs on its lectern a dramatic purple parament depicting the stump of Jesse blossoming with a bloom resembling a lily. In our Second Reading tonight, you heard reference to a “shoot” and a “branch” from the “stump” and “roots” of Jesse (sometimes translated a “rod” from the “stem” or “stock” of Jesse). Jesse, of course, was King David’s father. Based in part on a Latin translation, some even extend the figure of speech to make the stem to be the Virgin Mary and to make her flower (sometimes “bloom” or “rose”) to be Christ. Regardless, that lectern parament presents a striking image of the “Jesse Tree” that we focus on in this fourth sermon of our special Lenten series themed “Living among the Bible’s Trees.”

**Considering Jesse’s Tree, We Realize That,**  
**Though We, Like the People of Judah and Jerusalem, Are Laden with Iniquity, Jesus, the Shoot and Branch of Jesse, Comes Forth and Conquers for Us.**

I. We, like the people of Judah and Jerusalem, are laden with iniquity.

In our First Reading, we heard God call Isaiah to proclaim a message of judgment against Judah and its capital Jerusalem at the hands of the Assyrians. Their land, Isaiah was to tell them, would be burned, like a tree reduced to a stump. But all hope was not lost, for the holy seed was in that stump. The stump might appear to be dead, but it was not dead;
suckers (new shoots) could sprout from its roots. In the Book of Job, for example, we find this contrast of such a tree to a person who dies and is laid low: "For there is hope for a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that its shoots will not cease. Though its root grow old in the earth, and its stump die in the soil, yet at the scent of water it will bud and put out branches like a young plant" (Job 14:7–9).

So, not surprisingly, in the Second Reading, as Isaiah proclaims a message of judgment against the Assyrians and the start of new life for God's people, Isaiah returns to the image of the stump in order to prophesy ultimately of the long-promised Messiah. In short, judgment was necessary, but all hope for the future was not eliminated.

Judgment was necessary, as you might know or expect or guess, because the people of Judah and Jerusalem, especially their kings, had been unfaithful to God. Isaiah rebukes their many sins, but he especially addresses their idolatry, their worshiping false gods. Perhaps striking to our ears when successive generations are less and less "churched," God, through Isaiah, calls Judah children whom he reared and brought up who rebelled against him. He calls them a sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring (or "seed") of evildoers, children who deal corruptly, who had forsaken the Lord, despised the Holy One of Israel, and were utterly estranged. Through Isaiah, God says that an ox knows its owner and the donkey its master's crib, but his people did not know or understand (Is 1:2–4).

We are no different by nature, and all too often we are no different by thought, word, or deed, omitted or committed. We fail to fear, love, and trust God above all things, and so we misuse his name; we despise preaching and his Word in its verbal and sacramental forms; we disobey our parents and other authorities; we do not help and support our neighbors in every physical need; we do not lead sexually pure and decent lives; we do not help our neighbors to improve and protect their possessions and income; we do not explain everything in the kindest way; and we are not content with the possessions, people, and animals that God has given us. We deserve not only the sort of temporal punishment God through Isaiah promised Judah and Jerusalem, but we also deserve eternal torment in hell.

In another agricultural figure of speech, that of a vine, our Psalm (Ps 80:8–19) recounts the Lord's favored regard for Israel and its kings until the people's unfaithfulness prompted God to let them suffer—as part of his enabling call for them to repent. And as part of an answer to that enabling call to repent, the psalm pleads for the Lord to favor the king again and restore the people that they may call upon his name and be saved. We made the psalm's words our words! We rightly confess our sin not only on Sundays and Wednesdays during this penitential season of Lent but also every day of every season. For, when we confess our sin and trust God to forgive our sin, then God does just that: he forgives our sin, all our sin, whatever our sin might be, for the sake of his Son, Jesus the Christ, the Shoot that comes forth from the stump of Jesse, the Branch from his roots that bears fruit.

II.

By the time of the birth of Jesus, that royal line of David, the son of Jesse, seemed long dormant and dead. Yet, whether traced to the Virgin Mary, Jesus' mother, or Joseph, Jesus' legal father, Jesus descended from David (Lk 3:23–38; Mt 1:1–17). As Isaiah prophesies elsewhere, Jesus grew up like a young plant, a root out of dry ground, of humble origins and an unlikely prospect for success (Is 53:2). Yet, far greater than Solomon or any other king (Mt 12:42), Jesus is Jesse and David's key descendant, who epitomizes all that the Lord promised to David (2 Sam 7:1–17). Out of his great love for us, the whole triune God at Jesus' Baptism is involved in anointing him for his work, with what is called the sevenfold gift of the Spirit. Jesus was and is the promised Savior (Acts 13:22–23). Jesus is the holy Seed of the woman, who on the cross bruises the serpent's head to defeat him, though there the serpent bruises his heel to strike him dead for a time (Gen 3:15). The Root of David has conquered (Rev 5:5; cf 22:16), and he has conquered for us! As we with repentance and faith rally around him who stands as a signal to us individually in Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, and Holy Communion. In Holy Communion, the body and blood of Christ are present on this altar in bread and wine, distributed by me and received for the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. And then, as Isaiah's service followed, so our service follows. Not all are called and sent as Isaiah was, but all have callings (vocations) in life. In those we, drawing on the rich provision of God's grace, do the good works prescribed by his Commandments. In other words, abiding in him the Vine, we branch bear much fruit (Jn 15:5), ultimately bringing glory to God the Father as our good works lead others to hope in the Root of Jesse (Jn 15:8; Rom 15:12). And though we die and be laid low, on the Last Day we will be made alive again! Considering Jesse's tree, we realize that, though we, like the people of Judah and
Jerusalem, are laden with iniquity. Jesus, the Shoot and Branch of Jesse, comes forth and conquers for us.

Depictions of the “Jesse Tree” go back at least to the eleventh century, and those depictions are said to be the origin of representations of other family trees.18 Jesse’s tree often has Jesse lying on his back and a vine or tree growing out of his loins; symbols or depictions of various people in the line of descent are attached to the tree, and the Virgin Mary and the child Jesus usually appear at the top.19 Similar is the portion of the “Jesse Tree” window from the cathedral in Chartres, France. We thank and praise God for bringing forth our new life from Jesse’s seemingly dead stump, and, with expectant hope and peace and joy, we look forward to God fully and completely fulfilling the prophecy through Isaiah, by gathering his dispersed people from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven (Mk 13:27). Amen.

LENTEN MIDWEEK 5

Tree of the Lord’s Planting
Psalm 104:10–18 (antiphon v 16); Ezekiel 17:1–24; Mark 4:30–32
Hymn: LSB 540

Sermon Outline

Considering the Tree of the Lord’s Planting, We Realize That, Although We Are Disloyal and Sin in Other Ways, Jesus Saves Us and Makes Us to Dwell Securely.

I. We are disloyal and sin in other ways.
II. Jesus saves us and makes us to dwell securely.

Sermon

“From tiny acorns grow great oaks,” so they say. That may be, but the process never just happens. What we take to be simple and common acts of nature are always really the work of the Creator’s hand. It goes all the way back to the beginning when Genesis tells us that “the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east. . . . And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food” (Gen 2:8–9). Tonight, in the seventeenth chapter of Ezekiel, we heard about a particular tree that the Lord planted. We’ll consider that tree in this fifth sermon of our special Lenten sermon series, “Living among the Bible’s Trees.”

Considering the Tree of the Lord’s Planting, We Realize That, Although We Are Disloyal and Sin in Other Ways, Jesus Saves Us and Makes Us to Dwell Securely.

I.

In that reading from Ezekiel, our First Reading tonight, God uses trees in a figure of speech. Using a cedar, willow, and vine, God relates recent history allegorically: King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon taking King Jehoiachin of Israel captive and putting his relative Zedekiah in his place, only to have Zedekiah disloyally and unfaithfully seek help from Egypt. Then God prophesies the consequences of Zedekiah’s rebellion. Finally, using a similar figure of speech, the Lord God speaks of the tree that he himself will plant, in order to prophesy the Messiah and his kingdom, the Church.

Since the first man and woman ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, not only King Zedekiah but all of us in various ways have been disloyal and unfaithful. Nebuchadnezzar had Zedekiah swear a loyalty oath in the Lord’s name, but Zedekiah broke it. Instead of faithfully trusting in the Lord even at that point, Zedekiah sought from Egypt help that never really came. You and I in our Baptism renounced the devil, all of his works, and all of his ways, and at our confirmation we further vowed to live according to the Word of God and to remain true to him in faith, word, and deed. You make vows to spouses, and we make commitments to family, friends, and employers. How long do we go before we first and then repeatedly break such vows and commitments in thoughts, words, and deeds? You and I also face consequences for our rebellion against God in all its forms: we face not an exile in Babylon but death here in time and torment in hell for eternity.

The 1978 song called “The Trees” by the Canadian rock group Rush could just as well have been inspired by the First Reading. In the song, maple trees demand more light from lofty oaks and eventually form a union and pass a law that kept the trees equal by hatchet, axe, and saw. In the First Reading, not a “noble law” but the Lord brings low the high, proud tree and makes high the low, humble tree; the Lord dries up the green tree and makes the dry tree flourish. Unless we humbly repent and believe, as the Lord calls and enables us to do, we will be humiliated at the judgment and for all eternity. He is the Lord; he has spoken, and he will do it. So, we humbly turn in sorrow from our disloyalty and rebellion and from all our sin, we trust God to forgive our sin, and we want to do better than to keep on sinning. When we repent, we receive God’s forgiveness of our sin. God forgives all our sin, whatever it might be, for Jesus’ sake.
II.

Jesus is the Sprig from the lofty top of the cedar, the tender topmost of its young twigs, whom the Lord himself sets out and plants on a high and lofty mountain. And indeed, the New Testament shows us Jesus on mountains, such as when he was tempted, when he was transfigured, and when he finally comes again with the new Jerusalem. Jesus is the righteous Branch who saves Judah and makes Israel to dwell securely (Jer 23:5–6). The young Plant grew up and was despised and rejected by people, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. On the cross, he bore our griefs and carried our sorrows, was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities, in order to bring us peace with God and heal us from the eternal death we deserve (Is 53:2–5). For Jesus’ sake, whatever our sin might be, God forgives it all.

