

Pastor Johnston's Email Devotions for the Week

12/20/04 – *Isaiah 45:1-8*

“This is what the LORD says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armor, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut: I will go before you and will level the mountains; I will break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron. I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel, who summons you by name. For the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen, I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honor, though you do not acknowledge me. I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me, so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting men may know there is none besides me. I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things. You heavens above, rain down righteousness; let the clouds shower it down. Let the earth open wide, let salvation spring up, let righteousness grow with it; I, the LORD, have created it.”

What does Cyrus have to do with anything? Why is God going to do all this for this unbelieving Gentile ruler? What's so special about him? God's people are what's so special about him! God was going to use Cyrus as His instrument to deliver His people from exile. When else in history has a ruler looked so kindly on a people on whom he had no reason to look kindly? He would return their city to them. He would provide materials and funds to rebuild their temple. He would preserve them from destruction by the innumerable tribes and people who wanted to wipe them from the face of the earth. The prophet writes in verse 13, *“I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness: I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free, but not for a price or reward, says the LORD Almighty.”* God would use the people of this world to help the citizens of the next, even, at times, without either party really understanding all that was going on until centuries later. God had raised up a powerful Babylonian ruler to take His people captive. Now He raises up a powerful Persian ruler to destroy the Babylonians, in punishment for doing the very thing He used them to do, and to ransom His captive remnant. His people are always the focal point of His concern.

History is an amazing thing, because many times we can only truly see what was happening when we look back from the future. This is true in our own lives. This is true in the plan of salvation. St. Luke begins the Christmas narrative in his Gospel, *“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.”* An historical person, an historical event, in an historical place, all used by God, as in the past, to bring about His greatest deliverance of all: the deliverance from sin, death, and the devil. God had guided HisStory to just this point. No, he did not remove the free will of those contemporary to this even or of those preceding it, yet He saw to it that this precise moment came. *“When the time had full come,”* we will hear St. Paul explain on Christmas Day, the festival of the nativity. God acts deliberately and purposefully, working all things *for the good of those who love Him*. And many times, those who love Him do not realize this until much later. How many has He spared from some terrible event by taking them home early? How many has He prepared for future suffering by strengthening them through an earlier trial? How many has He given what seemed like a curse, only for them later to discover it was their greatest blessing?

The time is coming? For what? For God's deliverance on Christmas, at His Second Coming, and, Lord willing, in innumerable other aspects and facets of life and history. Look back in awe. Look forward with hope. Live today, knowing that His hand is not idle in our time.

12/21/04 – *1 Corinthians 2:6-10*

We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of

this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written: “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him”—but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.

I have mentioned it at various times in Bible class already in connection with St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians, but I will mention it again. Christianity is the only religion of the world no one could have thought up on their own. It is not absurd, but it is irrational in the opinion of our fallen minds. Anyone can dream up a religion based on works. A work righteous religion simply starts with the understanding that we are separated from God, which we all know instinctively, although we may try to deny it, and proposes a solution to the problem the only way we humans know how to solve a problem: the devotee does something to placate and woo God. Hindus wash in the Ganges. Buddhists meditate. Muslims fast and observe certain moral laws. The list could go on and on. But who could think up the Second Person of the Triune God being incarnate of the Third Person of the Triune God and taking our place to bring us peace with the First Person of the Triune God. Only God could come up with that one. *“No, we speak of God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written: “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him”—but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.”* Don’t let this Christmas pass without taking time to ponder the sheer magnitude of this event. Ponder the boundless love of the incarnate Christ as He descends into our mess so that we can one day ascend into the peace and joy of heaven, which He has prepared for us. God became weak. God became a servant. God died. God did all this for us, while we all too often won’t even lift a finger to help each other. If that doesn’t give you something to think about, slap yourself upside your head, because what happens on Saturday will change the world forever, and what happens on Saturday will change you as well.

12/22/04 – Mark 3:31-35

Then Jesus’ mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, “Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.” “Who are my mother and my brothers?” he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”

Who are Christ’s brothers and sisters and mother, that is, who are those closest and most dear to Him? We are. We are children of His will, baptized and catechized according to it, forgiven according to it, and growing in sanctification according to it. How amazing is our Lord! He makes us what we are according to His will and then, through us, accomplishes His will by us. This is what Christmas is about: God’s will being accomplished and our relationship with Him being restored. The same is what every divine service is about. It is what every celebration of the Lord’s Supper, and the spiritual sustenance and rejuvenation it gives is about. It is what Christ taking flesh, every time He does it in Word and in Sacrament, is about. May He take flesh this Christmas. May He take flesh in the manger, incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. May He take flesh in the blessed Sacrament of the Altar, giving His Body and Blood, born in Bethlehem to be crucified on Calvary, for the forgiveness of sins. May He take flesh through His Word, dwelling in us through it with His peace, and accomplishing His gracious will for others through us, using us as little Christs, to steal Luther’s phrase. Who are Christ’s brothers and sisters and mother? Go look in the mirror, and there’s your answer. Am I the only one who thinks that amazing?

12/23/04 – Romans 1:1-7

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him and for his name’s sake, we received grace and

apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

“I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord.” Sound familiar? I hope so, because it is from the Small Catechism’s explanation to the Second Article of the Apostles’ Creed. The subtitle of this article is “redemption.” “He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with His holy, precious blood and His innocent suffering and death.” Why true man? To take my place under the law. Why true God? So that His death could take away the sins of the world, of which I am a part? What is the result? “All this He did that I should be His own, and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he has risen from death and lives and rules eternity.” Can we be sure? “This is most certainly true!” “To all in [Shields, and, yes, even Freeland] who are loved by God and called to be saints [that’s you!]: Grace and peace to you from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.” Grace is God’s undeserved love. Peace is the forgiveness of sins. Both now belong to you in Christ, through Word and Sacrament. I guess there are two things to remember from our devotion today. First, dust off your Catechism, because there is some good, Scriptural stuff in there. Second, your God became man to bring you grace and peace. Take that grace and peace and run with it, run with it all the way to the finish line of this race we call life.

11/24/04 – Christmas Eve Commentary from the Service of Lessons and Carols

This service is not designed for a sermon, but, unfortunately, I am, and so permit a few comments as we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Lord in the morning. As excitement grows for the arrival of your various friends and family this holiday, remember that your Brother is coming, and He is going to take the gift that no one else wants: your sin and death. In return, He has brought you peace with His Father and an inheritance in heaven. This gift He brings has not been purchased at a store with money or credit, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death. You will not find this Gift wrapped and placed under the tree. Instead, follow the Magi to a dirty barn and find this greatest Gift of all wrapped and placed in a manger. Your Savior, conceived and growing in the womb of the Virgin, will be born tomorrow. Seeing Him, fragile, weak, and helpless, all for you, may fresh and fruitful faithfulness be born in you as well. Do not let this be your only trip, or one of a few, to see your God made man for your forgiveness, life, and salvation. He has come to forgive our unfaithfulness in the past, and He has come to reinvigorate us in love and faithfulness for the future. He is always here when He says He will be. He is always waiting for you, as His Church has waited for Him this Advent season: eagerly and expectantly. Come and see your newborn King tomorrow, and bring Him a better gift than the Magi; bring Him yourself. Let us light our candles and keep this holy Christmas vigil with prayer and pondering. At midnight, we welcome our Lord. May we welcome Him with humble and repentant hearts, and may we receive Him in a renewed faith, reborn in the reliving of our Baptism, fed in the celebration of His Holy Supper, and ever increased by His living and active Word. Christ is coming, and He is coming to make us broken sinners whole. Come, Lord Jesus, come, free us from death and ransom us from sin.

12/27/04 – St. John, Apostle and Evangelist – John 21:20-25

Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is going to betray you?") When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me." Because of this, the rumor spread among the brothers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?" This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true. Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.

Today is the Minor Festival of St. John, Apostle and Evangelist. Yesterday was the Minor Festival of St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr. It may seem ironic that these feast days fall so soon after THE FESTIVAL, the Festival of the Nativity of our Lord, but not if we look with knowing eyes. Lutherans have not kept these festival days in our church calendars because we are hesitant to cast off the last vestiges of Romanism, but rather, because we recognize that Christ's ministry did not end when Christ's ministry ended. He worked through men and women, saints and martyrs, confessors and doctors, pastors and parishioners. He worked through St. Stephen, the first martyr, who continued to serve as a witness for the risen Christ while he was stoned and, by the continued observance of his memory, long after he left the church militant for the church eternal. St. John, too, served as a witness, and he served well. His testimony, almost all of it eyewitness testimony, has been preserved for all posterity in his Gospel and epistles. Rather reliable tradition tells us he was exiled to Patmos for his faith. Both men chose eternal security over earthly security, not because they were superhuman in their convictions, but Christ, who died and rose for them, lived in them and worked through them.

"This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true. Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written." St. John closes his Gospel with true insight. It is impossible to record all that Jesus did in his earthly ministry, and it is just as impossible to record all He still does through His Church today. He is the Head. We are His hands, His feet, His mouth, etc. We have not yet been called to witness to the point of the shedding of our blood, but we have been called to witness, to make confession and not concession, to spread the gospel and not complacency. May the incarnate Son of God, born in Bethlehem, and born in all the baptized through water and the Word, work in and through us as He has worked in and through John. May His Body, the Church, which has continued and extended His ministry for millennia, continue and extend it today. May we pray like this all depends on Him, and may we work like it all depends on us. May we, like St. John, give close attention to Christ's every word, and then proclaim His Word as clearly as possible. Do you see why we Lutherans have these festivals still? The names are deceiving—the festival of St. Stephen, the festival of St. John—because the real celebration is about Christ, who has worked through His saints in the past, and will work through His saints still today. You are His saints. Amen.

12/28/04 – Holy Innocents, Martyrs – Matthew 2:13-18

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son." When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."

Man knows no limits to his raging against God. He dulls his conscience, to obliterate guilt, which is evidence of an ultimate Judge. He increases and increases his threshold for sin, desensitizing himself all the while. He lashes out at everything that smacks of the divine, removing, banning, mocking, and secularizing the sacred. He calls murder choice and immorality alternatives. He seeks power for power's sake and despises weakness, because weakness breeds faith. He confuses freedom with licentiousness and libertinism. He even kills children to avoid the redemption of his human race. Yes, man by nature does not want to be redeemed, saved, or forgiven, because man refuses to admit there is anything from which to be redeemed or saved, and of which to be forgiven. How many have fallen victim to this incessant and furious campaign against God? How many will continue to fall victim? Look how deeply sin is rooted in our race. Look how entrenched hatred and anger are engrained in our minds. Look how capable we are of unfathomable cruelty. Look, and thank God that He has redeemed you, saved you, and forgiven you, all without asking your opinion. Like the walls of Jericho, your hardness of heart caved in before His divine will, working through Word and Sacrament. Don't marvel at that of which we are capable when you watch the evening news. Mourn, because it is an accurate representation of what our fallen human race is: fallen. Marvel, instead, at what the grace of God has and can do. Marvel that much worse does not happen. Marvel at how the prayers of the Church have preserved this world so long. Marvel at how so little salt has kept this rotting mess from spoiling all the way. Marvel that what God has done for us, He has done for all men, women and children—He has given His Son, and, through faith, He will give them heaven itself. Yes, we still stumble. Yes, our sanctification is a process, and often a slow process at that. Yes, our sinful nature oftentimes rears its head in horrible and troubling ways. But it is a dying man's desperate last grab for control. Drown your Old Adam in your Baptism, and let a new you daily arise to serve God as He intended to be served, using that same zeal that once campaigned against Him to work and witness for Him, to protect the innocent and lift up the weak, to reflect His Son to those who still oppose Him. Nothing is ever impossible with God. He did, after all, bring you to faith. Amen.