The Psalm for this day (Ps 104:10–18) recalls creation and the Garden of Eden with its parklike plenitude of trees. The two stanzas of the psalm that we chanted are the center of the psalm and tell of the good use to which God puts water, creating strong trees bursting with life, hordes of birds and other alpine animals. We should think of Holy Baptism and the good use to which God at the font puts water and his Word—working forgiveness of sins, rescuing us from death and the devil, and giving eternal salvation to all who believe the words and promises of God. Those so baptized live with daily sorrow over their sins and trust that God forgives their sin, and as needed they seek out the unique comfort offered by individual Holy Absolution from their pastor as from God himself. And those so baptized live in the shelter of the Church, sustained on the Church’s meal, the Sacrament of the Altar, bread that is Christ’s body and wine that is Christ’s blood, given and shed for the forgiveness of sins for life and salvation.

There is a tendency among some Americans wrongly to apply to the democratic country that is the United States promises that God made to the theocratic country that once was the Old Testament nation of Israel. We can and should pray both that our nation as a whole repents and that God richly blesses our nation as he has in the past, but we should not expect the United States to endure forever and to be what Jesus calls the “city set on a hill” (Mt 5:14); that’s more properly Christ’s Church. We should also not expect even the Church to achieve its greatest glory this side of eternity. Jesus’ teaching in the Second Reading, “every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit” (Mt 7:17). So, as we continue our Lenten sermon series, “Living among the Bible’s Trees,” we consider good trees bearing good fruit and bad trees bearing bad fruit.

Sermon Outline

Considering Good Trees Bearing Good Fruit and Bad Trees Bearing Bad Fruit, We Realize That, Though by Nature We Are Bad Trees Bearing Bad Fruit, God Changes Us into Good Trees Bearing Good Fruit.

I. By nature, we are bad trees bearing bad fruit.
II. God changes us into good trees bearing good fruit.

Sermon

People sometimes have trouble picking out produce at the grocery store. Is that avocado not ripe enough, or is it too ripe? Will that orange be juicy? Is the texture of that apple going to be mealy? Standing at the store, we are primarily concerned about the fruit in front of us and not so much the tree it came from. Yet, the quality of the fruit depends on the quality of the tree! As we heard the Lord Jesus say in the Second Reading, “every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit” (Mt 7:17). So, as we continue our Lenten sermon series, “Living among the Bible’s Trees,” we consider good trees bearing good fruit and bad trees bearing bad fruit.
**CONSIDERING GOOD TREES BEARING GOOD FRUIT AND BAD TREES BEARING BAD FRUIT, WE REALIZE THAT, THOUGH BY NATURE WE ARE BAD TREES BEARING BAD FRUIT, GOD CHANGES US INTO GOOD TREES BEARING GOOD FRUIT.**

I.

The Lord Jesus’ words in the Second Reading come in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, but he is recorded speaking similarly both later in St. Matthew’s Gospel (Mt 12:33–37) and in St. Luke’s Gospel account (Lk 6:43–44). And the passage from St. Paul’s divinely inspired Letter to the Galatians that we heard in the First Reading likely draws on both Jesus’ words and other similar teachings about faith and its fruit. The idea of finding grapes on a vine and not on something like a thistle plant, may seem for us to be a no-brainer. But what is important for us is to recognize the good or bad nature of the tree by its fruit and the good or bad nature of the tree as the cause of the quality of the fruit.

In the Sermon on the Mount and in the other places where Jesus speaks similarly, the Jewish leaders as false teachers in particular seem to be the target of what Jesus says. For example, in that Second Reading, Jesus says to beware of false prophets, and, later in St. Matthew’s Gospel in this context, Jesus calls the Jewish leaders a “brood of vipers” and says they are evil. They are no different by nature than we are. Out of the abundance of our hearts, our mouths also speak, and Jesus says that “on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Mt 12:36–37). Our words give evidence either to the faith that is in our hearts or to the lack thereof (cf Rom 10:9–10). That focus on words is not even to mention what probably are the thoughts that precede the words and the deeds that follow the words. As the works of the sinful flesh, St. Paul lists for the Galatians and us “sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these” (Gal 5:19–21). He warns the Galatians and us that “those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (v 21). Rather, as Jesus said, “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Mt 7:19). That judgment is not only on some far-off Judgment Day, but, as John the Baptist said before Jesus, “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees” (Mt 3:10, emphasis added).

II.

The Lord Jesus says that “a healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit” (Mt 7:18). So, Jesus says, “Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad” (Mt 12:33). But we can hardly make literal trees good or bad, much less ourselves as figurative trees. John the Baptizer and the Lord Jesus call for fruits in keeping with repentance, and both John and Jesus’ disciples baptized for that purpose (Mt 3:8; Jn 4:2). For the sake of the Lord Jesus’ death on the cross, God himself, working through his Word in Baptism and all its forms, changes us from being bad trees bearing bad fruit to being good trees bearing good fruit, fruit in keeping with repentance.

In the First Reading, St. Paul says that we are called to freedom and that Christ has set us free (cf Jn 8:36). Christ sets us free by the truth of his Gospel (Jn 8:32)—his Gospel that he, true God in human flesh, died on the cross for the sins of the whole world, including your sins and my sins. Christ substituted himself there on the cross for us. Unless we reject God’s enabling call to repent, God frees us from our slavery to sin, death, and the power of the devil. God forgives our evil sinful nature and all our actual sins of thought, word, and deed. God makes us bad trees good, so that instead of bearing bad fruit, which brings condemnation, we bear good fruit, the fruit of justification and eternal life.

God’s Word read and preached to us all as a group brings about and continues that change, as does God’s Word applied to us individually in Holy Baptism, in private Absolution, and in the Sacrament of the Altar, where bread is the body of Christ given for us, and wine is the blood of Christ shed for us. In all these ways, those whom God has sent bring out of their good treasure what is old and what is new (Mt 13:52), and those of us who are served by them can do the same.

As St. Luke uniquely reports, John the Baptist to some extent tailored his teaching about the good fruit in keeping with repentance to the different vocational groups that were baptized by him, such as tax collectors and soldiers (Lk 3:10–14). So, we know that we likewise have fruit of good works that we do in keeping with our vocations.

There is also fruit of good works that we have in common. For example, our Psalm calls all to praise the Lord, even mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars, all peoples, princes and all rulers, young men and maidens, old men and children. With the author of Hebrews, we can say that our sacrifice of praise is the fruit of lips that acknowledge (or “profess” or “confess” [NIV; cf ASV]) his name (Heb 13:15). And St. Paul in the First Reading specifically lists as our common fruit of the Spirit “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:22–23). When we fail in any way to bring forth such fruits of repentance, good works in keeping with our vocations, and fruits of the Spirit—as we will fail—then we live in daily repentance, and so we are daily comforted with God’s forgiveness.

As we have continued considering our “Living among the Bible’s Trees,” we today specifically considered good
trees bearing good fruit and bad trees bearing bad fruit. And considering good trees bearing good fruit and bad trees bearing bad fruit, we realize that, though by nature we are bad trees bearing bad fruit, God changes us into good trees bearing good fruit.

God has called us to repentance and forgiven our sins by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. From various sources, we may learn the necessary skills for using our senses and reason to pick literal good trees’ good fruit—avocados, oranges, apples, and the like—in our local supermarkets. But only by the power of the Holy Spirit, reaching past our senses and reason to our hearts through his Means of Grace, can we ever be figurative good trees, ourselves bearing the good fruits of the Spirit that St. Paul describes in the First Reading. A study of that passage was the basis for Anglican hymnwriter Timothy Dudley-Smith’s text that we sang as the Office Hymn.20 We close now by praying again its final stanza: ‘Fruitful trees, the Spirit's tending, May we grow till harvests cease; Till we taste, in life unending, Heaven's love and joy and peace” (LSB 691:4). Amen.

MAUNDY THURSDAY

Fig Trees

Psalm 105:23-45 (antiphon v 43); Luke 13:1-9; Mark 11:12-25
Hymn: LSB 823

Sermon Outline

Considering the Fig Trees, We Realize That, Although We Do Not Always Bear the Fruits of Faith as We Should, God Brings Forth from Us Fruits in Keeping with Repentance.

I. We do not always bear the fruits of faith as we should.
II. God brings forth from us fruits in keeping with repentance.

Sermon

In our part of the world today, figs are well down the list of popular fruits. In fact, if it weren’t for Fig Newtons, many of us would probably never have thought of them at all. But in Bible times, in Palestine and the Near East, figs were no novelty for an occasional cookie or jam; they were food on the table the way apples or oranges might be for us today. Fig trees are among the first plants ever cultivated by humans, long before wheat or barley or beans. In fact, evidence of their domestication in the Jordan River Valley may be the first discovered example of agriculture. Fig trees grow well in poor soil. They can withstand drought. And they’re large; they can grow to a height of more than thirty feet and provide welcome shade in hot climates.

It was fig trees and their fruit—or lack thereof—that we heard about in today’s readings. On this Maundy Thursday night, as we think especially of the fruit of the grape vine, we prepare to receive that blessed gift by continuing our special Lenten sermon series, “Living among the Bible’s Trees.” Today we consider fig trees.

Considering the Fig Trees,

We Realize That, Although We Do Not Always Bear the Fruits of Faith as We Should, God Brings Forth from Us Fruits in Keeping with Repentance.

I.

In the readings, we heard both St. Luke’s divinely inspired and unique report of Jesus’ parable that used a fig tree and also St. Mark’s report of Jesus’ later live experience with a fig tree (cf Mt 21:12–13, 18–22). In the First Reading, the parable using the fig tree illustrates the time for repentance that tragedies should prompt. In the Second Reading, Jesus dramatically enacts a living parable or takes prophetic action related to the judgment that comes when the time for repentance is over. In that case, the repentance and judgment seem to relate specifically to God’s people’s being full of activity but nevertheless unfruitful.

People sometimes have a hard time with Jesus’ experience with the fig tree on the road from Bethany to Jerusalem. Some say the miracle is unworthy of the Lord, or that an innocent tree was unjustly the target of his wrath. Yet, Jesus is the Creator in human flesh, with the right to do with his creation as he knows best, and that particular tree, as it was by the road, may not have been anyone in particular’s tree. What’s more, with the leaves, there should have been early figs, indicators of the later figs to come; apparently, a tree without figs early on also will not have figs later. The Old Testament is also full of references to figs in related figures of speech. For example, through Hosea, the Lord says that he saw the people’s forefathers “like the first fruit on the fig tree in its first season” (Hos 9:10). And yet, as he says through Jeremiah, when the Lord would gather the people, there were no figs on the fig tree, even its leaves were withered, and what he had given them had passed away from them (Jer 8:13), as the figs and other fruit were taken away from the Egyptians and Canaanites in our Psalm.

Are we like the unfruitful people God addressed through Hosea and Jeremiah and like the Jews of Jesus’ day, claiming to be religious but without any fruits of faith? Certainly we are like them according to our sinful nature, but God calls and enables us to bear fruit. Do we bear fruit as we should? If not, apart from repentance, we deserve the same kind
of judgment they deserved. Like the fig tree on the road looked the next time the disciples saw it, God’s righteous wrath could totally dry us up to our very roots because we do not listen to him as we should (Hos 9:16–17). We face temporal consequences, including death, and eternal torment in hell if we do not first turn away from our sin, trust God to forgive our sin, and want to do better than to keep on sinning. Although our time for self-examination and reflection of repentance will come to an end one way or another, yet in this Lenten season—today, right now—God is enabling and giving us every opportunity to produce fruits in keeping with repentance (e.g., Mt 3:10). And so, we each must ask ourselves this question as we prepare to come to the Lord’s Table tonight: Do I repent of my sins, truly intend to amend my sinful ways, and desire to receive Christ’s forgiveness?

II.

Today’s Psalm celebrated God delivering his people from slavery in Egypt, which pointed forward to his delivering his people both from exile in Babylon and, most important for us, from our slavery to sin and its eternal punishment. After his three-year ministry, Jesus took upon himself the punishment that we deserve and experienced that punishment on the cross for us, in our place. Out of his great love for us, Jesus lived the perfect life we fail to live and paid the penalty for our failure to live it. When we repent, God forgives our sin—our sinful nature, our failures to bear fruit as we should, and all our other sin, whatever our sin might be. God forgives it all by grace through faith for the sake of Jesus’ death on the cross. As we know from today’s Second Reading and related passages, “the largest promise applies even to the smallest faith.” By faith in Jesus Christ, we have the free forgiveness of sins, what might otherwise seem absurd or impossible, and we have that free forgiveness in what some might regard as absurd or impossible ways.

Through the means of congregations today, God calls pastors to serve him by serving his people, as God once directly called the prophet Amos, who had been a dresser of sycamore fig trees (Amos 7:14). Such workers in the vineyard dig around the trees and put on manure, as it were, and wait another year before cutting down any unfruitful trees.

That is to say, such workers in the vineyard read and proclaim God’s Word to all those gathered in his cleansed house of prayer. And, as appropriate, such workers in the vineyard apply that Word to individuals in Holy Baptism, in Holy Absolution, and in the blessed Sacrament of the Altar we celebrate tonight. For on this night, the night when he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus Christ took bread and wine, and when he had given thanks he broke the bread, he passed the cup, and gave to them, gave to us, his very body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. In each of these means, God brings forth from us fruit in keeping with repentance according to our various callings in life. As such “good figs,” the Lord plants us by giving us a heart to know that he is the Lord, and so we are his people and he is our God, as we return to him with our whole hearts (Jer 24:6–7).

God’s people are often blessed with literal good figs from literal trees by those who grow them. But figurative good figs, if you’ll pardon the play on words—figurative good figs produced by repentance—are more wide ranging. The Second Reading might have us think of the figurative figs of forgiving our brothers and sisters in Christ, even as our Father in heaven forgives our sins: “And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses” (Mt 11:25; cf also Col 3:13). All such prayer in keeping with our powerful God’s will and nature is answered.

Figurative figs are also service to God and one another through our volunteering to our congregation. Today’s Office Hymn by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther referred to praising God’s worth “in all good works increasing.” Those are good figs, too, and the hymn connected our good works with the land itself bringing forth plenteous literal fruit (LSB 823:3). Whether or not the literal fig trees should blossom, however else we might be afflicted, yet we rejoice in the Lord and take joy in the God of our salvation (Hab 3:17–18).

As we are “Living among the Bible’s Trees,” God calls and enables us to repent of our sin and freely forgives us of our sin for the sake of his Son, Jesus Christ. Considering the fig trees, we realize that, although we do not always bear the fruits of faith as we should, God brings forth from us fruits in keeping with repentance.

With such repentance, we live each day in God’s forgiveness of sins, forgiving one another, for we have learned another lesson from the fig trees: to see the signs and know that our Lord’s final coming is very near (Mt 24:32–35; Mk 13:28–31; Lk 21:29–33). By God’s grace, we are prepared and watching for it! Amen.

GOOD FRIDAY

Tree of the Cross

Psalm 74 (antiphon v 22); Deuteronomy 21:22–23; Galatians 3:1–14

Hymn: LSB 431

Sermon Outline

Considering the Tree of the Cross, We Realize That, Although We Fail to Keep God’s Law and Deserve the Cross’s Shame, Jesus Became Accursed for Us and So Redeems Us.
I. We fail to keep God’s Law and deserve the cross’s shame.
II. Jesus became accursed for us and so redeems us.

Sermon

Terrible chapters in our history teach us to be careful in talking about being “hanged on a tree,” as mob actions outside the law may come to mind too easily. Experts conservatively estimate that over approximately seven decades spanning the turn of the twentieth century, about four thousand people were lynched in the United States.2 Yet, despite the need to be particularly careful, Jesus Christ’s “being hanged” for us under the law is precisely what we need to talk about on this most holy day. As our special Lenten sermon series nears its climax, we consider the eighth of the Bible’s trees among which we live, none other than the tree of the cross.

Considering the Tree of the Cross,
We Realize That, Although We Fail to Keep God’s Law and Deserve the Cross’s Shame, Jesus Became Accursed for Us and So Redeems Us.

I.

In our First Reading for this Good Friday (Deut 21:22–23), we heard the Lord through Moses in his final “sermon” command the people of Israel to bury on the same day criminals who were hung on a tree. This hanging was after the criminal had already been executed by stoning or some other method. Hanging on a tree after execution publicly displayed the criminal’s shame24 and deterred others from committing the same crime.25 Such criminals were cursed by God, and being displayed on a tree showed the shame of God’s judgment and rejection. Yet there was to be a limit: God said that leaving them hanging overnight would defile the land he was giving the Israelites.

The people of Israel were not the first or only ones so to use trees or their wood. The Book of Genesis reports that earlier Pharaoh’s onetime chief baker, who was imprisoned with Joseph, was hung from a tree (Gen 40:19, 22). The Book of Esther much later reports that the Persian king hung two of his rebellious eunuchs (Esth 2:23). And the Bible reports of Esther much later reports that the Persian king hung two of his rebellious eunuchs.26 Yet, despite the need to be particularly careful, Jesus Christ’s “being hanged” for us under the law is precisely what we need to talk about on this most holy day. As our special Lenten sermon series nears its climax, we consider the eighth of the Bible’s trees among which we live, none other than the tree of the cross.

Of course, the Israelites could hardly boast that they all our heart, soul, and mind, and we fail to love our neighbors as ourselves (e.g., Mt 22:37–40). We each know our own failures better than others know them, and God knows them best of all! Such failures flow from the sinful nature we inherited from the first man and woman who ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and for such failures and sinful nature we deserve to be cut off from God’s presence for all eternity (Mt 27:46). We all deserve to be hung accursed from the accursed tree!

Do we think of such an outcome as shameful? Are we ashamed of our sin? Do people today even feel shame anymore? What do we consider to be insulting? Are we more concerned about embarrassment or a loss of respect or reputation from something posted on Facebook or Instagram than we are of the guilt of our sins?

II.

As we heard in the Second Reading, sinless and righteous Jesus Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, being hanged on the tree of the cross. For some seven centuries before Jesus, the Assyrians, Persians, Jews, and Romans crucified people, whipping them, using crosses of different shapes, and sometimes impaling them in parts of their bodies that I will not mention. For us and for our salvation, Jesus Christ humbly endured the shame of crucifixion, the greatest possible insult—stripped, beaten, and left hanging naked to the world—so that you and I might be sinless and righteous (2 Cor 5:21), not by the Law, but by faith in him. Jesus Christ took to the cross our sins and the ancient curse that afflicts us, as we sang this evening in the Office Hymn:

My soul looks back to see
The burden Thou didst bear
When hanging on the cursed tree;
I know my guilt was there. (LSB 431:4)

Drawing on the Old Testament (Is 53:4, 12), not only St. Paul but also St. Peter repeatedly preached and wrote about Jesus’ hanging on the tree of the cross for us (Acts 5:30; 10:39; 13:29; 1 Pet 2:24). After them, at least one Early Church writer also understood the ram caught by its horns in the thicket when Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac as a prophetic image pointing to Jesus’ hanging on the tree (Gen 22:13).28 Such is God’s use of hanging on a tree for us!

One author says well:

It is no accident that human sin which began at the foot of a tree, the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen 2:9ff), found its resolution on another tree, the cross of Calvary. There is a poetic justice in the use of trees in [salvation history]. . . . Satan’s victory over the woman (and the man!) beneath the branches of that primal tree led to his own defeat beneath the crossed beams of another tree.27
I. On account of our sin, we deserve to be barred from the tree of life.

II. Jesus’ cross becomes our tree of life, and we eat of its fruit.

Sermon

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

An angel with a flaming sword guards the way to the tree of life. And no one may approach. And no one may taste of that fruit of life. Until today . . . when . . .

. . . an angel, bright as lightning, shocks and awes those guarding the way to the place of death. And they flee. And now we may again taste of the tree that gives life.

As we conclude our special sermon series, “Living among the Bible’s Trees,” in a sense we come full circle, returning to that precious tree once placed in the Garden of Eden, the tree of life.