12/29/04 - John 12:35-43

Then Jesus told them, "You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going. Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light." When he had finished speaking, Jesus left and hid himself from them. Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet: "Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere: "He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn—and I would heal them." Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him. Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved praise from men more than praise from God.

Sometimes God says, "Fine, have it your own way." When someone persistently opposes God's will, resists His message, and neglects His Means of Grace, God leaves them to their blindness and turns them over to the persistent and unyielding darkness of unbelief. God wants all men to be saved, as Scripture clearly teaches, but God also does not remove our ability to reject Him, and, when we harden ourselves to it, confirms us in it. It is interesting that in the various meetings between Pharaoh and Moses the subject responsible for Pharaoh's hardening is spoken of as Pharaoh at times, and then God at others. God let Pharaoh have what Pharaoh was intent on having: hardening of heart.

Some do not harden themselves, per se. They simply fail to confess their faith out of fear or shame. Such were the Pharisees. As Pharisees, and as leaders, they were respected in the community. They were the Jewish Dream Team. As Christians, they would be outcasts and in fellowship with fishermen, slaves, and various other unseemly characters. As Pharisees, they were right with men. As Christians, they would

be right with God. The two choices are not always so mutually exclusive, but oftentimes are. At such times, we recall our Lord's words: "*Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven*" (Mark 10:32,33).

We have all heard the good news of Jesus Christ. We have all had exposure to His Means of Grace, that is, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. We have all faced situations where we failed to confess our faith out of fear or shame. We have all, at times, had to choose between our sinful nature's inherent love for accolades from peers and a godly humility that draws praise to God and not to ourselves. We have all fallen short in these, or similar circumstances, at one time or another. May such shortcomings never become characteristic of us! May we do what our Lord would have us do when we do falter: turn to His mercy and grace. Our Lord has richly and freely forgiven us. He has given us what He wants us to have, which is infinitely better than what would be ours if we got things our way all the time. May we live in the light of His grace that the darkness of sin, fear, and doubt may never envelope us! The Light has come, and He has come to chase our darkness away. He is the Light no darkness can overcome. He is our Light.

12/30/04 – John 12:44-50

Then Jesus cried out, "When a man believes in me, he does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. When he looks at me, he sees the one who sent me. I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness. As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it. There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day. For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say."

Our relationship with the Father exists through our relationship with His Son. Our relationship with His Son exists through His Word. How is your relationship with the Father? With the Son? With the Word? To know one, you must look at the other. The Father is revealed in nowhere else but in His Son. The Son is revealed nowhere else but in His Word. Have you seen the Son lately? Have you heard Him speak words that are truth and life? Have you heard the Father speak through Christ through the Word, whether read or preached by a called servant? None of these three are opposed, but all three instead faithfully point to each other, wanting to introduce each other into their relationship with the believer. See the Father, by seeing Christ through the written Word, the preached Word, and the visible Word (Sacraments). The Word will lead you to Christ. Christ will lead you to the Father. The Father will lead you into paradise with all the saints who've gone before us. Hear His Word and believe it. His Word will be testifying for you or against you one day. Let His Word and its sweet gospel promises testify on your behalf, that it has washed you together with water, fed you together with bread and wine, spoken to you through the pages of your Bible, and absolved you through the mouth of your pastor. When His Word testifies for you, Christ testifies for you, and the Father testifies for you, and no prosecutor, no matter how wily, is going to convict a defendant with witnesses like that.

1/3/05 – Deuteronomy 33:26-29

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Promise kept. Did the fulfillment of the promise look like what these men expected? If you read the next few verses, you will see it did not. Yet, nonetheless, the promise was kept. Here was the Christ, standing before them, reading His very own Word, the Word that made Him present every time it was read, and they did not want Him. Promise kept.

Does the fulfillment of God's promises always look like what we expected? Is our daily bread always our favorite flavor? Is God's protection always as protective as we would prefer? When His will is done, does it always match ours? Yet the promises are kept, and, not only are they kept, they are kept according to our own best interests, although we may not see that now. Promise kept on Calvary. Promise kept at the font. Promise kept in a Book. Promise kept at a communion rail. Promise kept from the lips of a simple pastor. Promise kept.

Is it what you expected? Maybe not, but don't let that keep you from being impressed. God has kept His promises to His children from the beginning of time, and He will not stop keeping them now. We do not always know what the fulfillment will look like specifically, and it may not always be what we expected, but it will be the fulfillment. See the Fulfillment today. See Him declare His presence. See Him open His arms to His fellow Nazarenes and be rejected. See Him standing still today. See Him declare His presence through His Word. See His arms open. Find refuge there. Find fulfillment there. Keep returning there, to the Promise Fulfilled. Let all the rest fall into place from there.

1/4/05 – James 4:13-17

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.

It used to be a common thing in church affairs to add the abbreviation d.v. to plans, proposals, etc. What does d.v. mean? It is Deo volente, which probably means little to those of you who don't enjoy a good Latin phrase. Deo volente is Latin for Lord-willing. It is a humble admission that, as well-laid as our plans may be, they are contingent upon the will of our Lord and His plans. We are not a very d.v. culture and world anymore, since we have progressed beyond needing God's help, that is, until a disaster strikes. Then we turn to God, to ask Him how He could let it happen, and how He could possibly dare to have plans that contradict our own, which we do not understand right now. But, we forget in all of the finger pointing and despairing and we have never been promised tomorrow, and we should never live as though we are. Cancer strikes. Tsunamis crash. Automobiles collide, etc. Our future is always in the Lord's hands, and this is a good thing.

I talked about it in Bible class last night, and I think it is worth mentioning again. We oftentimes confuse God's blessings with curses. We oftentimes think our suffering is a punishment from God or proof He is not hearing our prayers. How often don't we forget this one simple fact: we live in a world and in bodies ravaged by sin. Unless our Lord comes first, which depends upon His gracious and all-knowing will, we are all going to die someday. We are all going to get sick, supposing we don't die in some sort of accident. These times of trial and cross-bearing are not necessarily curses, but sometimes are blessings, meant to draw us to God's strength in our weakness, to focus our attention on His promises and not our plans. Sometimes our financial shortcoming is an opportunity to learn the difference between needs and wants. Sometimes those intense moments are the burning of the muscles of our faith, necessary for growth and progress. All this may well be the Lord's GOOD and GRACIOUS will, and not a curse or punishment. All this may be the realities of existence that are too real to fit in our heads and ultimately are handled best by Him who can grasp and deal with them for us.

"If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." There is nothing wrong with planning. There is nothing wrong with looking forward to future plans. The problem is when we plan as if we alone control what will happen in the future. May God give us a keen awareness of His ultimate control of all time—past, present, and future. May God grant us insight, that we may see His gracious will in all time—

past, present, and future. May God grant us faith, to trust His gracious will is at work even when we cannot see it. We are not nearly as in control of our lives and futures as we think we are, and thank God for that, because as many of us have learned already, and some will learn with time, “the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry.” The best laid plans of the Lord, however, although they do not always seem as clear and cognizable, never go awry. They always accomplish just what He wants, and what He wants, believe it or not (believe it!) is what is for our ETERNAL best.

1/5/05 - Isaiah 43:16-19

This is what the LORD says—he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick: “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.”

We love new and improved things. Put a new and improved label on a product and it is going to sell better. In our common view, the newest is the most improved and vice versa. In fact, even when a product works just fine, when it isn't broken, companies are still working to improve it, to put on more bells and whistles, etc. Today, through the prophet Isaiah, the LORD tells us He has a new thing. His new thing, however, is not simply improved, it is totally redone.

We all know firsthand that it is impossible to perfectly keep the law, yet perfection is precisely what the law demands. It is not the law's fault that we cannot live up to its standards. The problem lies in our inherent sinfulness that from our very birth makes such a task unachievable. For example, out minivan is a perfectly fine minivan, but if I was only three feet tall, it would do me no good. The fault would not lie with the van. It was designed perfectly by its maker. The problem is that a three-foot tall person cannot handle it. The law is perfect, holy, and useful, but we are no longer able to make use of it as it was intended. Sinners sin, and sin is a transgression of the law. Therefore, a new thing was necessary.

God's new covenant is not a reciprocal relationship like the law offers. It is not quid pro quo (you do; I do) deal. His new covenant is sheer grace. It is completely one-sided. God promises. God creates faith. That God-wrought faith receives the promise. We cannot mess this one up. This is designed for spiritual midgets like ourselves. Gone is the uncertainty and fear and burden of the law. We now have the certainty, comfort, and refuge of the gospel. And now, now that we have been forgiven, now that we are the beneficiaries of this one-sided covenant, we can keep the law in a way we could not before: not for salvation, but out of complete gratefulness and with joy. Talk about new and improved! Unlike with other products, which companies are always fiddling with, rejoice that this promise needs no tweaking and never needs to be made new, because we are now the product, and it is constantly improving us.

1/6/05 – The Epiphany of our Lord - Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel." Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of

incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Today we begin a new season of the Church Year. This is the festival of the Epiphany of our Lord. Epiphany means revelation. A revelation occurs when something that could not have been discovered on its own is made known. Today the Christ Child is revealed as the King of Israel and worshipped by the Magi. He is revealed by a star, as the heavens point to the King of Heaven. The star brought the nations to the Christ, God the One and Only incarnate for them.

We too have our star today. We follow the Word. There we find the Christ Child, incarnate for us, and finding Him there, we worship Him. Let us keep our eyes on our star this Epiphany season, that Christ may be made known to us more and more, and that, growing in love for Him, increasing in knowledge of Him, and maturing in faith in Him we may more fully worship Him.

1/8/05 – Ephesians 5:8-14

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said: “Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

Isn't it tiring always hiding ourselves in the dark? I would say, Isn't it tiring always hiding our sins in the dark?, but since this hiding so often consumes and defines us, I think it is better to say the former. We strive to be perfect parents, children, employees, employers, spouses, husbands, etc. In all these ventures we fall short, and yet we refuse to admit it, or at least to allow others to see it, and so we spend our days wondering how much others have figured out about us, what we have failed to sufficiently mask, what blemish we may have forgotten to cover. What if they know I am not the perfect parent?...child?...employee?...pastor?...spouse?...whatever title you choose? Come out of the darkness. The Light has made His epiphany. Place your secrets, your shortcomings, your blemishes, your sins in the light of day. Acknowledge them to God. *“Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”* You might be surprised, but God already knows you are not perfect, and that is why the Light has come, and that is why you must become His children, and not children of darkness. Bask in the light of your Baptism. Walk in the light of the Word. Let your sins become visible, because then something else becomes apparent as well: God's grace. *“You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord.”*

1/10/05 – 1 John 4:9-16a

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” May we never isolate these words from what follows in Jesus' ministry! When He is rejected in Nazareth: *“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”* When so many turn away from Him in John 6: *“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”* When His disciples sleep as He wrestles with what is to come in

Gethsemane: *“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”* Before the Sanhedrin: *“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”* As pagan soldiers beat and mock Him: *“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”* As He hangs naked on a cross: *“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”* As He cries out in anguish, *“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”*: *“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”* *“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”* Knowing who we are, knowing how unlovable we are deep down at our most hidden and wretched core, how can we hear how God has loved us and then fail to love one another. How can the Spirit, who made us God’s child when we were still offspring of the devil, fail to reach out to others through us in faith-wrought love and concern? How can we grow in this love we show to one another without first growing in our connection to Love Himself?