CONSIDERING THE TREE OF LIFE,
WE REALIZE THAT, ALTHOUGH ON ACCOUNT OF OUR SIN
WE DESERVE TO BE BARRED FROM THE TREE OF LIFE,
JESUS’ CROSS BECOMES OUR TREE OF LIFE
AND WE EAT OF ITS FRUIT.

I.

The tree of life is mentioned not only at the beginning of Genesis and the end of Revelation but also, implicitly if not explicitly, in our First Reading from the Old Testament Book of Ezekiel (Ezek 47:1–12). It’s also explicitly mentioned in a couple of other places I’ll mention later. Before we go any further, however, we want to recognize that Ezekiel and Revelation, although with some differences, are largely what is called “apocalyptic literature”—literature consisting of highly symbolic, visionary, and prophetic pictures, used to reveal things to believers but to conceal them from unbelievers. We believers are well positioned to understand Ezekiel and Revelation, as we heard more than six weeks ago from Genesis how God planted a garden in Eden, with the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in its midst. God commanded the man not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, lest he die. But when the woman doubted the Word of God and she and her husband ate of it, God drove them from the Garden and placed cherubim with a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life (Gen 2:8–9, 15–17; 3:1–24).

In today’s Second Reading (Rev 22:1–20), we find that tree of life, as one author says, “transplanted, as it were, from Eden (Gen 3:9, 22, 24) and made available for the inhabitants of the coming new world.”²⁹ In Revelation, the Genesis Garden of Eden paradise—especially its river and tree (Gen 2:9–17; 3:1–7)—essentially merges with the holy city of God, the new Jerusalem. It is the place where believers will live as their blessed reward. In the new Jerusalem, there is a

And the Proper Preface that the Divine Service uses for Holy Week confesses that truth: “the serpent who overcame by the tree of the garden” was overcome “by the tree of the cross” (LSB Altar Book, 151, 190, 231).

Our appointed Psalm today likely dates to the time after the Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem and its temple, where pillars were decorated to look like trees.²⁸ The divinely inspired psalmist described this destruction of God’s temple as if God’s enemies were “those who swing axes in a forest of trees” (Ps 74:5). They are also those who scoff at God and revile the name (v 10) of him who brings salvation (v 12). The temple of Jesus’ body was likewise mocked and destroyed but ultimately raised back up (Jn 2:18–22). Jesus did not hang on the tree of the cross overnight that first Good Friday but was taken down before the Sabbath (Jn 19:31).

And later God revealed the majesty and glory of the crucified Christ by raising him from the dead and exalting him to his right hand. So, now Jesus Christ works through his Holy Spirit in all those who believe, through such means as the reading and preaching of his Word, Holy Baptism, individual Absolution, and the Sacrament of the Altar. Especially in the Sacrament of the Altar, we eat the fruit and receive the blessings of the tree of the cross. Thus the cross in effect becomes for us a tree of life (but more about that Sunday). For now, considering the tree of the cross, we realize that, although we fail to keep God’s Law and deserve the cross’s shame, Jesus became accursed for us and so redeems us.

Long before thousands of people in our country were killed through the detestable crimes of mobs—taking the law into their own hands and hanging people on trees—our Lord Jesus Christ was hung from a tree, under the Law, for the sake of us all. Jesus became accursed for us on the tree of life. And later God revealed the majesty and glory of the crucified Christ by raising him from the dead and exalting him to his right hand. So, now Jesus Christ works through his Holy Spirit in all those who believe, through such means as the reading and preaching of his Word, Holy Baptism, individual Absolution, and the Sacrament of the Altar. Especially in the Sacrament of the Altar, we eat the fruit and receive the blessings of the tree of the cross. Thus the cross in effect becomes for us a tree of life (but more about that Sunday). For now, considering the tree of the cross, we realize that, although we fail to keep God’s Law and deserve the cross’s shame, Jesus became accursed for us and so redeems us.

As we conclude our special sermon series, “Living among the Bible’s Trees,” in a sense we come full circle, returning to that precious tree once placed in the Garden of Eden, the tree of life.

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main street and a river running through the center of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life 10 (see also Rev 2:7) and so also access to what has been called its “wonderful, supraterrrestrial food of immortality,” 31 at least a figurative (if not also literal) way of expressing Christians’ share in the eternal life to come. In one Advent hymn (LSB 342:4), we call on Jesus to restore that lost paradise, to lead past the angels’ flaming sword, and to open heaven’s door.

You and I may be among those who, at times if not always, think it’s unfair when we suffer the consequences of someone else’s actions, such as our being banished from Eden on account of the man and woman’s original sin. Of course, we are prone to overlook our own sin, on the basis of which God could cast us away from his presence in paradise and sentence us to eternal torment. As we heard in today’s Second Reading, outside the city are “the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood” (Rev 22:15) — and that includes us in thoughts and sometimes words if not also in deeds! Just like Adam and Eve, we do not trust the divinely given status of God’s Word nor give it unconditional recognition and due obedience. On account of not only our sinful nature but also our actual sins, we deserve eternal torment apart from God, unless, as God calls and enables us to, we repent, believe, and receive his forgiveness for our sinful nature and actual sins, by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

II.

Between Genesis, with the cherubim guarding the way to the tree of life, and Revelation, with the Lord granting us to eat of the tree of life, something changed! Genesis, Revelation, and the other sixty-four books of the Bible in between tell the prophecy and fulfillment of the woman’s Offspring, who suffers the bruising of his own heel (the loss of his own life for a time) but in the process bruises (or crushes) the serpent’s (the devil’s) head (ultimately for all deeds)! In Ezek 47:12, Ezekiel saw a vision of God’s temple at the end of time. In Ezekiel’s vision, water was flowing from the temple. In the vision St. John recorded in the Book of Revelation, after the saving work of Jesus Christ, the water is described as flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb (Rev 21:22). Even Ezekiel, however, may still have had a sense that a final sacrifice would have been made, as he omits from his complete vision some key sacrifices, such as that made on the Day of Atonement.

Indeed, on the cross, Jesus, the Lamb of God, makes the only sacrifice needed to take away your sins and my sins and the sins of the whole world (Jn 1:29, 36). Jesus himself was true God, called the Alpha and the Omega in the Second Reading, but Jesus also was the living Shoot or Branch from the seemingly dead stump of human Jesse’s tree. And the dead wood of Jesus’ cross in a sense becomes for us a tree of life, a living tree. Early Christian art saw such a close relationship, picturing the trunk of Jesus’ cross sprouting twigs and leaves like a living tree, 11 and in today’s Office Hymn (LSB 561) author and Lutheran pastor Stephen Starke uses the cross as a bridge from the tree of life in the Garden of Eden of Genesis to the tree of life in the paradise of Revelation. 12 On the tree of the cross, as we heard on Good Friday (Gal 3:13), Jesus removed the curse from all humankind in general, and we are individually delivered from that curse through God’s Means of Grace.

Today, at last, after all those millennia, we see the curse removed. We see the flaming sword quenched. We see again the way to that tree of life.

Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.” (Mt 28:1–6)

Come!

In Genesis, Ezekiel, and St. John’s visionary tours, water and the tree of life both figure prominently and depict salvation (see also Joel 3:18; Zech 14:8). The river of salvation has a miraculously increasing flow from the throne of God and of the Lamb (see Jn 7:37–38), bringing life to the otherwise dead Salt Sea, the lowest and saltiest body of water in the world. That river of salvation exists for us now in Holy Baptism, where we, who are dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1, 5), are restored to life by God’s new covenant of transforming grace. In Baptism, we first receive God’s name, the sign of his holy cross upon our foreheads and our hearts to mark us as one redeemed by Christ the crucified (LSB, p 268). Our baptismal robes are washed white in the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7:14), and so we have the right to the tree of life. The desert touched by the river of salvation becomes ever-widening banks of a paradise filled with trees that yield a different kind of fruit each month and whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. Such trees of life exist for us now in the Sacrament of the Altar, where we in bread and wine eat and drink Christ’s living body and blood. Here and now, God satisfies our hunger and thirst as he will do for eternity, when we, delivered from the hands of our enemies, worship him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our never-ending days (Lk 1:74–75).
I mentioned earlier that there were a couple of other places in the Bible that mention something along the lines of the tree of life, and all of four of them are in the Book of Proverbs. In one, Wisdom is described as a tree of life so that those who lay hold of Wisdom—that is, we who believe—are blessed (Prov 3:18). In a second, the fruits of righteousness—or, we might say, of the righteous—are described as a tree of life, as if for others (11:30). Likewise in a third, a gentle tongue, such as one that speaks the Gospel, is described as a tree of life (15:4). And finally, a fulfilled desire, such as that desire for eternal life, is described as a tree of life (Prov 13:12). All four of those things that God brings about in us—wisdom, fruits of righteousness, a gentle tongue, and fulfilled desire—are beneficial to life.55 By God’s mercy and grace, we ourselves become, as we sang in Psalm 1 more than six weeks ago, trees planted by streams of water that yield their fruit in its season, and our leaves do not wither (Ps 1:3). As we sang in Psalm 52 today, while unbelievers ultimately are uprooted, we are like green olive trees in holy ground,36 protected in God’s presence, for we trust in his steadfast love and mercy forever and ever (Ps 52:8–9). Considering the tree of life, we realize that, although on account of our sin we deserve to be barred from the tree of life, Jesus’ cross becomes our tree of life and we eat of its fruit.

Our special Lenten and now Easter sermon series has been themed different biblical trees, and each has been relevant to us. We have realized our need for a Savior, God’s provision of a Savior in the person of Jesus Christ, and how relevant to us. We have realized our need for a Savior, God’s presence, for we trust in his steadfast love and mercy forever and ever (Ps 52:8–9). Considering the tree of life, we realize that, although on account of our sin we deserve to be barred from the tree of life, Jesus’ cross becomes our tree of life and we eat of its fruit.

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Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

Notes

30. Louis A. Brighton, Revelation (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 625.
32. For a perspective on this difference between Ezekiel’s vision and that of Revelation, see Brighton, Revelation, 624 n. 11.