God now lives in us through Word and Sacrament, and not only does He live in us, but He completes His love through us, using us to accomplish His compassionate will in the world. But let us always keep the cart behind the horse. We can and will love only as much as we have been loved by God, and as much as we have learned of and trusted in that love. *“We rely on the love God has for us.”* Apart from Him and His love, we can produce only superficial and transient love. In Him, we produce the greatest love of all: His love.

1/11/05 – Hebrews 2:14-18

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

We do not have a cosmic watchtower out in space who set everything running and now just stands back and watches. We do not have a cruel director of a grand drama who pitilessly and maliciously guides history and our individual lives for his own enjoyment. We do not have a distant and uncaring father who unsympathetically observes our mistakes and resolves it best to let us suffer through them to no end, leaving to what we’ve gotten ourselves into. We have a God who hurled Himself into the fray, being born in our flesh, baptized with our Baptism, and dying our death. *“Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”* We have a God who has suffered as we suffer, who has been tempted as we are tempted, who wept at the death of Lazarus, intimately connecting with the grief of Mary and Martha. We have a God who still today is not a casual observer, but a shoulder to cry on, a sanctuary to hid in, and a strong arm to carry us when we are weak. Do we suffer? Most definitely we do. Do we suffer to no end? No, we suffer to the greatest end of all: life—real life without end. Sin has brought discord, suffering, sickness, and death into the world. We are capable of doing horrible things to each other. We are all too often let down by those we trust most. We get sick, and, yes, unless Christ comes first, we will die. But we are not alone. We read how God has suffered throughout history, grieving over the stubbornness and rebellion of His people, delivering them again and again, even sacrificing His own good name for their well-being. We read how God became man and suffered. We read how He died. We are not alone. God entered the fray, and, for that reason, when He sees our lost condition or watches us bear our crosses He does not need to speculate about what we may be experiencing, thinking, and feeling. He has been there, done that, and knows personally what we are going through, and He bears it with us, propping up our cross and Simon of Cyrene did for Him. *“Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”* Maybe that doesn’t strike you as remarkable today, but one day it will, and you will rejoice in the midst of

your sadness, because you are not alone, because your sympathetic Savior is with you, and He has walked in your shoes.

1/12/05 – Matthew 4:18-25

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.” At once they left their nets and followed him. Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them.

What is more amazing? That the Christ chose fishermen to be apostles, that when Jesus told them to follow they did “at once,” or that Jesus was healing the sick and diseased? I know what is most important: *“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news...”* Last Sunday we saw Christ revealed in His Baptism, as He began His public ministry. Now, a chapter later, we see that ministry growing and spreading the same way it began in the Jordan: in fulfillment of prophecy, especially prophesy from Isaiah. Remember that in the Gospel according to St. John, this list of activities is the proof that Jesus offers John the Baptist when asked if He is really the Christ. The Christ has come! That was good news then, and that is good news now. He still calls common people to follow Him today. Contrary to reason and selfish concerns, many still follow at once. People in desperation and dire straits still turn to Him for help. And most importantly, through His Word and His Church, He is still teaching and preaching the good news.

1/13/05 – John 5:19-24

Jesus gave them this answer: “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him. I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”

Look at the intimate connection between the Father and the Son. See how the Father and Son work in concert to accomplish their divine purpose. Notice how the Father cannot be worshipped apart from the Son, and the Son cannot be worshipped apart from the Father. Pay attention to whom the Father has made your Judge, and by what standard that Judge judges. *“I tell you the truth, whoever hears My word and believes Him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”* Your Judge is God’s Son. God’s Son is your Savior. Your Savior is your Judge. Hear the word of this Judge, God Himself and God’s Son, who became your Savior. Hear His Word, and honor Him, because He has honored you, taking your flesh so He could take your sins. Honor His Father, who sent Him for this very reason. Hear His Word, which presents the reality of the Father and Son’s plan from beginning to end, and makes it present still today. Know that in Him, as you find Him in His Word, you have life, and not mere living and breathing life here and now, but real life, the way it was meant to be, with this kind Father and gracious Son for all eternity. The Christ is revealed this Epiphany season. He is

God's Son. He is God. He is your Judge, but He is also Your Savior. May His mercy guide and rule His interaction with us as it has since the beginning and as it will forever and ever. Amen.

1/17/04 – Mark 2:18-22

Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?" Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast. "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins."

It was a valid question. "Why aren't Your disciples fasting when everyone else is, even John's followers?" It was an even more valid answer. "Weddings are a time for feasting, not for fasting." A Jewish wedding was a festive occasion, even more so than ours, and was the culmination of a long process, often lasting a week or more. The bride would wait anxiously for weeks, months, years for her bride to come, when he was prepared to care for a household. Christ is the bridegroom. The Church is His bride. The Christ had come to His Church, the Bridegroom to His bride, and fasting was an absurd suggestion to anyone who understood the situation. This was a time for celebration. A time for fasting would follow, when the Bridegroom would be taken from His bride by death. But, do not worry, the greatest feast of all would soon follow when the Bridegroom made His miraculous return. The Church Year reflects this order, as we feast at Christmas, fast (it is a custom observed by many to give something up) in Lent, and feast again, more than we've ever feasted before, on Easter.

"No one pours new wine into old wine skins." When grape juice fermented in the goatskins the ancients used to hold wine, the wine would expand. An old wineskin would break when this happened. A new wineskin, however, would expand with the wine, stretching as was needed. Jesus and His teaching is new wine. The old wineskin, the Mosaic Law, had served its purpose, but it was not able to hold this new wine: the gospel. A new wineskin was required. The old forms must pass away, fulfilled and abrogated by the Savior, and a new Church, shaped by the gospel, must emerge. While only one fast was prescribed in Old Testament law, a fast for the Day of Atonement, the Pharisees fasted twice a week. This fasting was viewed as meritorious. It was a work of the law, not of the gospel. It was old wine in old wineskins. Christ's new wine is the wine of grace and mercy, a wine of Christ's merits that goes bad when we attempt to add our own. Fasting may be useful to discipline our flesh and focus our mind, but it has no part in our justification, that is, how we are saved by God.

Thank God for this new wine, contained in new wineskins. As sin abounds, this new wine of grace abounds all the more, stretching as is needed. Drink from this new wineskin and taste the sweet flavor of Christ's undeserved love. Don't try to mix this new wine with the old, and don't try to put this new wine in old wineskins, mixing law and gospel or couching the gospel in the law. The old wineskin will break and both wines, the new and the old, will lose their unique place, purpose, and flavor. If something must burst, let it be your heart, bursting with joy at this new and priceless gift of God to His Church and all the world. The Bridegroom is here. Let us celebrate His arrival!

1/18/05 – Mark 3:1-6

Another time he went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone." Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent. He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was

completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

How badly we humans want a set of rules! Jesus says elsewhere, *“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath”* (Mark 2:27-28). Our Small Catechism explains the third commandment thus: “We should fear and love God that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but regard it as holy and gladly hear and learn it.” The highest and greatest purpose of the Sabbath is to hear and learn God’s Word. Yes, the Sabbath was also instituted for rest, but the Lord of Sabbath gives us a rest no resort or vacation can. Jesus Himself says, *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”* (Matthew 11:28). St. Paul writes in Colossians, *“Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ”* (2:16). Christ is the fulfillment of the Sabbath, and it is in Him, who comes to us in the Word and Sacraments, that our Sabbath is complete.

“We should fear and love God that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but regard it as holy and gladly hear and learn it.” How far from hearing and learning the Word the Pharisees are in our text today! The Sabbath regulations they are concerned with are not taken from the Scriptures, but from later traditions of the Jews created and prescribed by men and not God. How much easier it is to make and keep our own man-made laws than it is to keep the Ten Commandments and the greater law of love. So Jesus asks, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” You can bet He expects an answer from God’s Word and not from tradition. Human regulations had turned God’s gift to the human race for physical and spiritual refreshment into a burden no one could bear. As Peter stated at the Council of Jerusalem, when some wanted to force Gentile Christians to keep the Mosaic Law: *“Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?”*

Rest cannot and could not be found in the law, and so, from the very creation of the world, something better—a true rest—had been planned and promised. That Rest stood before the Pharisees today, but like slaves who’d grown to love their servitude, the Pharisees clung to their yoke of slavery, to the impossible demands of the law. But you will not do the same. See your Rest today, and rest in Him. Here is your Sabbath, and here is He with whom the Sabbath is to be spent. He promises you, as He promised these obstinate disciples of the laws of men: *“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”* He will restore you—maybe not your shriveled hand, but your troubled soul, because *“then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus,”* and they did kill Him, as He knew they would. In that death, and in the resurrection that followed, we can sing wholeheartedly with David in the midst of every trial and all suffering: *“I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety”* (Psalm 4:8).

1/20/05 – Matthew 16:13-19 – Text for the Confession of St. Peter

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

I must say that I was rather grieved to find that in my haste and business the past two days I did not stop to remember that Tuesday was the Minor Festival of the Confession of St. Peter, one of my favorites in the church year. Here we see St. Peter, who tried to keep Jesus from washing his feet in the upper room,

even though Peter so often put his foot in his mouth. Here we see St. Peter, whose boldness so often got him into trouble and led him to say foolish things. Here we see St. Peter who would later betray his Lord, failing to confess this faith he now proclaims. Here we see St. Peter providing the rock on which the Church is built: *“You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”*

Some would like to make this text a proof of the papacy’s primacy. I know their arguments well, having been raised with them. The best thing they could do is read the text. *“You are Petros,”* Jesus says, *“and on this petra I will build my Church.”* You are Peter—masculine—and on this rock—feminine—I will build my Church. Had Peter been neutered in the span of the one short sentence? Or is Peter’s confession the rock upon the Church is built, because his confession is of Christ. St. Peter calls Christ a rock (1 Peter 2:8) as he quotes Isaiah. St. Paul calls Christ the spiritual rock Israel drank from in the wilderness (1 Corinthians 10:4). In Matthew 18 and John 20 the binding and loosing of sins is entrusted to all the Church, not only St. Peter. And finally, there is not an ounce of evidence that the pope is the successor of St. Peter in either position or doctrine, in fact, the overwhelming evidence destroys any claim of a continuation in either. How quickly we are tempted to turn our eyes from the object of the confession to the confessor! How prone we are to elevate men above Christ!

“You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” The Church is built on that confession and it will prevail in it alone. The devil frequently and with little effort overcomes men, as he did St. Peter on Good Friday, but that confession alone has remained and will remain constant for all eternity, because that confession comes not from men, but from God, through the holy gospel. In Greek, *petros* is a pebble, a piece of a large temple stone. *Petra* is a massive fitted stone block, such as those used to lay the foundations of buildings, especially large buildings. A faith in men is always founded on *petros*, which crush under pressure. A faith in a confession of faith, rooted in and given from God, that is a *petra*, which all the siege works of Hades cannot destroy. We may waver. We may doubt. We may fall into sin and need to be converted all over again. None of that, however, changes that true confession of the Church. In our text, Jesus asks His Church, the gathered disciples, “Who do you (plural) say I am?” St. Peter gave the Church’s answer, and the Church’s answer is still the same. *“You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”* In that confession, we find a sure and strong foundation. Pebbles may be knocked off here and there, but they can always be stacked back on, provided the foundation stands firm. You stand on that foundation, because you are in Christ. And *“no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ”* (1 Corinthians 3:11). Thank God for that!