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You Will Weep, but Soon You Will Rejoice

John 16:16–24
Rev. Larry A. Peters, pastor,
Grace Lutheran Church, Clarksville, Tennessee

Sermon Outline
1. This future rejoicing that the Lord created in Christ crucified he is bringing forth through you.

You WILL HAVE SORROW NOW, BUT SOON YOU WILL REJOICE.

Sermon
Thirty-seven years ago, I sat where you are sitting...at least I think so. I have no recollection of my baccalaureate, and I expect you won't either. In fact, it seems as if graduation itself is extraneous. It's rather anticlimactic in the afterglow of call day. Most of you have what you came here for. You have a call. You have a place to go. You are already making plans for ordination, consecration, the big move, installation. You are chomping at the bit to start your new lives as pastors and deaconesses of Christ's Church. It will be hard to keep your attention, and however long I preach it will probably seem too long. But at this juncture, our Lord still has something to say to you.

I will admit at the beginning that the Gospel read today is hardly the inspirational or motivational text some might expect for a class of church workers in waiting. The first part you get. "A little while, and you will see me no longer" (v 16a). These are personal words because you are itching to head out of Fort Wayne. As an ancient alumnus, I am testament to the words, "again a little while, and you will see me" (v 16b). A little reminder that as much as you're ready to leave this place, I pray it will be a place to which you'll return.

Then, though, the text goes downhill: "Truly, truly, I say to you," Jesus says, "you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful"—hmm, not thrilling—"but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full" (vv 20–24).

3. We know our Lord is speaking of his coming crucifixion, yet I wonder if this is not exactly the right text for you at this juncture of your lives after all. You may not want to hear it, but the ministry that awaits you is filled with defeats and disappointments. I can't recall my baccalaureate, but I can't forget the sadness of finding out all my profs were wrong. Your people will not follow you to the gates of hell. They have itching ears and want to hear feel-good words more than the Word of the cross. You will be gravely tempted to preach what they want to hear. You will not encounter fully completed saints but sinners in the worst moments of their lives.

You will meet your people as sinners wearing the guilt and shame of thoughts no one else may know but they cannot forget, of words that should never have been spoken, and of deeds tainted by evil. You will meet them as angry people—just as upset with their own faults and failings as they are with others. You will meet them as people strong in pride who appear content with the relative righteousness of being better than most even if they're not as good as some. You will meet them as the weak who have caved in the face of temptation too often to count.

It may appear to you that you have nothing much to offer them except judgment. It may appear to you that the world is laughing at them and at you—standing there with pop guns, with the meager weapons of the Means of Grace, against a world better armed and equipped than you. Most of you earnestly want to make a difference, and this will be your weakness. The day will come when you'll wonder if it's possible to make such a difference with only the tools of the Word of God and his Sacraments. It will seem to you that the only way to make things happen is to appeal to the Law or to echo the happy-talk preachers. You'll seek affirmation of your success from your people's better behavior or happiness rather than faithfulness to the Word.

2. All of this is true, but it's not the whole truth. It is a fairly accurate picture of the disappointments of earnest Christian people who ache to do God's bidding. But it is not the whole picture. As tempting as it is to see all that's wrong with the
church, do not forget that the Lord has not left you on your own, he has not left you to your own devices, and he has not abandoned those who wear his name before the world.

Eve once heard the harsh words, “I will greatly multiply your sorrow so that you shall bring forth your children in pain” (see Gen 3:16). Those words were not spoken only to Eve or only to women who give birth. They were spoken to the Church, our mother in the faith. Yet Jesus has spoken to Eve and to all her children and especially to you: “A woman in labor has sorrow, but her focus is on the joy that comes at the outcome of her labor—her child!” (see Jn 16:21). While there is pain, all the mom cares about is birthing that baby. Her pain fades because she’s focused on the joy to come.

The Church Militant is like that woman in labor. You and I live in the Church of sorrow, pain, and struggle already . . . but we also live in the Church of not yet—of the consummation to come: perfect peace and joy! At one and the same time. We live a life of waiting for the promised future of God, which we now know not by sight but by faith. The fruit is ripening, but the harvest is not yet. Do not give up. Do not despair. Do not grow weary in well-doing (Gal 6:9). Do not judge by what you see, but see by faith what your eyes cannot behold. Leave it to God to judge, and do not be disappointed that he judges with mercy.

1.

This life and its work, whether brief or long, is transitory. But it is still important. What you do is essential if this life is to give way to the future God has prepared. Before joy can be complete, it will be tested by sorrow. Before peace can be perfect, it will be tested by turmoil. Before the end comes, it will be tested by waiting. You are not in charge of this any more than any woman is in charge of her labor. The baby is in charge. For all her pain, mom is just going along for the ride, waiting for the outcome and hastening it by doing what God has given her to do. So it is for you. You are not in charge. You are going along for the ride. God is bringing all things to their culmination. But that does not mean you do nothing or your work is not important. For God is bringing the future through the work you do now on his behalf through his Word and Sacraments.

Like the woman in childbirth, focus on the joy that is to come and not on the present pain. Focus on the promise of God and not yourself. Focus on the Means of Grace and not your skills or lack of them. Focus on the future God has created from the past of Christ crucified. Encourage your people in the same way. It is not the office holder who matters but the office of the Holy Ministry, not the sorrows and struggles but the Lord who has borne them all for you and who still bears them with you, not the sinner and how great the sin but the Lord whose forgiveness bears them all away, not the judgment of the world but the God who declares the sinner just and saintly in Christ, not the moment of conflict but the future God has prepared for you and for all through our Lord’s death and resurrection.

The Lord is with you. He has called you by name. He has invested Christ’s blood in you. He will not abandon you. He loves you not with a hug but with arms outstretched in suffering. He has freed you not with silver or gold but with the holy, precious blood of Christ. He will vindicate you against your enemies and rescue you when you fall. The pain of this time of labor is not some punishment from God but proof you belong to him. As the world treated Jesus, so it will treat you. But do not despair. “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom 8:31).

Your day is coming . . . soon. Be strong in the strength of the Lord. His grace is sufficient for all your needs. His Word and Sacraments are not only the Means of Grace for others but your own food, strength, comfort, and peace. Daily repent and regularly avail yourself of the comfort of private confession and absolution. Feast at the meal where the Passover is fulfilled and the heavenly banquet is anticipated in Christ’s flesh and blood. Live captive to the efficacious Word that alone delivers its promise to a people waiting upon it.

When I began, I said you would see your people at the worst moments of their lives. Let me end by saying you will also be with them in the best moments of their lives—not the moments the world counts as great, but at the font, where the dead are united with Christ in his death and resurrection and reborn . . . in the pulpit, where the Word of life directs their new hearts to love the Lord’s commandments and to live them out in their daily lives . . . at confession, where you will absolve them and restore their clear conscience through the keys . . . at the table, where you will feed them Christ’s flesh so they may want for nothing more and Christ’s blood that cleanses them from all sin . . . in ministry of presence with them in their loneliness and trials . . . and in the manifold ways you will instruct them and encourage them with the Word of the Lord that endures forever.

Ours is not merely a ministry of ideas or a therapeutic gospel to heal feelings. It is the cross to heal sin and its death. The world may laugh, but it is hollow laughter. Your joy is eternal. Fear not the labor; focus on the outcome.

YOU WILL HAVE SORROW NOW, BUT SOON YOU WILL REJOICE.

Follow Christ, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross and scorned its shame. Endure by faith in Christ, and you will be saved. Be faithful, and you will receive the crown of life that no one can take from you. And if you have done what the Lord has asked of you, it will be enough . . . enough for him to accomplish his purpose and enough for him to bring many into the kingdom with you.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.
**Hook, Line, and Sinker?**

**Text:** Matthew 4:1–11  
**Visual:** a fishing pole with heavy fishing line, large hook, and sinker; also some kind of non-live bait (not shown at first)  
**Summary:** Though we often take Satan’s bait of temptation hook, line, and sinker, Jesus never took the bait, so that God credits us who believe with resisting all temptation.

Have you ever been fishing? *Wait for answers.* What do we need to go fishing—if you want to catch anything? *Wait for answers.* Yes, that’s right. We need a fishing pole with line, a hook, and maybe a sinker. *Point these out when you show the children.* Anything else, or could we catch fish with just this hook, line, and sinker? Ah, yes, we do need something else, don’t we! What’s missing? *Bait.* Yes, that’s right. We need bait. If you just drop this hook in the water, no fish is going to go for it, but if you attach this (show the bait, and attach it if that’s easy and not messy), then you might get some fish to take it hook, line, and sinker! Ever heard that expression? Sometimes we say a fish was so eager to eat the bait that he took it hook, line, and sinker—like he swallowed this whole thing.

Our Gospel today is about the devil tempting Jesus to sin. The devil tempts us to sin too, doesn’t he? What are some things Satan tempts us to do? *Receive responses and add additional examples.* Right! Satan tempts us to do all kinds of things that are sinful—things God doesn’t want us to do. How does the devil do that? Does he whisper to us, “If you do this sin, it’ll make God very angry” or “If you do that sin, you’ll be punished”? *Wait for answers.* You’re right. We wouldn’t go for that. Instead, Satan uses what’s like bait. He makes us think, “Oh, doing that really wouldn’t be so bad. And it would be kind of fun.” That’s like bait. And lots of times, we take that hook, line, and sinker.

When the devil tempted Jesus, he tried all kinds of bait: delicious food, becoming famous, power to rule over everything. Suppose Jesus took the bait? *Wait for answers.* Right! Jesus never sinned, never got caught on Satan’s hook. And Jesus was doing that for us. Jesus was obeying God instead of sinning so that when he died on the cross, it wouldn’t be for any sin of his, but for ours. So now God says, “What Jesus did—not taking the bait, not sinning—I count for you who believe in Jesus.” God says that it’s just as if we never sinned, never got caught in Satan’s temptation. So we are spared from punishment for our sins and get to live with Jesus forever.

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**I’ll Go!**

**Text:** Genesis 12:1–9  
**Visual:** a picture or model of a moving van  
**Summary:** When we are on the move, Jesus is with us.