1/21/05 – Deuteronomy 4:5-13

See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today? Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them. Remember the day you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, when he said to me, “Assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children.” You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain while it blazed with fire to the very heavens, with black clouds and deep darkness. Then the LORD spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice. He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets.

How special the children of the old covenant were! They had a God near to them in prayer, who had revealed His will to them in the Ten Commandments. He had spoke to them out of fire. What could be greater? The season of Epiphany answers that. How special are the children of the new covenant. They

have a God near to them in prayer, who has revealed His only begotten Son to them in a manger, in the waters of the Jordan, at a wedding in Cana, in an upper room with confused apostles, on a cross on Golgatha, and from an open tomb. The old covenant, like the new, is from God, but this covenant is one that brings what the other did not bring: eternal life. This covenant had been prophesied and promised from the beginning, and all who looked forward to it in faith were saved, but we have the privilege of having seen it revealed in Christ. And this covenant has not only been given or revealed to nation of Israel, but to all the nations. Pass this on to your children. Let them learn to revere the God who has worked this marvel so that they will in turn pass this treasure down to their children. What nation is so great? Every nation, for the Christ has come to Jew and Gentile alike with the same promise: forgiveness, life, and salvation through faith in Him. Believe that promise. Pass it on.

1/24/05 – Numbers 22:21-35

Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab. But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the LORD stood in the road to oppose him. Balaam was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, she turned off the road into a field. Balaam beat her to get her back on the road. Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between two vineyards, with walls on both sides. When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she pressed close to the wall, crushing Balaam's foot against it. So he beat her again. Then the angel of the LORD moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn, either to the right or to the left. When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam, and he was angry and beat her with his staff. Then the LORD opened the donkey's mouth, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?" Balaam answered the donkey, "You have made a fool of me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now." The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?" "No," he said. Then the LORD opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell facedown. The angel of the LORD asked him, "Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? I have come here to oppose you because your path is a reckless one before me. The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If she had not turned away, I would certainly have killed you by now, but I would have spared her." Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, "I have sinned. I did not realize you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now if you are displeased, I will go back." The angel of the LORD said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but speak only what I tell you." So Balaam went with the princes of Balak.

God has a certain arrangement He prefers. He puts His words in the mouths of His servants. His servants do not put words in His mouth. The king Balak wanted the prophet Balaam to curse Israel, on God's behalf of course. God, however, did not want His chosen nation cursed. Balaam was in a quandary. The LORD was the LORD. Balak was offering a sizeable profit and earthly comfort. Percentage wise, the latter most often wins. I can put food in my mouth now and enjoy material pleasures now. The LORD, however, is most often the object of my faith, not my immediate senses (except in the Sacraments of course). All choices, however, have consequences.

Balaam was about to reap the harvest of his disobedience. Putting words in God's mouth is not a joking matter. God did not need Balaam to serve as His mouth. To prove it, God opened the mouth of an ass to preach repentance to Balaam. The donkey suffered for sharing God's message, as God's servants often do, but He saved Balaam from destruction, all because the Lord gave this beast of burden His words to share.

God does not need us to share His Word, yet, in His grace, He allows us to do so, putting His words in our mouth. This is a solemn duty, and requires the utmost faithfulness. The relationship and arrangement must always stay the same. The LORD puts His words in our mouth. We do not put our words in His. There is no certainty in the promise, blessing, or curse of an individual man or woman, if

that promise, blessing, or curse is not from God. The mouth is not important; in fact, the message often does its work in spite of the messenger. Our sinful nature does not like this fact, and our sinful nature does not like the message, just as Balaam did not like the seemingly stubborn ass that contradicted his wish. But that stubborn ass saved Balaam's life, and God's faithful messengers do the same for us. May we rejoice, even in the verbal beating we may receive in the process, for we never know when LORD will open someone's eyes. Thank God for His stubborn mercy and irrepressible grace!

1/25/05 – Acts 13:42-52

As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God. On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying. Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: 'I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'" When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. But the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. So they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: 'I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'" When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. Did you hear the warning? As Luther once said, "The gospel is like a passing rain shower." The Jews had possessed God's promises for generations. They had learned the prophecies as children. They had been the people of a God who was near to them, in the temple, and in their minds and mouths. They were still in the synagogue every Saturday, still hearing the Word and considering it, but it had no effect. They had become calloused, like a child who has watched too many violent cartoons. What was once so exciting for their people was now what they were used to, what they expected to hear.

What has your response to the gospel been lately? Have you become desensitized to it? Or have you become desensitized to the law, and thus failed to appreciate the forgiveness the gospel offered. Sit down today and consider your day, your week, your month. Think hard about the sins you've tried the hardest to hid. Consider the looks of disappointment on loved ones' faces when you let them down. Remember the lust that has filled your heart. Recall the anger and maybe even hatred that burned within you when another acted against your own self-centered will. Review the ways you have spent your time with family, with the television, at work, with God. Have you been an honest and dutiful employee, or have you merely passed the time? Have you been a loving and selfless husband, wife, father, mother, brother, sister, son, or daughter? Have you seen Christ in the people you've come into contact with, and looked for opportunities to care for Him, to feed Him, to give Him drink when thirsty, to listen to Him, and to pick Him up when He had fallen down? Have you considered it enough that you are a Lutheran Christian—fourth or fifth generation maybe even—and that you are in church every several weeks? Has God's law seared your conscience, or merely blown through your ears like a summer breeze? Have you felt your need for a Savior, or have you become lukewarm with respect to the gospel and assumed it, which is always the most dangerous assumption there is? The Holy Spirit does not dwell in spiritual ghettos, but in temples. If you keep tearing apart what God has built, do you expect Him to dwell with you

much longer? *“We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’”*

When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.” May the gospel ever be new and fantastic news in your ears! The rain shower has not yet passed. Feel its forgiving waters. Be glad and honor the Word of the Lord, because there and there only you have a message that never gets old to regenerate ears: the gospel. You may have become dull to the gospel, but you have not yet chased it away, as the Jews in Iconium did. Rejoice that it remains. Rejoice that it is still spoke to you. Rejoice that it still applies to you. Be filled with joy, and be filled with the Holy Spirit, for you are still His temple, at times tattered and in need of serious repair, but repairable nonetheless. Let the encouragement Paul and Barnabas gave the congregation in our text be the same given you today: *“continue in the grace of God,”* for the grace of God continues in you.

1/26/05 - 1 John 1:5-10

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

Talk about a roller coaster ride! If we only read the first part of this lesson, we'd be in trouble. *“If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.”* Where and in what have you been walking as of late? Are your temptations and sins momentary missteps, or have they begun to control your life in a way that you now walk in them, that they dictate where you are heading and how you plan your days? This same St. John writes in 3:9, *“No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.”* Pretty clear, isn't it? Christians stop sinning, because Christians don't sin. So stop sinning!

I am not so foolish as to think it is that easy, and neither is John. He writes in 2:1, *“My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.”* You see, this letter is a masterpiece of law and gospel. The law is preached bluntly and concisely. No words are wasted. Stop sinning, because Christians do not continue sinning. And then the gospel: Christ intercedes for you when you fall.

Sin must never characterize the Christian's life. A sin must never be embraced by the Christian, as if what is wrong in God's eyes is right in our own. John uses present tenses in the Greek when talking about sinning. The present tense in Greek indicates a continuous and ongoing action. A Christian must not be guilty of continuous and ongoing sin, because, if he or she is, that sin has become their master, and the Holy Spirit will not share His throne in the temple of your body.

“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” In this life, we will never rid ourselves completely of sin, although we strive to, but we must, nonetheless, never surrender our will and identity to sin, continuously battling and struggling against the temptations that come from inside and outside of us.

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” God's grace is more powerful than our sin. He is faithful and just, and will forgive and purify all those who struggle against their sinful nature and confess their weakness and failures in that battle. So long as a Christian is aware of and forthright about his or her sin, confesses it is wrong, and summons all their strength to turn from it, God is and remains their true Master, their strength in battle, and their forgiving Lord. Rejoice in your God, who grants you His absolution (forgiveness) repeatedly and sincerely throughout your life. Never take that absolution for granted, because that is the first sign that sin has taken control of your life. Let that absolution fuel your continued combat with the sinful nature, and

know that, though you may fall frequently and too easily, your God is faithful, and is ready just as frequently to pick you up. We may fall in the mud from time to time, but may we never wallow in it. May we, instead, swim in our baptismal waters, where we are emancipated from our slavery to sin, and empowered for new life in Christ!

1/24/05 – Acts 15:7-12

After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

Don't things look different through these lenses? Those people that annoy you most suddenly look a lot like you. Those groups of people you are uncomfortable around aren't quite so foreign to you experience. Those people you think at times are irredeemable suddenly look ripe for redemption. *“We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”* Yes, every person you see in your day—whether they cheer you up or steer right into your lane on the way home—is a child of the flesh, struggling under the burden of the law, desperately in need of God's grace and Spirit. We are all the same. Sure, we may wrestle with different thoughts, different words, different actions, but we are all lost under the law and hopeless, except, that is, for the grace of God. Maybe that will effect how we treat each other. Maybe that will effect what we tell each other in those moments we want to tell each other off. Maybe that will effect how we look at each other when we do not look so lovely. *“We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”* We're not so different after all, are we?

2/7/05 – 2 Peter 1:16-21

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

If you recall, this was the second lesson yesterday for the Transfiguration of Our Lord. It is interesting that this lesson is written by St. Peter, the very person whom God the Father interrupted on that holy mountain. Notice Peter leaves off the last part of the Father's words: “This is My Son, whom I love, with Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him.” In the amazement and excitement of the moment, Peter began interpreting the event before it was even over, deciding how it should be commemorated. “Listen to Him, Peter,” the Father insisted. And Peter learned his lesson. God will interpret His message for us and He will reveal what He wants us to know. St. Peter grew a lot in his understanding between the Transfiguration and the writing of this letter. He grew so much that he discovered that there was something even more glorious and astonishing than the Transfiguration: the Word. *“And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”* Have you seen the

wondrous light that radiates from the Word? It is the light of faith, which jumps from the pages of Holy Writ and grabs hold of your heart, mind, and soul. Dig into the word of the prophets made more certain, and read your Bibles, rejoicing in the fulfillment of God's gracious promises from Eden on. Rejoice that, while parts of His Word may at times seem unclear or hard to understand, it is not your job to interpret it, but to read on, and let it interpret itself for you. Is this always easy? No, but know that something greater than your mind is involved and responsible for opening your eyes to Christ's light: the Holy Spirit. We could make a pilgrimage to that holy Mount of the Transfiguration, but we will not find our transfigured Lord shining with the splendor of heaven. We can make a much easier pilgrimage to find that. Open your Bibles, and marvel as Christ is revealed before your very eyes, revealed from that first promise to Christmas to Lent to Easter to Ascension and to His Second Coming. Journey with your Lord up the holy mountain of His Word, see His transfigured glory, and let His light enlighten your day.

2/8/05 – *Luke 13:31-35*

At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you." He replied, "Go tell that fox, 'I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.' In any case, I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem! "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

How sad that we can hate such a God as this, or at least take Him for granted and be indifferent toward Him? Tomorrow Christ will call us to take up our cross. Cross? Who wants a church that promises a cross, a God who sanctifies suffering rather but postpones glory? Oftentimes God's people do not! "*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!*"

Are these words less true today? As Christ looks out upon His church, with its wheat and tares, can He not speak the same? As Christ ponders our own congregation where, if He is fortunate, a third of His flock wakes up for the divine service in which He comes with undeserved love and forgiveness, can He not speak the same? As Bibles sit gathering dust and sacraments are received without thought or devotion, can He not speak the same? How quickly we run from His wings, especially when we find sacrifice, suffering, or mysteries of faith there! How similar we are to those who one day could shout "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord," and the next turn their backs on Him!

Yet do you see what Jesus did? He walked right into this city of backsliders, these of His own who did not know Him, these who so often fled from His gospel invitation, and He walked into it knowing what was going to happen. They had killed the prophets. What would they do to the Savior? They had rebelled against God in heaven. How much more would they rebel, would they multiply their insurgency, when God Himself was among them? "*At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, 'Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you.'*" Notice who tells Jesus this: the very Pharisees plotting His death. See how men line up to slaughter their Christ, their LORD. Yet He sets His face on Jerusalem, looking right through Palm Sunday to Good Friday. Why? For Jerusalem, for whom He weeps. For you, for whom He so often weeps.

My friends, look, behold how your Christ loves you. Behold how He gives for those who don't want to receive. Behold how He receives what they are happy to give: death and hatred. All for them. All for you, even though you so often flee His wings. Return to the hen, you chicks. You cannot survive long apart from your protector. No matter what you think, you are not ready or equipped to live life on your own. If you need proof, examine yourselves, and examine the fruit your godless decisions have produced. "*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!*" What grace! Not only does He suffer and die for us, but He does what only He can do, He comes to the

unwilling, and, by His grace, makes them willing. He comes to you. Be gathered to Him, because He has gathered you. Notice Christ says to tell Herod He will reach His goal. He never acts without purpose. He always has the end result in mind. He has you in mind. Thank God for that!

2/10/05 – Luke 9:57-62

As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus replied, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” He said to another man, “Follow me.” But the man replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Still another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family.” Jesus replied, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”

As we look back and ponder the past months and years during our Lenten journey, let us beg God’s mercy as we look at the lines we have plowed—crooked lines, the result of all too often looking back to the world instead of ahead to Christ. We have not been fit for service in the kingdom of God. We have been distracted by what is not important and overlooked and taken for granted what is important. “I will follow you wherever you go,” we may confidently declare at times, but just where has our following taken us? The Lenten path is a difficult one, and it requires putting serious attention into watching every next step of our Lord, and every next step of our own feet as we follow Him. Following Jesus is never an easy task, and to pretend it is misleading and unscriptural. It is a hard task, but hard tasks are usually the most rewarding. Follow your Lord this Lenten season, with both eyes ahead, watching where He is going. Walk with Him in His Word, and you will never regret doing so, no matter how daunting the journey may be at times.

2/12/05-Isaiah 58:5-12

“Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: ‘Here am I.’ If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.”

Doesn’t it feel nice to know we went to church? Don’t we feel so religious after walking through those sanctuary doors? Is that because of the Lord has done for you there, or because of the simple fact that YOU came? I always marvel at how high the percentage of Americans who attend church regularly is, because usually in the same survey the percentage who actually believe what those teaches preach and teach is much lower. It leaves the impression that the end in itself is church attendance, and, unfortunately, I fear it is for many people, and even for many pastors.

God does not want outward obedience and formalism (an empty going through the motions). God wants the heart, and once He has it, creating faith in it, He rejoices in the fruit that follows. What good would it be for our neighbors (Kluck nurseries) to have all kinds of trees in their fields if none of them

produces leaves, needles, fruit, or flowers? They would have a lot of dead wood, and not much more. Are you dead wood, or are you bearing leaves, needles, fruit, and flowers. Navel gaze for a bit, considering your mind, heart, hands, and tongue. What is it, dead wood or thriving trees? The answer may be a little bit of both.

So what do we do? Do we keep searching in ourselves for some untapped innate power for spiritual fertility? No, look to the gardener who can make dead wood grow into productive trees. *“The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.”*

When the LORD, in Christ, through the gospel, waters His garden, things grow. Listen in the divine service. Ponder what you hear and receive. Watch God bring dead wood to life, as your faith manifests itself in your mind, your heart, your hands, and your tongue. And as this happens, as your faith bears fruit, you will recognize more and more, that what you do, you do for Christ and by His grace, and you will walk nearer to Him as you walk nearer to the needs of those around you. As Luther said, “We are saved by faith alone, but faith is never alone.” Feed your faith this Lenten season, and your faith will feed the needs of those around you.

2/14/05 – James 4:1-10

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

Good question, isn't it? *“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?”* Do we look at each other, at what we do and don't have and at what others do and don't have, and fall into jealousy, arrogance, favoritism, or envy? Do we spend more time grieving the things that go wrong among our brothers and sisters, or rejoicing in the things that by God's grace alone go right? We have all been drafted into God's army and an army divided against itself and lacking direction will lose. We are to be like our Lord, who battle with purpose (our salvation) and with direction (the cross) and with the weapon God has given us (the Word). *“Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.”* A soldier doesn't leave fallen friends on the battlefield. He lifts them up and brings them to safety. We have fallen. We are lying injured and lame by sin. Humble yourself. Admit your condition. Rejoice, because Christ has come to lift us up, and bring us into God's fortress of Word and Sacrament. *“What causes fights and quarrels among you?”* Sin. *What causes the only true unity among you?* Grace. And you can't be envious or jealous of that, because God's grace is for all, and it is free, and it can never be nullified by the devil. *“Come near to God, and he will come near to you.”* You have come near to Him, and you will continue to, at the font, the altar, the pulpit, and in His written Word. *“Come near to him, and he will come near to you.”* Be of one mind, and let that promise be what fills and drives it.

2/15/05 – James 1:13-18

When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

Three gradual, sometimes hard to detect steps—desire, sin, death—that’s how it works. And when it happens, two things can result: we can be strengthened or we can be weakened, we can resist or we can give in. How easy it is to throw in the towel! How easy it is to despair! But *“He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.”* He must know something that we do not, or He simply is aware of the fact that He can make beautiful jars from lumpy clay. *“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”* He’s not going anywhere. He’s not changing His mind. Let’s stop changing ours. Let’s stop allowing desire to take our hand and lead us away from God to sin. How? *He chose us*, and He will not abandon us or leave us unprotected. Arm yourself with God’s Word this Lenten season, that, like Christ, you may smack Satan’s vile head with it and at the same time strengthen your own resolve to desire what leads to grace and thus life: Jesus Christ.

2/17/05 – Hebrews 12:1-7

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.” Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?

There’s usually a sense of comfort in knowing you’re not the first one to do something. For instance, when you are trying a new food, you might prefer to wait until someone else takes the first bite, to see what face he or she makes and if they seem to get sick. Knowing that people have been there and done that and survived is comforting when we are about to be and do something we’re nervous about. The same is true of the Christian life. When Christ tells us to take up our cross to follow him, we squirm a bit. When Jesus tells us that the world will hate us as it hated Him, we aren’t exactly eager with expectation of such hatred. When we hear in our text today that the Lord disciplines those he loves, we, similarly, get a little uncomfortable. But we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, sainted men, women, and children who trusted in the Lord and accepted His discipline in that trust, and are all the better for it, established now in heaven for all eternity.

No one enjoys discipline. You might remember as a child having a parent tell you, “This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you.” After it was over, maybe you wondered if that was true, until you saw tears in your parent’s eyes. Discipline is not only hard for the one receiving it, but hard for the one giving it, because discipline is often more than punishment, which is often rather cold or vengeful. Discipline is an act of love. It is meant for the good of the one receiving it. By discipline we are turned from sin, from death, from eternal hell. While at the time it may seem unloving, when we look back, it becomes discernible that it was for our best. While God surely does not delight in disciplining His children, He

would be a bad Father if He didn't, because He would be handing us over to the lawlessness, and lawless one's belong to the lawless one, who drags souls to the abode of the lawless.

I think that in heaven I will look back on this life a lot like I looked back on my childhood when I got toward the end of college and seminary. My perspective changed, and as I was about to take a huge step toward establishing myself in a respectable way, I was grateful for all the things my parents did for me to get me there, including those things I told them I disliked them for at the time. Every time I slammed a door, angry at them, I was not angry at them really, my sinful nature was angry at the law. The best thing they could do, therefore, was make me angry at them, and I am glad they did.

The same is also true in our relationship with God. When you are disciplined, rejoice, because God is showing His love. When you cease being disciplined, be afraid and examine yourself honestly, because you may very well have begun hardening your heart against God. “*‘My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.’ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?’*” You are God's sons and daughters. Discipline is proof of that. Thank God for discipline.

2/18/2005 – Commemoration of the Death of Martin Luther, Doctor and Confessor – Hebrews 13:7-15

Today we commemorate the death of Martin Luther, Doctor and Confessor. Some may say we Lutherans are obsessed with Luther, that we in a sense got rid of the veneration of the saints to replace it with the veneration of Martin Luther. That is because some just clearly don't get it. In remembering Luther, we remember Jesus Christ, who promised that the gates of hell would never overcome His holy Church and has raised up men throughout history to keep His promise. Today we celebrate the rediscovery of the gospel, which for centuries was shrouded in superstition, legalism, and sophistries. We celebrate the renewal of evangelical preaching, that is, preaching that is centered in Christ and presents Christ to His Church, both through the Word that is proclaimed and in the Sacraments to which such preaching draws its hearers. We celebrate the refreshment that the cool rain of the gospel brought to so many for so long as a result of the Lutheran Reformation and the Lutheran Confessions, which Christ in His grace led pious men to write to preserve the truths of His Word for posterity. We remember that, even though that rainstorm of grace seems to be passing, Christ has before and will again bring forth courageous sons and daughters of the Father, people of conviction, to confess the truth, even in the midst of threats, persecution, and rejection. Luther was not the first of his kind. He was one of many who had come before him, and may he be one of many to come. This year we mark the 475th anniversary of the presentation of the Augsburg Confession, which defined true Lutheranism ever since. We mark the 425th anniversary of the completion of the Book of Concord, which contains all six of our Lutheran Confessions. May these anniversaries bring more than fond memories; may they bring renewed courage, strengthened faith, increased zeal, and a more steadfast confession of the truth. Lutheranism does indeed seem dead in most of the world. Christianity as a whole appears to be breathing its last, with few holding what the Church has always held. But God can bring new life from dry bones. He did so in the Reformation. May He do so again in our day!

The text I would like us to ponder today is Hebrews 13:7-15. May we, like Luther and so many of our spiritual fathers and mothers, give God sacrifices of praise, offering Him lips that confess His precious name in good times and in bad, in times of growth and in times of loss, in times when the gospel is welcomed and in times it is opposed with all the hatred the world can muster! May our love for Him, like His love for us, shine brightest in our darkest hours!

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods, which are of no value to those who eat them. We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat. The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And

so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise-- the fruit of lips that confess his name.