What is this? *Show the model or picture of the moving van.* Allow time for the children to respond. That’s right, it’s a moving van. Have you ever seen one? What’s in it? *Again show the moving van.* Allow time for children to respond: the household goods of a family that is moving. Have you and your family ever moved? Have you ever watched your bedroom furniture, your clothes, your toys loaded into one of these vans? Yes? How did that make you feel? *Afraid, uncertain, lonely, excited.* Did you know exactly where you were moving? Did you know what your new home would look like? Usually, our parents know where we’re going when we load one of these vans and move. But even when we knew where we were going, my wife cried after the van was all loaded and the home we were leaving was empty, ready for new people to move in.

Can you imagine what it would feel like if you were moving but didn’t know where you were going? That’s how Abram and Sarai felt in today’s Old Testament Reading from Genesis. God asked them to leave their home, much of their family, and everything that was familiar to them and go where he was sending them. The problem was, they didn’t know where God was sending them, just that they were going.

How were they able to do that—to go to a place they didn’t know even though they were probably a little bit sad and maybe even afraid? *Wait for answers.* Abram and Sarai were able to move to that new, unknown home because God had promised to be with them—and he’d promised that in an interesting way. Not only had God promised to give them a new home, but God had promised that through them he would bless everyone in the world. You know what that meant? *Wait for answers.* It meant that someday they would have a great-great-, many-times-great grandson who would be Jesus. Jesus is the way everyone is blessed—because his dying on the cross has taken away everyone’s sins. And, see, our sins would have kept us away from God, but because Jesus has taken our sins away, God is always with us wherever we go.

When God says “Go!” what shall we say? Yes, we shall say, “I’ll go! Send me! Because I know that you, dear God, will be with me, just as you were with Abram and Sarai.”
**No Comparison**

**Text:** Romans 5:1–8  
**Visual:** crucifix  
**Summary:** By comparing ourselves to the cross of Christ, we see God’s love.  
Rev. Douglas D. Bauman, senior pastor,  
St. Paul Lutheran Church, Columbus, Indiana

After greeting the children, ask for two volunteers. Boys and girls, we are going to compare (name of first volunteer) and (name of second volunteer) this morning. Who can tell me, who’s taller? Who has darker hair? Who has blue eyes? Ask three or more questions like this to make a comparison between the two children. Thanks for volunteering.

Ask for another volunteer. Choose one of the older children who will understand the following comparison and won’t have his or her feelings hurt. Take the crucifix and ask the children:  
How about comparing (name of third volunteer) to Jesus? Which one is perfect? Who is the sinner? Who is weak? Who is strong? Who is God? Who isn’t God at all, sometimes even ungodly?

When we compare ourselves to Jesus, the differences are much different than just height and color of hair. Jesus is the perfect Son of God. He is the mighty and all-powerful God. We’re just the opposite. We’re not perfect but sinful; we do things every day that are wrong, that hurt other people, that are against what God wants us to do. We’re not mighty but weak. We can’t fix things all the time for everybody when they go wrong; we mess them up. We’re not always brave; lots of times we’re scared.

When Jesus saw that we were sinful, imperfect, and weak, what did he do for us? Invite answers. That’s right! He didn’t go around showing off how much better he is than we are. He died on the cross to save us, even though we are so much less compared to him. When we compare ourselves to Jesus and his cross, we see God’s love. This is the good news we hear from the Bible today: “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). We never have to wonder whether God loves us. When we stand next to Jesus and his cross, we see God’s love. Jesus died for us not because we’re good and perfect. He died for us because God loves us. This morning here in church, God is giving us his love as he washes away all our sin and gives us his peace.

Boys and girls, when we compare ourselves to Jesus and his cross, what do we see? God’s love.

Let’s pray. Dear Father in heaven, thank you for showing us your love by sending Jesus to die for us. Amen.

**Christ, Be Our Leader**

**Text:** Isaiah 42:14–21  
**Visual:** a walking stick and/or alpine hiking hat  
**Summary:** Even though we don’t know the way and trouble is all around us, Jesus leads us.  
Jeni Miller, deaconess,  
Lutheran Church of the Ascension, Atlanta, Georgia

Wearing hat and/or holding stick: Have you ever gone with your family on a hike in a forest or up a mountain? Receive responses. Sometimes when people go hiking, they have to step over big rocks or go under a hanging tree branch. On some hikes, they even have to cross streams of water! Do you think that would be hard? Receive responses.

What if the hikers were blind and couldn’t see the way? They’d have a lot of trouble knowing when to step over big rocks, or when to duck down so they don’t walk right into a hanging tree branch! What would they do? Receive responses.

I know! What if they had a leader who wasn’t blind and who knew the way through the forest really well? Not only that, but this leader would first even go ahead on the path and make it straight for the hikers and smooth out all the bumps and rough spots so the hikers wouldn’t have to worry about rocks and streams and tree branches. Then, maybe the hike wouldn’t be so hard, right?

This is what God promises to do for us—not just when we go for a hike, but for our whole lives! Earlier, we read what God said through the prophet Isaiah. He said, “And I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground” (Is 42:16).

Because Christ died and rose again for us, we don’t have to be afraid or worry when there’s trouble in our way or our problems feel as big as a mountain. God took all of those problems and troubles and gave them to Jesus, so now we get to follow him because he knows the way. All of our biggest problems were defeated when Jesus was on the cross. When he rose again on Easter, we got a new life and a leader who would never leave us! God even continues to guide us today by leading us here to church, where we can hear his Word and receive his gifts. He speaks to us, he washes us in Baptism, and he feeds us in the Lord’s Supper. I know if I were going on a big hike, I’d want a leader like that!

Let’s pray. O Lord, you call us to follow you, and you take away all of our fears and troubles. Thank you for leading me and for promising to be with me always because of your Son, Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.
Hey, guys, I need some help. I have this cake pan here, and it’s empty. Show the pan. My friend’s birthday is today, and I want to give him a cake. I want it to be magnificent! Ten layers! With a different flavor of frosting for each layer. What flavors could I choose? Receive responses.

That sounds great! Here’s my problem. Every time I tell the cake to appear, nothing happens! Demonstrate a few times, saying things like, “1, 2, 3, cake!” or “Now . . . cake!” Why isn’t this working? Receive responses. Well, that’s really frustrating. You see, I was thinking about the Bible lesson for today, and I thought that maybe I could “Snap!” make a cake appear.

Did you hear? In the Bible, God brought the prophet Ezekiel to a big valley with lots of dry bones. He told Ezekiel to speak God’s Word to the bones so they could live again! First, he told the bones all to come together, then to grow new muscles and skin, and then God spoke through Ezekiel to bring breath into the bones. They were living, breathing people again! “Snap!” All because of God’s Word.

It’s just like creation. Remember how God made the heavens and the earth and all the trees and plants, fish and animals, and every living thing? It was beautiful! How did he do that? Receive responses. That’s right! His Word! He spoke and “Snap!” it happened. Just like it happened with Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones. God’s Word is powerful.

So, I guess you know I was just kidding about my cake. I know that I’m not God and I can’t just speak a word to make my ten-layer cake appear. But our Lord does speak through his servants, his pastors, in other ways . . . and things happen! God’s Word says to us that Jesus died and rose again for us, and “Snap!” that Word creates faith in our hearts whenever the Holy Spirit wills. Pastor says, “I forgive you all your sins,” and “Snap!” our sins are forgiven and “Snap!” we have eternal life. Just like when God created the world through his Word, now he creates this beautiful new life for us. See? His powerful Word does amazing things! God uses his Word to do amazing things for you too. “Snap!” Just like that.

Let’s pray. Heavenly Father, you made wonderful things happen for your people throughout history! Please keep speaking to us so that we see how your powerful Word always does what it promises, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.
**GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 10, 2020**

**Dad! Dad! Where Are You?**

*Text:* Psalm 22  
*Visual:* none  
*Summary:* Jesus was forsaken by the Father, but . . .

Rev. Carl C. Fickenscher II, PhD, professor,  
Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana

It was a Friday evening in the springtime, and Jess and his dad were out camping! Jess loved camping, and he loved being with his dad. Dad was washing out the cast-iron skillet from supper, and Jess decided to go for a hike. Not too long, not too far; it would be dark soon.

But it wasn’t too long before Jess was lost. Really lost. All the trees suddenly looked the same. And now it was dark! “Dad! Dad! Where are you?” Jess called out at the top of his voice! No answer. There was no moon tonight; Jess couldn’t see his hand in front of his face; it was pitch black. And then he did start to hear sounds—but not Dad. Rustling in the undergrowth. Something was out there. Was it a raccoon? a bear? a wolf? What should Jess do?

Dad was nowhere around. He hadn’t answered. He couldn’t hear. But Jess believed, he knew, Dad would be looking for him. A cave! There was a cave! Nobody would find him there until morning, but he hoped the bears or the wolves wouldn’t either.

It was a long, scary night! But just as the sun was beginning to rise, “Jess! Can you hear me?” It was Dad!

You know what happened to Jesus on this Friday many years ago, don’t you? *Receive responses.* This is the day Jesus died on the cross. And just like Jess, this day Jesus was separated from his Father. While Jesus was hanging on the cross it became very dark—just the time when we really wish Dad was with us, the time when we might be most afraid of being alone. And Jesus cried out at the top of his voice, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But the heavenly Father didn’t answer. Jesus was left all alone.

Why did God the Father leave his Son alone? *Receive responses.* The Father left Jesus alone because Jesus had to suffer all alone the punishment for every one of our sins.

But you know what? Even when God the Father didn’t answer Jesus, Jesus still trusted that God would care for him, would be coming to save him. Jesus died and was buried in a cave. When he did, all our sins were forgiven. All the punishment for our sins is gone. But Jesus was right. The heavenly Father hadn’t forgotten about him at all. And when another morning comes, you know what’s going to happen to Jesus that’s just like what happened to Jess, right? *Receive responses.* You’re right!

**THE RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD: EASTER DAY, APRIL 12, 2020**

**Easter for Everybody!**

*Text:* Acts 10:34-43  
*Visual:* chocolate Easter eggs or some other Easter treats  
*Summary:* Christ’s Easter victory is for all who believe in him.

Rev. Nolan Astley, senior pastor,  
Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Kitchener, Ontario, Canada

Good morning, young disciples! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Besides Jesus rising from the grave—that’s the best thing!—one of my other favourite things about Easter is the candy! I really like the chocolate Easter eggs! Something I learned when I was young was to share, so I would like to share my Easter candy. I am going to share candy with . . . (Select just one child to share the candy and give a significant amount of it to just that one child. Instruct the child not to eat any of it yet!) There we are. The candy’s been shared. (Hopefully one or more of the children will notice the inequity and protest.)

Oh my, I see some of you are looking kind of sad. Why are you disappointed? (Receive responses.)

In our First Reading this morning, one of Jesus’ disciples, a man named Peter, is at the home of another man named Cornelius. Now at first that might not seem too important. But as it turns out, this meeting was pretty special. Peter was from Israel. Cornelius was from Rome, and in those days people from Israel did not have much to do with people from other nations. One thing they would almost never do was share a meal with them. But one day Peter had a vision from God telling him those old rules were finished. God wanted Peter to go see Cornelius and to share a meal with him, even though they were very different from each other and even though other people might not understand why this was happening. Peter learned an important lesson that day: God’s love in Jesus isn’t just to be shared with a few people, but with all people.

When Jesus died on the cross, it wasn’t just for the people of Israel, but for everyone. When Jesus rose again on Easter Sunday, it wasn’t just for a few people, but for everyone. Let me remind you of how that Bible reading ended: “Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43). So Peter and Cornelius, two men who were very different from each other, shared a meal together and shared God’s love with each other. Which reminds us that God shares his love with each and every one of us.

Because of that, I’m going to ask my friend who has all the candies I shared with him now to share those candies with all of you. Easter is for everyone! Amen.
Questions

Text: John 20:19-31
Visual: a question mark and an exclamation point, perhaps drawn on poster board or fashioned with pipe cleaners
Summary: Jesus answers Thomas’s questions so that Thomas can proclaim that Jesus is Lord and God.

Rev. Nolan Astley, senior pastor,
Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Kitchener, Ontario, Canada

Good morning, young disciples of Jesus. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

If you were listening to our Gospel this morning, you heard about a disciple of Jesus who wasn’t exactly sure Jesus had risen from death. Can any of you remember the name of the disciple who wasn’t so sure about this good news? Receive responses. Thomas was the disciple who wasn’t so sure.

Thomas had questions. Whenever I think of Thomas, I think of a question mark. Those of you who’ve learned to write know a question mark comes at the end of a sentence that asks a question. Show the question mark. Thomas had some questions, like, “Did Jesus really come back to life?” and “How can I know for sure he came back to life?” When we have questions like that, it’s hard to feel happy. The question mark reminds me of Thomas because it’s bent over as if it has a heavy burden or weight on its back.

It’s amazing how Jesus responded to Thomas’s question. He didn’t tell Thomas to stop asking questions. He didn’t get mad at Thomas for asking questions. Instead he loved Thomas even though Thomas had questions. To show Thomas how much he was loved, Jesus gave Thomas the chance to see that he really was alive again. The week after Jesus rose from the grave, he told Thomas to look at the nail marks in his hands and to touch those nail marks and even to touch the wound in Jesus’ side. Because Jesus loved him in this way, Thomas wasn’t weighed down with questions. Instead he was able to proclaim that Jesus was his Lord and his God. And at the end of that sentence in the Bible, there is no question mark but rather an exclamation point! Show the exclamation point. We use exclamation points to show when we’re happy and excited about something.

Jesus understands when we have questions, and we can ask him our questions. He also has given us his Word in the Bible. He speaks to us through the Bible’s words so that we are not weighed down with our questions. Instead we can believe that Jesus is our Saviour and by believing have life in his name! Show the exclamation point!

Boys and girls, Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! We exclaim that today! Show the exclamation point!

Your Story

Visual: a Bible (preferably a children’s picture Bible)
Summary: Scripture is one big story of salvation, and it’s all about Jesus . . . and you.

Jeni Miller, deaconess,
Lutheran Church of the Ascension, Atlanta, Georgia

Show the Bible. You guys know what this is, don’t you? Receive responses. What’s in the Bible? Receive responses.

Yes, the Bible contains stories. But these are not just any stories. The stories in the Bible aren’t fairy tales; they actually happened. All of the people are real!

What are the very first stories in the Bible? Receive responses; help if necessary. Right. First, God created the world and people. Next, the people that he created make a big mistake, disobey God, and then have to leave the garden! What does God do then? Receive responses. He makes a promise to the people. He promises that he will fix their mistake, once and for all, by sending a Savior for them. Then, through the whole rest of the Bible, we hear about how God cares for his people and sends that Savior! The end.

Hmm. It really doesn’t sound like the Bible contains a bunch of different stories about different people anymore, huh? It sounds like it’s just one BIG story!

In our Gospel today, we hear Jesus talk a little bit about this. After he rose again on Easter, he was walking down the road with two disciples, telling them about how all of the Bible is actually about . . . himself! It’s about Jesus, the Savior! Jesus shared with his friends all the parts of the BIG story of salvation, what the Bible is all about, just like your parents and teachers share it with you. He told them about how everything and everyone . . . from Moses all the way through John the Baptist . . . pointed right to Jesus and his dying on the cross and rising again. The whole story was pointing to Jesus, the Savior that God promised in the beginning to Adam and Eve.

But you know what? This story isn’t JUST about Jesus. It’s also about YOU. If you know the names of the children, point to each child and say: It’s about (each name). It’s about you, because you are the ones that Jesus came to save. It’s your story, too, because it’s all about how much God loves you, that he would send his Son to die for you and then rise again, so that you can one day live with him. Isn’t that a wonderful story with the best ending ever?

Let’s pray. Dear Jesus . . . thank you for sharing your story with us . . . and for making us a part of the story . . . so we can live happily ever after . . . In your name we pray . . . Amen.
I Am Jesus’ Little Lamb

Text: 1 Peter 2:19–25
Visual: My First Hymnal (CPH) or Lutheran Service Book
Summary: We wander astray, but Jesus the Good Shepherd loves and cares for his lambs.
Jeni Miller, deaconess,
Lutheran Church of the Ascension, Atlanta, Georgia

There’s a hymn I like to sing, Show the page for “I Am Jesus’ Little Lamb” in My First Hymnal or LSB 740. Maybe you’ve heard it before! If you know it, sing it with me:

I am Jesus’ little lamb,
Ever glad at heart I am;
For my Shepherd gently guides me,
Knows my need and well provides me,
Loves me ev’ry day the same,
Even calls me by my name. (LSB 740:1)

What does it say in that hymn? “I am Jesus’ little...” what? Receive responses. Yes, his little lamb! Being a lamb is pretty great. Just like the hymn says, being Jesus’ little lamb means I am glad in my heart. I’m glad because he loves me and guides me. He knows me so well that he even calls me by my name! He provides me with everything I need to live. When I’m hungry, he feeds me. When I’m thirsty, he makes sure I have water. See? Being a lamb is pretty wonderful.

Except... I have a problem. You see, lambs like to wander. Sometimes, they wander so far that they get lost! That’s why there are shepherds. To help guide the sheep back home.

The Bible says that Jesus is our Good Shepherd. He loves his little lambs so much that he makes sure they are always safe. If they start to wander off, he brings them back—even though he knew he would die when he went to find them. He returns them to the sheepfold, where they can be back and safe with their family and with their Good Shepherd.

We are all Jesus’ little lambs! And when we make mistakes and disobey God and get ourselves lost, he comes right after us to forgive us and bring us back. The Bible says, “For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Pet 2:25).

Little lambs like us wander off, away from Jesus our shepherd, but Jesus keeps loving us and chasing us. We know that we can always tell Jesus we’re sorry for wandering away and he’s quick to forgive. He brings us back, makes sure we’re fed, and keeps us close. I told you being a lamb was wonderful!

Let’s pray. Dear Jesus... thank you for being my Good Shepherd... and loving me... even when I stray. ...Please continue to guide me... and teach me what it means... to be one of your precious lambs. ...In your name we pray. Amen.

Stephen the Superhero

Text: Acts 6:1–9; 7:2a, 51–60
Visual: cape
Summary: The gift of faith given to Stephen made him brave and bold to speak God’s truth.
Jeni Miller, deaconess,
Lutheran Church of the Ascension, Atlanta, Georgia

Wearing the cape: Ever heard of a superhero? What is a superhero? Receive responses. Yes, superheroes usually help people who are in trouble, fight against bad guys, and do really amazing things with their superpowers. When we think of superheroes, we might think of Superman, right? Who else? Receive responses. Those are some pretty tough superheroes!

You know, another thing about superheroes is that they’re brave. It takes a lot of bravery—a lot of courage—to do what’s right. Sometimes it’s easier to do the wrong thing, because maybe lots of other people are doing the wrong thing, and you don’t want to seem different. So doing the right thing often means you have to be brave.

There’s a very brave man the Bible tells us about named Stephen. He wasn’t quite a superhero! He was a regular person, just like you and me. But he was very brave! Stephen shared God’s Word with everyone, even when people were mean to him and didn’t want to hear it. Even when they bullied him for doing right and telling the truth of God’s Word, he remained brave. He didn’t run away. He kept speaking.

Stephen didn’t have superpowers, but he had something better. God gave him the gift of faith to believe that Jesus had died for him and given him eternal life in heaven. That faith made him brave and courageous. It made him continue to tell people about the love of Jesus, even when enemies killed him. It wasn’t easy for him, but God gave him the strength and bravery he needed to do the right thing.

Guess what? God has given you the exact same gift he gave Stephen! You have the gift of faith too, and now you can be brave like a superhero too. You can speak up and tell others about the love of Jesus. It would be really easy not to share the truth about Jesus, but when you were baptized God gave you a wonderful gift. He gave you the gift of faith to believe in his promises and tell others about him.