2/21/05 – 1 Peter 1:13-21

Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.” Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear. For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God. Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

You know why people are always so interested in news about princes, politicians, celebrities, and even pastors or priests getting in trouble. Its because they get caught doing things that are beneath the status awarded to them by the culture at large, and by their respective professions. We all as Christians have been given a status, and that status is great because the One who awarded it to us is great, and the means by which He won it for us is great. . *“But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.” “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.”* We have been called by the holy and just God of the universe, and we have been promoted to the status we now hold by the holy and precious blood of Christ. Any sin, even the smallest, is beneath our status. Any mistreatment of a brother or sister in Christ is a devaluing of their new status in the Lord. . *“But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.”* Brothers and sisters in Christ at Christ, let us appreciate the new status we have through Christ’s death and resurrection, live in a manner worthy of it. Let us appreciate the new status our fellow Christians have through Christ’s death and resurrection, and treat them in a manner worthy of it. Brothers and sisters, let us confess our failures to do so and trust that our Lord has forgiven us. After all, you don’t throw out something you paid so much to acquire. You fix it, and improve it, and that is what God is continually doing through Word and Sacrament. Christ bought you at a price—the greatest price. You are His. Rejoice in that. Live like that is the case. Take comfort that when God could have had anything He wanted, when He could have started over and made everything new, He chose to buy you used, and now He chooses to use you. Be born again, as you first were born again, through the living and enduring Word of God, which was joined with the waters of your Baptism, which now comes to you through His written and preached Word, to do what its done many times: to make you new, to make you His, to make you obedient children of the heavenly Father, now and forever.

2/22/05 – Mark 6:7-13

Calling the Twelve to him, he sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil. These were his instructions: “Take nothing for the journey except a staff-- no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra tunic. Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet

when you leave, as a testimony against them.” They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.

Mark 1:15 says, “*‘The time has come,’ [Jesus] said. ‘The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!’*” Our text says, “*They went out and preached that people should repent.*” Their message was Jesus message and, interestingly, they used the same signs to support and bring attention to their message: healing the sick, driving out demons, etc. By whose authority did they do this? “[*Jesus*] *sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil.*” They ministered in Jesus name and their ministry was the same as Jesus’ in its purpose and content.

Have things really changed? The Church today still ministers in Jesus’ name and its ministry is still the same as Jesus’ in purpose and content: *Repent and believe the good news!* Some receive the message, and thus the messengers stay with them. Thank God that for years now Christ Lutheran has received the message and had messengers stay in its house, because some do not receive the message, or grow cold towards it, and the messengers depart.

Look at much of once was “Christian civilization.” It is now almost entirely secular and often far from civilized. The dust stands at the doors of their empty cathedrals as a testimony to their apostasy and, whether or not many care, that dust will be before their eyes on Judgment Day. Are their granules of sand at our doors? At the doors of many of our synod? At the doors of much of American Lutheranism?

Let this text be a warning to us this Lenten season. Let it spur the question in our minds, “Have we received the message and supported its messengers, or have we become apathetic?” The New Testament calls miracles signs, and that is important. These miracles were not an end in and of themselves, but pointed to the message, which presented Christ through the mouths of His messengers. With time, miracles to a great extent departed from the Church, but the message did not. The signs had served their purpose, but the message’s purpose would remain for all eternity: to bring people to Christ. That is what these twelve men were sent to do. That is what pastors and missionaries are sent to do today. Let us pray that our welcome mat stays clean today and for many years to come, free of Christ’s messengers’ sandal dust. Let us thank Christ for sending His messengers to us. Let us, most importantly, cling to their message, by clinging to Christ. That’s where the signs point, after all.

2/24/05 – Acts 16:8-15

So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day on to Neapolis. From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days. On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

Whole lives change when the Lord opens a heart to His message. Take Lydia for instance. Here was a wealthy and educated woman sitting down by the river. She was familiar with Judaism, even though she was a Gentile. In fact, that was probably why she was down by the river, praying with the Jews, who had no synagogue in Philippi because they were so few in number. That is why she was called a “worshiper of God.” She had converted to the faith of the Old Testament. She was clearly won by the message of the Old Testament, and not by impressive externals, because there was little about the Jews in Philippi to impress anyone. It was paganism that could put on the awesome seeker services. But imagine her excitement when she found the God of the Old Testament, when she learned His truths and ways, so

different than the excesses of paganism and its gods. Imagine what went through her mind now. The Scriptures say the Lord opened her heart, as He opened the hearts and minds of the Emmaus disciples after the resurrection. Now this woman, who had learned the Old Testament, which was still new and foreign to her, is listening to St. Paul tell her about a New Testament, a fulfillment of the promises she had learned as she entered the faith of the Jews. She must have thought that one could never exhaust the gracious revelation of God, the wonders of His Christ. She would have been right in thinking so. She must have been overwhelmed with the joy of the riches of God's grace and mercy, because she made sure that this grace and mercy was poured over the heads of the members of her household and filled their ears. She did her best to persuade St. Paul and St. Luke to stay and teach her more and more about her God. What a woman! What a message! What a God! The message hasn't changed since. God hasn't changed since. All that changes is the men and women in the story. Be in the story.

2/25/05 – *Matthew 16:21-28*

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Let us not forget what this text follows. Immediately preceding it is St. Peter's confession of Christ, on which the Church is built. Poor St. Peter goes from being a rock to Satan. Talk about a quick turn of events. Why? Because he went from confession that Jesus was the Christ and the Son of the living God to opposing what Scripture said the Christ and the Son of the living God had to do: be killed and raised from the dead. St. Peter, like all of us by nature, preferred a theology of glory to the theology of the cross, but the theology of glory is Satan's theology, while the theology of the cross is Christ's theology. Christ had to bear His cross and, He tells us, we will have to bear ours. While such suffering hardly seems worth much at the time, when we put things in perspective, it is worth every ounce of sweat and every hour of desperate prayer. *"What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?"*

That's a good question, isn't it? How often, however, don't we choose a few minutes or hours of carnal pleasure over eternal spiritual bliss? Do you think about to whom you hand your soul when you sin? Do you consider from whom you turn away? We are either walking to God or to the devil. We are turning our back on one and embracing the other. We are grabbing the cross of Christ and our cross or we are grabbing Satan's false glory. *"For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done."* Is that a scary thought? I pray it is. Yet at the same time I pray it is comforting, because we know how God will judge.

Notice this same Peter whom Jesus rebukes here, this same Peter who will betray Jesus on Good Friday, this same Peter is restored after the resurrection and told to feed Christ's sheep. This same Peter sits on an apostolic throne in heaven judging the twelve tribes of Israel. God forgave His sin, and rewarded his faith-wrought service for Christ's kingdom. God did not give St. Peter what he deserved for his sin, but did give him what his good works, done without any intention of reward, imperfect as they were, were worthy of in Christ. God showed Him mercy. God rewarded him in grace.

Will you forfeit your soul, or will you beg God's mercy and receive His grace through faith? St. Peter was rebuked, and he repented of his arrogance. When St. Peter fell again on Good Friday, he did not

despair as Judas did, but in godly sorrow turned again to the risen Lord, who reinstated the apostle. “*What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?*” There is nothing Satan can take that Christ can’t take back.

Let go of Satan’s glory. Hug Christ’s cross with all your might, taking hold of it in Word and Sacrament, and willing bear your own when suffering comes your way. The pain of this world is brief when compared to the eternal joy of heaven. The carnal pleasure of this world is unbelievably fleeting and momentary when compared to the eternal horrors of hell. Lose your life in Christ, taking His as your own. Be of His same mind, setting your mind on the things of God and casting off the things of men. Be the Peter who preceded this text, who confessed Christ’s saving person, and not the Peter of this text, who tried to tell Christ what to do. He knows what He is doing, and, believe it or not, He is doing it all for you.

2/28/05 – Revelation 5:11-14

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!” The four living creatures said, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Quite a scene, huh? I can’t even imagine it. What about you? Imagine how all those angels must have awed St. John. Imagine how amazing the four living creatures must have appeared in his bewildered eyes. Imagine the great men he saw among the elders, falling down and worshipping like he’d never seen men worship before. It is quite the picture, isn’t it? But in all this imagining, let us not forget who the whole deal is about: the Lamb in the center.

He is worthy! Why? Because He was slain. Worthy of what? Power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise. That’s not kind of worthy; that is worthy beyond compare. He is worthy, because He traveled through Christmas to Epiphany to Lent to Easter to Ascension. Now He waits to bring the End Times to completion. Worthy is the Lamb! He is worthy because He lived these seasons of the church year, which we now relive with Him, not for Himself, but for us. He was slain for us, and now He is enthroned for us. From that throne He will judge the nations, and from that throne He will judge us. What will He say? “Worthy are my lambs!” Why will He say that? Because worthy is the Lamb!

St. John sent his Revelation to struggling, persecuted, and lukewarm churches. The message given to St. John in his vision is clear. Keep the Lamb in the center. Know He is worthy, and worth everything you suffer. Know great men and angels fall down in worship before Him, and there is no room for lukewarm lip service. Know that what you suffer now will lead to a throne—His throne—and that throne is where you’re meant to be, because it’s the center of it all. He is worthy! He is worthy for you, so that you are worthy in Him. Worthy is the Lamb! Amen, it is so now, and ever shall be.

3/1/05 – 1 Corinthians 4:9-16

For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world. I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children. Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. Therefore I urge you to imitate me. For this reason I am sending to you

Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.

“The ministry is not for wimps.” That’s what a beloved professor of mine used to often remind us in my first year at MLC. “God needs plumbers too,” he would comment when we did or said something that gave the impression we might not be cut out for the office of the holy ministry. The call to the pastorate is a serious and cumbersome call. It comes with great joy, as I have experienced in my short time with you so far. It also comes with great sorrow. Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the ministry is the challenge our Lord Himself faced. A minister often appears weak, mediocre, or ineffective precisely when he is doing what takes the most strength, requires the most character, and is most effective. Such was the case for St. Paul.

After St. Paul left the Corinthians to continue his missionary endeavor, false teachers swooped in and started to turn his flock against him. Paul was not a good enough speaker. Paul did not tell them all God has promised. Paul did not tell them the secret things we know. Paul was not as powerful as the new teachers and could not impart to the Corinthians as much power. Paul promised them suffering, while they could promise abundance and ease. The list could go on. The point is, these false teachers scratched the itching ears of the Corinthians and undermined all St. Paul had worked to establish by Word and Sacrament.

Nothing pains a pastor more than losing someone when he applies biblical discipline. Nothing dejects him more than when a member turns from the whole counsel of God to a more palatable message served buffet style at another church (pick as much of whatever teachings you’d like). St. Paul calls himself the Corinthians’ spiritual father, and he was. What father wants to see his children deceived, misled, and, possibly, brought to destruction? Couple this with the numerous other trials that may be taking place at the same time, and the weight can seem unbearable. And to top it all off, in his attempts to be faithful, to follow God’s instruction and will even when it is unpopular, he often draws the ire of a result-driven or ungrateful members who affix blame without the least bit of knowledge of the reality of things, after all, confidentiality must never be broken, not even to defend one’s actions.

You would think with all that St. Paul would have thrown in the towel, would have simply let the Corinthians have what they deserved for even entertaining such false teachers and wolves, but he does just the opposite. He prays for them and pleads with them. He patiently waits for them to see the shallowness of the deceivers’ message and the superficiality of their concern with the flock, especially when a member of the flock becomes less useful, falling ill or going broke. He begs them to imitate his life and doctrine, not because he himself was perfect (read Romans 7), but because his life and doctrine brought them to Christ. St. Paul had become their spiritual father in Christ through the gospel, and so St. Paul calls them back to Christ, through the gospel, which he preached in word and action.

“The ministry is not for wimps.” That’s because fatherhood is not for wimps, because fatherhood requires one knows who he is and who his children are. The father is a sinner, and wants nothing more than for his children to become better than him. The father knows his children are sinners and will err and stray at times, but that he must love them with a love greater than emotion or selfish desire. Such a love calls for discipline when necessary, with the goal always being the child’s safe return to the narrow road to heaven. Such love calls for sacrifice when necessary, as the child’s well-being becomes more important than one’s own. Such love calls for honesty, speaking the truth in love, but always the truth and always in love.

Remember how I mentioned there is great joy and great sadness in the ministry? What is funny, is that they sometimes come at the same time, sometimes even from the same event, and sometimes at the times it’s least expected. That’s why St. Paul could suffer the things he listed. That’s why pastors willingly do the same today. Because as much grief as fatherhood may bring at times, it all is worthwhile as you watch your children grow. It’s crazy what the gospel can do in, through, and in spite of the men Christ has called to proclaim and administer it, isn’t it?

The Lord made it known to me and I knew; then you showed me their deeds. But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. I did not know it was against me they devised schemes, saying, "Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more." But, O Lord of hosts, who judges righteously, who tests the heart and the mind, let me see your vengeance upon them, for to you have I committed my cause.

Jeremiah spoke these words when he discovered a conspiracy against him on account of his staunch confession in the midst of Judah's apostasy. These words found a second fulfillment in Christ. Was this not the hope of the conspiracy of those who schemed against our Lord? *"Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more."* Didn't it backfire? Precisely because Jeremiah was a faithful prophet and spoke what the Lord gave him to speak, his name is remembered with honor, included among the great Old Testament saints, and his words—the Lord's words—remain with us thousands of years later. Precisely because Christ was a faithful Son to His Father, and because He was the pure and innocent Lamb of God, born to be slaughtered for the sins of those slowly dying in the land of the living, that His name is the name above every name, at which every knee shall bow. Jeremiah committed his cause to the Lord, and the Lord delivered him. Our Lord declared from the cross, *"Into your hands I commend my spirit,"* and God raised Him on the third day, as we will hear Hosea prophesy on Sunday. A cause committed to the Lord is always a good cause, though not an easy one. A cause committed to the Lord is a cause that will be remembered and last forever. You have been committed to the Lord in Holy Baptism. May He be your cause: the cause of your new life now, the cause of your eternal life in heaven, the cause of all that you do in between.

3/7/05 – John 6:22-29

On the next day the crowd that remained on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there, and that Jesus had not entered the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. Other boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus.

When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal." Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."

"Jesus answered them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.'" They had seen the signs, they just did not seek Jesus because they saw Him. They saw Him because they ate, which was the sign, but they sought Him because they had eaten, and not because they saw the sign. This earthly bread was meant to draw them to the Bread of Life. It is no coincidence that Jesus' Bread of Life discourse appears in this same chapter. They saw the sign, but they didn't really see it.

"Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal." That doesn't mean this life and the things of this life aren't important; it simply means that the life to come and the things of that life are more important. It is great that Christ's church can help us improve our life here and now, by improving our relationships, motivating us for service, strengthening our character and confidence, etc. It is better that Christ's church improves the next life, bringing us from hell to heaven through the gospel. It is wonderful that Christ's church can do the former. It is essential that Christ's church does the latter.

Has the divine service become a thing of this world for you? Do you sing "Holy! Holy! Holy!" with the angels, or do you merely mumble it with the people in the pews? Do you see the sign, that is, the bread and wine on the altar, or do you partake of the very Body and Blood of our Lord with the apostles,

the saints of old, and the entire host of heaven? Do you hear the pastor giving a speech, or do you listen to Christ Himself proclaim His love and concern through the pastor? Do you confess your sins because that is what's on the page of the hymnal, or do you confess, knowing that what you confess is an abomination to the Lord, praying for His forgiveness, which then comes to your great comfort and consolation in the absolution? Do you seek Christ because you've seen the signs, or do you simply follow Him because you want to be fed for the here and now with food that spoils?

"Then they said to him, 'What must we do, to be doing the works of God?' Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.'" If you read the Gospel according to St. John, you can't help but marvel at how often St. John reminds us, through His record of Jesus' words, what Christ's message and purpose is: to bring men and women to eternal life through faith in His work on their behalf. "Believe." "Believe." "Believe." This is Jesus' familiar refrain in this evangelist's Gospel. But belief is of no value in and of itself. A man may believe in aliens, in a political cause, in a psychological delusion. St. John knows this, and so he always records the object of faith, which Jesus is usually quick to reveal. We believe in the Father, and we believe in the Father by believing in the Son He has sent. It is not faith that is powerful. It is Christ who is powerful, and faith clings to Christ, and because faith clings to Christ, it receives what Christ gives: eternal life. As St. John reminds us at the end of his Gospel and as we sing in the Service of Word and Sacrament: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these 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" (John 20:30-31).

A sign is not meant to be the place we rest our eyes. A sign points us beyond itself to something else, whether it be a bump ahead, children at play, or something else. Jesus' miracles, His signs, did the same. They pointed to eternal life, because they pointed to Jesus. That is the same place His signs points us today, through the gospel in Word and Sacrament. Seek Him because you see the signs. Seek Him and live now and forever.

3/11/05 – John 6:60-65

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, "Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe." (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) And he said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father."

John 6 is a regular roller coaster of emotions for our Lord. The chapter opens with the feeding of the 5,000, which, of course, drew Him many "disciples." They were not true disciples, however, because the word disciple means one who sits at another's feet and learns. These men and women wanted to sit at His feet to be fed, and fed in temporal abundance. They were fine with Jesus' message, so long as Jesus' message was simple and materially advantageous. They wanted a bread king, not a crucified King. So Jesus did what He always did in such circumstances: He gave them something more to chew on—something even harder to swallow.

Jesus said to them just before our lesson, *"Do not grumble among yourselves. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the Prophets, 'And they will all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me—not that anyone has seen the Father except him who is from God; he has seen the Father. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."*

Jesus said “Chew on this” in a very literal way. The Greek word used for eating Christ’s flesh is the word meaning “to rend with one’s teeth.” This is the same word that could be used for a cow chewing on its cud. This is the slow, deliberate, meditative eating of faith. It is eating of faith most pastors have in mind when they quote the Book of Common Prayers: “Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience, and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life.”

Many of Jesus’ disciples were not willing to do this. They wanted short, simple answers that required little thought and promised a lot of immediate benefits. They were American Protestants. But, alas, a few confessional Lutherans remained, didn’t they? Just after this lesson, Jesus turned to His remaining disciples and asked, “*Do you want to go away as well?*” Imagine that! The Messiah, the Christ, God Himself turns to these simpletons and asks, “*Do you want to go away as well?*” And not only does He ask, but He really means it. Perhaps there were tears in His eyes as so many rejected the gospel. Perhaps there were not. Yet the fact of the matter is that Jesus was deeply and sincerely concerned with their souls, and He was terrified of the thought that they too might turn and leave, and thus be lost. Alas, Simon Peter took his proverbial foot out of his mouth and answered, “*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.*”

Isn’t it amazing how Peter could waver between clear and powerful confessions of the truth and arrogant and naïve denials of it? Isn’t it amazing how we can do the same? Isn’t it amazing how Christ patiently corrects us, like Peter, when we err or rush to judgment, and affirms us when we speak the truth? Like the disciples, we encounter much in Jesus’ teaching that is hard to understand. At times we ask, “*This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?*” But may that question always quickly be followed by Simon Peter’s confession, “*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.*” The best truths in life are oftentimes those that take time to sink into our skulls. The best answers in life are oftentimes those that take awhile to understand. May God grant that we be true disciples of Christ, sitting at His feet to learn, not just to receive material blessings. May God grant that we receive Christ’s message in the way it was meant to be received: by faith, which oftentimes run counter to our emotions, our reason, and our expectations. May God the Father do for us what He has already done, that is, bring us to the Son, that we may believe what we hear, and that we may confess what we believe.

3/15/05 – Hebrews 7:23-27

The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.

Priests who were men died, and thus displayed the limits and impermanence of the Levitical priesthood. Yet our high priest is also a man, but the God-Man, and thus His priestly work knows no limits and continues forever. Men draw near to God through Him, yet He Himself is true God. He died, but He lives. He was forsaken by God the Father, but now He sits at His right hand. He was rejected by men, but now He intercedes for them. He became sin, but had no sin of His own for which to offer sacrifice. He is holy, but He is also merciful. He is innocent, but He was declared guilty in our place. He is unstained, but He was covered with the filth and derision of mankind. He is separated from sinners, and yet He is their advocate on high, that they may be with Him, yet without sin. He is exalted above the heavens, but He descended into our flesh. He has no need, yet His greatest want is our salvation. He does not offer daily sacrifices, because He offered Himself once for all on the cold and rocky altar of Golgotha.

Opposites meet in Christ, our high priest, intercessor, advocate, and sacrifice. Paradoxes abound in Christ, only to be reconciled through faith in Christ, the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the defense attorney and the judge, the priest and the God to whom the priest makes His offering, the holy one and the merciful, the innocent one made guilty, the crucified one who lives indeed.

This is a busy time in the church. This coming week is perhaps the busiest of the year, and shame on us for that. Business may abound outside the walls of this sanctuary, but let our doors shut it out of God's house. May this week be solemn and joyous! May it be confession and absolution! May it be drowning and cleansing! May it be fasting and feasting! May it be weeping and rejoicing! May it be trembling and believing! May it be holy week, where we meet Christ, and where opposites meet! Our Savior enters Jerusalem on Sunday. Our priest approaches His altar. Our advocate presents our defense to the Father. Take time to marvel at that!

3/16/05 – *Hebrews 9:15-22*

Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant. For where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive. Therefore not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood. For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying, "This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you." And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

Let's look at words. We have a "mediator." A mediator is a go-between, an intermediary. That right away implies there is a need for a go-between, that conditions have deteriorated to the point that face to face contact is impossible. This would explain the use of the word "redeem." We must be bought back. Created as God's, we have become the devil's by the sin of our first parents and by our own personal sins. These sins have been committed under the "first covenant," which is the covenant of the law. The law says "do this and I will do that." Keep the law and be saved. We have not kept the law, so the opposite is true—we are not saved. The fact that there was a first covenant implies there is a second, or new covenant. The first covenant required blood, and the new covenant would as well. The first covenant required the blood of calves and goats. The new covenant would require the blood of God. The first covenant fell short in that it left an active role to us. The second covenant stands forever because God alone is active in it, while we are passive recipients.

"Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." There you have it: if you want forgiveness, blood must be shed. Whose blood? Justice would seem to demand the blood of those who sinned, and Justice did demand that. Therefore, God became Man in order to shed man's blood for man's forgiveness. What we could not do, God did as us and for us. Remember that. Your sins are not forgiven as a governor pardons a criminal. In that case, one's sins are merely overlooked. Your sins are forgiven because they were paid for, and not only paid for, but paid for with blood, and not only with blood, but with the blood of the eternal God incarnate, Jesus Christ. How serious is your sin? Look at the crucifix, and see what it cost. How serious is God's love? Look at the crucifix, and see what it cost. *"Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant."* Words mean things, and thank God for that!