I’m wearing this superhero cape to remind how God’s gift of faith makes us brave like Stephen. Superheroes aren’t real, but God’s faithful people are real, and you are one of them! Let’s pray. Thank you, Jesus, for giving me the gift of faith... and making me brave... like your faithful servant Stephen. ...Please give me courage... to share your Word and serve you all my life... In your name we pray. Amen.
**EASTER 6, MAY 17, 2020**

**A Reason for Hope**

**Text:** 1 Peter 3:13-22

**Visual:** photos or printouts of a smiling (happy) person, a mad person, and a sad person

**Summary:** We can share with others the reason for the hope and joy we have in Jesus.

Jeni Miller, deaconess, Lutheran Church of the Ascension, Atlanta, Georgia

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Let’s play a game. I’m going to show you a few photos, and you tell me how the people in these photos are feeling. Okay? Show picture of happy person. Receive responses. Show picture of mad person. Receive responses. Show picture of sad person. Receive responses.

Great! You were able to tell me how all of these people were feeling just by looking at them. Now let’s see if you can tell me a little more. Show picture of happy person again. Why do you think this person is happy? Receive responses. Those are all good guesses! It’s a little hard to know why people are happy just by looking at them, isn’t it? Don’t you wish this person was right here to tell us why she (or he) is smiling? I know we’d all love to hear the reason that someone is feeling so joyful! We’d want her (or him) to tell us all about it, because maybe we could share in that joy too.

Today, we heard St. Peter say in the Bible that we should always be prepared to tell anyone who asks us for a reason we are so full of joy and hope (1 Pet 3:15). Do you know the reason we always have for hope and joy? Receive responses. Yes, because Christ came to save us! It’s the best reason in the whole world to smile, to be full of joy and hope.

When other people look at us and see our joy and hope, and especially when they talk to us, they may start to get curious too. Just like we were wondering why the person in this photo was so happy, they also might want to know why we are joyful. What could you tell them? Receive responses. Yes! We can tell them that since Jesus died on the cross for us, forgave us our sins, and made us God’s children forever—even in heaven—we are the happiest people in the world.

I was thinking about it, and I want to be SO READY to tell other people this special reason why I have joy and hope! If anyone asks me, I’m going to be ready. We all see lots of people as we go about our days, and when they see how full of hope and joy we are, they will ask us: “Why are you so happy?” Let’s always be ready to tell them!

Will you pray with me? Lord God…you give us joy and hope…When other people notice it,…please help us to tell them…the reason for our joy and hope…and so that they will have hope in Jesus too….In his name we pray. Amen.

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**THE ASCENSION OF OUR LORD, MAY 21, 2020**

**Hands and Head**

**Text:** Luke 24:44-53

**Visual:** your right hand and your head

**Summary:** To say Jesus is at the right hand of God and is Head of the Church, his Body, is great news for us.

Rev. Ralph Blomenberg, DDiv, senior pastor, Immanuel Lutheran Church, Seymour, Indiana

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Good morning! It’s great to have you in God’s house today. Usually I bring something in my bag to show you, but today each of you brought just what we need! Please raise your right hand. Good! You can put it down. Now, take your right hand and touch your head, like this. Demonstrate. Good!

In our Bible reading from Ephesians, it says something about the right hand (show your right hand) and the head (touch your head) that I want to talk about with you. It says, “[God] raised [Jesus] from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places… and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph 1:20, 22–23).

That reading says God seated Jesus at his right hand (show your right hand). Would one of you volunteer to sit where my right hand is? Thank you! You’re sitting at a different place than before, but nothing else has changed, right?

When the Bible speaks of the right hand of God, it doesn’t really mean a place, but an honor. We still use “right hand” like that. The right-hand man to the boss is the one who gets things done. He’s as important to the boss as the arm connected to his body. So Jesus is the right-hand man—the one who does things no one else can. Because he died and rose for us, he has forgiven our sins. No one else can do that.

God the Father also made Jesus head over all things to the Church. What are things your head can do? Receive responses. Well, it can wear hats and grow hair, but what’s inside it? Receive responses. Yes, your mind, your brain. The brain in our head is what allows our body to move, our mouths to speak, our eyes to see. Jesus is in charge of the entire universe. He is over the whole world. And Jesus is Head of the Church. He gives life to all its members. When you were baptized, he made you a member of his body, the Church. He helps us, his body, work together with kindness and mercy, and he gives us voices to invite others into his kingdom.

On Ascension, we thank God that Jesus is at the right hand of power and glory. Because of that, you are safe now and will be safe forever in his good hands.

We pray: Lord Jesus, because you died and rose and ascended to heaven, you are my head. Thank you for saving me. Help my hands and mind serve you. Amen.
Take It to the Lord in Prayer

Text: 1 Peter 4:12-19; 5:6-11
Visual: none
Summary: God wants you to tell him all the things that you are concerned about because he cares for you.
Rev. John A. Fale, emeritus,
LCMS Office of International Mission, St. Louis, Missouri

God tells us in the Bible that he wants us to talk to him. Who knows what we call it when we talk to God? Receive responses. Yes, prayer. One of the things Jesus taught his apostles is that they could talk to God about anything, because God wants us to talk to him in prayer. And they did. One of Jesus’ apostles was a man named Peter. Peter told people about Jesus dying for them, being their Savior, just as Jesus told him to. Peter also taught them about praying, just as Jesus taught him to pray. Peter taught them to take all the things they’re concerned about to God, because God cares about them. That’s what I also want to teach you this morning.

A long time ago, a pastor taught me how to use my hands to remember whom to pray for when I talk to God. I’d like to show you that. Can everybody fold your hands for prayer? Show children how to fold their hands.

You see that as I fold my hands in prayer, my thumb is closest to my heart. That reminds me to pray for all the people who are close to my heart: my mom and dad, my brothers and sisters, my grandparents, my friends. People like that.

Next, I see my index finger. This is the finger people use to point at someone when they make fun of them. So I pray for the people who make fun of me or bully me.

Next, I see my finger that is the tallest finger on my hand. This is for the important people who teach me and care for me. So I’m reminded to pray for my teachers, my pastor, police officers, firefighters, people who serve in the military, doctors, nurses, and anybody who takes care of me.

Next, I see my ring finger. Did you know that this finger is the weakest finger on your hand? This finger reminds me to pray for those who aren’t very strong—people who are sick, people who need someone to help them.

Finally, I see my little finger. This finger reminds me to pray for myself and for children, especially babies who are still inside their mommies or babies who are sick.

You see? As I fold my hands in prayer, my hands help me remember all the people and things I’m concerned about. I know God wants me to tell him these things, because he said so. I know he cares for me because Jesus dying on the cross took away my sins and made me his own dear child again.

Let’s pray now, using our hands to remind us how to pray.

The Day of Pentecost, May 31, 2020

Spiritually Thirsty

Text: John 7:37-39
Visual: a glass of water
Summary: Jesus gives us his Spirit when we come to him spiritually thirsty, so that we can help others who are spiritually thirsty.
Rev. John A. Fale, emeritus,
LCMS Office of International Mission, St. Louis, Missouri

Good morning, children. I’m happy you’re all here today! What do I have in my hand? Receive responses. Yes, a glass of water. Why do people drink water? Receive responses. Right. And when do you get thirsty? When they eat, when they run or play, when it’s a hot day. So, you usually know when you need a drink of water. And sometimes, too, I’ll bet your moms and dads tell you that you need to drink some water, because they know water helps you be healthy.

When Jesus was in church, he was talking to people about being thirsty in their spirit. What do you think it means to be thirsty in your spirit or thirsty in your heart? Receive responses. As needed, direct responses toward things that are sin or effects of sin. So when you feel bad after you’ve done something wrong, or when you’re sad or others have hurt you, or when you’re scared or something’s bothering you, that’s what Jesus means about being spiritually thirsty.

And that’s exactly what Jesus was talking about to the people who were in church that day. He said, “If anyone is spiritually thirsty, come to me and drink.” What he was saying is, “If anyone is spiritually thirsty because you’ve done something wrong”—like not listening to your mom or dad, or hurting someone, or doing anything that’s wrong—“come to me, and I’ll forgive you. If anyone is spiritually thirsty because you feel bad or you’re scared or something’s bothering you, come to me, and I’ll help you.” That’s the whole reason Jesus died on the cross—to be your Savior from all those things. He wants you to come to him when you’re spiritually thirsty.

And you know what else? He says that he’ll put his Spirit in your heart so that you can help others when they’re spiritually thirsty. So when a boy hurts you and says, “I’m sorry,” what can you say? Receive responses. Yes, you can say that you forgive him. That will help him not be spiritually thirsty. If another girl is scared or something’s bothering her, you can be a friend to her and help her tell an adult who’ll make her feel better. That will help her not be spiritually thirsty.

So remember, Jesus is your Savior. He loves you and wants you to come to him when you’re feeling like your spirit is thirsty. He promises that he will help you—and use you to help others who are spiritually thirsty too.

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Coming Next Issue

Heads-Up for Preaching in an Election Year, Part 3

Mark and Mollie Hemingway

We may not realize that every school—private or public—is a religious school. So parents, congregations, and citizens need to beware . . . and to look for the opportunities God presents for shaping our children in the Gospel. Nationally known journalists Mark and Mollie Hemingway continue to discuss issues on which preachers will wish to keep their hearers informed in 2020.

Preach the Word (Module 6): Sacramental Preaching

David H. Petersen

God wants to deal with us by means of his external Word and Sacraments. This we Lutherans all publicly confess. God forbid, but this is so basic that we might grow bored with it and think we've already exhausted the topic of Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar! Dr. Petersen introduces the sixth module of the LCMS Preach the Word project with a goal that preachers take up a deliberate effort to declare these external words for their hearers' comfort and eternal good.

Apologetics Series: Make a Defense

Ken R. Schurb

St. Peter wrote, “In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense [ἀπολογία] to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet 3:15). Many of our members, though, may think Christian apologetics has something to do with “being sorry for our faith.” Quite to the contrary, Dr. Schurb offers a series to help our people make a defense of their faith to those they see every day.

Pastors Conference

If you had to characterize your preaching as being more like “The Gambler,” “The Godfather,” or “The Great Gatsby,” which would it be?

Sunday Themes, Series A

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Special Sermons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text, Title</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baccalaureate Sermon Jn 14:15–24, You Are Not an Orphan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordination Sermon Rev 2:8–11; Heb 7:11–16; Mt 10:16–20, The Spirit of Your Father</td>
</tr>
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