3/17/05 – *Hebrews 9:24-28*

For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

The Old Testament temple was a very powerful place: the sound of animals bleating as they waited to be sacrificed, the smell of death mixed with incense, the pools of blood, the throngs of pilgrims rocking in prayer, the peculiarly dressed priests carrying out the various symbolic actions prescribed for worship. Yet all this was never enough for God. More bleating, more death, more incense, more blood, more pilgrims with more prayers, more duties carried out by the priests—always more was demanded, because that is what the law does, it demands more than we can ever do.

Christ did not enter the temple to offer repeated sacrifices to God on our behalf. Christ was the Temple, of which the temple was merely a transient caricature. Christ entered heaven, having offered His sacrifice once for all, having offered Himself. We are all destined to die once and then to face judgment. Christ has died once for all, and now brings salvation, having faced our judgment on the cross. This same Christ, who has offered Himself and is now seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty, will come again. He will come, not to deal with sin, for He has already done that, but to bring salvation for His flock.

Our High Priest is coming. We get a glimpse of the Temple this coming week, as He arrives. Here the cries of the dying: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Smell the death, masked by the perfumes with which His body is anointed. See the blood, running over the Golgotha’s skull, as it runs over the heads of the redeemed. See the throngs of pilgrims, looking in derision, in confusion, in faith. See the peculiarly dressed Priest, naked with a crown of thorns, carrying out His duties as the realization of all the temple worship symbolized. See new life. See salvation. Wait with eager expectation for His coming again, because He will come again as He came this week: to save.

3/18/05 – Psalm 94

Life is always a blessed gift of God. Life is a gift, whether found in the weak or the strong. Life is not measured in quality, life is measured according to its source: God. Life is God’s to give and God’s to take. Life is sacred, and it is oftentimes most sacred in the weak, because it is the weak who learn what true strength is most clearly. True strength is reliance, reliance on God. That is the essence of faith, that is, a trust that God can do and has done what you cannot yourself. Understand this: when you demean life or measure it, you are demeaning and measuring God, and God will not be demeaned and cannot be measured. The fact that someone cannot eat without help does not make them helpless, because they have a Helper and they still have life. If Tricia and I locked Nicholas in his room for several weeks and refused to feed him, he would die, because he is not able to get food and feed himself. Was his life less important because he was unable to feed himself?

We have a responsibility to protect the weak, for that is why God has made us strong. A society and a church is only as strong as the way it treats its most vulnerable members and citizens. Thank God for the boundless love and mercy of God, because too often that is the only love and mercy the weak are being shown. Thank God that when we were spiritually dead, not just helpless but dead, Christ did not merely shrug His shoulders in apathy, but spread His arms in love and mercy, to bring strength from weakness and life from death.

The psalms are the Church’s greatest prayer book and hymnal, and the psalms at times surprise us. Not only do the psalms pray for the godly, but they also pray against the wicked. Such psalms, called imprecatory psalms, recognize that God cannot deliver us from evil without frustrating and crushing the schemes and ploys of the evil. May we pray the same today for our country, for our society, for our culture, and for our church! May a respect for life arise this Easter season as Life Himself rises from the

dead to give the greatest life of all: spiritual and eternal life! Take the time, not only to read Psalm 94 today, but to pray it. In this coming week of the Church Year where we see good and evil, sin and grace, guilt and innocence, and life and death so clearly enmeshed in bloody battle, let us reflect Christ's victory in our thoughts, in our prayers, and in our view of the world and those in it. Let us be a people defined by the grace and mercy of Christ, and let such mercy be reflected through us, that more and more may declare, "The LORD has become my stronghold, and my God the rock of my refuge."

Psalm 94

O Lord, God of vengeance, O God of vengeance, shine forth!

[2] Rise up, O judge of the earth;

repay to the proud what they deserve!

**[3] O Lord, how long shall the wicked,
how long shall the wicked exult?**

**[4] They pour out their arrogant words;
all the evildoers boast.**

**[5] They crush your people, O Lord,
and afflict your heritage.**

**[6] They kill the widow and the sojourner,
and murder the fatherless;**

**[7] and they say, "The Lord does not see;
the God of Jacob does not perceive."**

**[8] Understand, O dumbest of the people!
Fools, when will you be wise?**

**[9] He who planted the ear, does he not hear?
He who formed the eye, does he not see?**

**[10] He who disciplines the nations, does he not rebuke?
He who teaches man knowledge—**

**[11] the Lord—knows the thoughts of man,
that they are but a breath.**

**[12] Blessed is the man whom you discipline, O Lord,
and whom you teach out of your law,**

**[13] to give him rest from days of trouble,
until a pit is dug for the wicked.**

**[14] For the Lord will not forsake his people;
he will not abandon his heritage;**

**[15] for justice will return to the righteous,
and all the upright in heart will follow it.**

**[16] Who rises up for me against the wicked?
Who stands up for me against evildoers?**

**[17] If the Lord had not been my help,
my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence.**

**[18] When I thought, "My foot slips,"
your steadfast love, O Lord, held me up.**

**[19] When the cares of my heart are many,
your consolations cheer my soul.**

**[20] Can wicked rulers be allied with you,
those who frame injustice by statute?**

**[21] They band together against the life of the righteous
and condemn the innocent to death.**

**[22] But the Lord has become my stronghold,
and my God the rock of my refuge.**

**[23] He will bring back on them their iniquity
and wipe them out for their wickedness;
the Lord our God will wipe them out.**

4/7/1 Timothy 1:12-17

I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, [13] though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, [14] and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. [15] The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. [16] But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. [17] To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

I still remember a professor in college telling us how our sinful nature loves to sing, “Chief of sinners though I be, [insert a name] is still worse than me.” The worst sin in our eyes is almost always the one that our neighbor commits. It is as if at times we think their sins are somehow more damning than our own. It is equivalent to someone with the Ebola virus criticizing someone with Mad Cow, except when it comes to our standing before God apart from Christ our diseases aren’t any different, in fact our condition is the same: we are all dead, rotting away in our depravity, slowly inching toward eternal destruction.

“The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.” It is good and right that we should rejoice in Paul’s conversion, in the grace and mercy shown him by God. It is good and right that we should rejoice in our neighbors’ conversions, in the grace and mercy shown them by God. It is best and most proper that we rejoice in our conversion, in the grace and mercy shown us by God. After all, God washed us in his grace. God feeds us with his grace. God absolves and teaches us by his grace. In short, God came into the world to save us, the foremost sinners. We will only truly appreciate Word and Sacrament, we will only truly appreciate God’s grace and mercy, when we realize just how desperately we needed it, and still need it, and how completely dead we are in trespasses and sins without it. You may see Jesus Christ’s perfect patience displayed in another, maybe Paul or an acquaintance from church, but don’t miss seeing it in yourself as well. “Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed his blood for me!” Amen.

4/8/05 - 1 Peter 1:22-25

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, [23] since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; [24] for

**"All flesh is like grass
and all its glory like the flower of grass.**

**The grass withers,
and the flower falls,**

[25] but the word of the Lord remains forever."

And this word is the good news that was preached to you.

The day of our birth is the beginning of our death. From that day forward, we inch or race toward the grave, depending on how many days we’ve been granted. It may sound morbid, but it is true. We may come up with nice ways of saying death (pass away, go home, leave this world, etc.), and we may dress it up in the casket, but the fact remains, that death and the casket are exactly where we all are heading. Flesh gives birth to flesh. So smile and have a good day. Amen.

No, I will not leave you with that. I will leave you with St. Peter’s words, which are the Word of God. *“You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.”* You have already died. You died with Christ in Holy Baptism, in water joined

with his word. You have been born again. You are a new creation. Your soul, once destined to perish eternally in the never-ending death of hell, has been reborn of imperishable seed. You have gone from being Adam's seed, to Abraham's seed, because Abraham's Seed has become your brother through the good news of his death and resurrection that was preached to you. What other good news is there? You shall not die, but live. *"All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever."* And you have been born of that word, and, as Christians, you now live in the word, and that word is always near you, "The word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it" (Deuteronomy 30:14). *"Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart."* In other words, live the new life God has given you, and relive your birth into that life by reliving your baptism, returning to it daily in sorrow over your sin, returning to it daily in the assurance of your forgiveness, returning to it daily in renewed zeal to serve the one who has given you new birth through his word, who has bought you with his precious body and blood. Amen. This time for real.

4/9/05 - John 2:1-10

On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. [2] Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. [3] When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." [4] And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." [5] His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

[6] Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. [7] Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. [8] And he said to them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast." So they took it. [9] When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom

[10] and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now."

"My hour has not yet come." The idea of Jesus' hour or time coming is like a refrain throughout the Gospel according to St. John. God never acts without purpose, and God never acts prematurely or later than he should. God acts at his hour, and God's hour is oftentimes not our hour, that is, he knows better when the time is right. Some mistake what seems to be God's delaying in acting on our behalf to be a sign of his apathy toward us, or even his anger, but this is not so. St. Peter writes, *"But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."*

God's delay is often precisely the opposite of what we take it to be; God's delay is often the result of his love, concern, and mercy. We will not always understand this. It will oftentimes not make sense that God's delaying, that God's failing to act when and where we want him, is an act of his love or mercy, but it is. We are not called to understand all of God's plans. We are called to trust them. We are not called to tell God how he should be God, we are called to watch him be God and rejoice in his doing so, and, when we cannot rejoice, to simply believe that he does not act without purpose, and that his purpose is good. Will we always see that this side of heaven? Maybe not, but the fact that we will be in heaven one day will be proof enough that God's plans were good and right. Was a relative taken early? Maybe they were spared suffering that would have come later. Did a relative linger long in suffering? Maybe God was providing them time to know him better, that he might be merciful to their soul, or maybe God simply wanted them to wear their earthly trials endured by faith as the greatest of jewels in his kingdom. One thing, however, is for sure, God's hour always comes, and it always comes just how he planned.

God's hour came in Cana, as Jesus performed the first of his many miracles, which testified to his divinity and led his disciples to put their faith in his message (miracles were signs, meant not to distract

from the message, but to point to it). God's hour came on the third day, as he rose from the dead, so that, though we too may one day die, we will not die, but live forever in God's presence, forgiven through Christ's death, raised through Christ's resurrection. God's hour always comes. Trust that, even if you can't always understand that.

4/12/05 - *Ephesians 4:17-24*

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. [18] They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. [19] They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. [20] But that is not the way you learned Christ!— [21] assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, [22] to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, [23] and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, [24] and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

“Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds.” Why do the Gentiles (here meaning unbelieving Gentiles) walk in the futility of their minds? Consider where their thoughts spring from and where they ultimately end: in the flesh. This or do that. Go here or go there. Eat this and don't eat that. It is futile, because the flesh, along with all man's religious ideas and ventures, will perish. Even the most scholarly, creative, and advanced thought of the unbelieving world ends in futility and meaninglessness, because it ends in the grave. Only Christ can raise what has been sown perishable to be imperishable through his resurrection.

“They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.” If you have ever been camping in the dark, or trying to find your way around an unfamiliar room or house in the dark, you know that it is possible to grab on to some things, but it is impossible to get the big picture, to see how everything fits together, to find a rhyme or reason in it all. So also, apart from Christ we can grasp truths here and there, we can even use much of what we grab onto to do amazing things with technology and science, but we miss the big picture, and we miss the rhyme or reason to it all. We may live longer, but our life is just as empty as it would have been if it were shorter. In fact, perhaps it becomes even more lonely and depressing as we age or as we become better at maiming and killing each other by war, crime, or terrorism. Why is all this true? We are lost, no matter how sure we think we are of where we are, because we are alienated from the Way. We are ignorant, no matter how smart we are, because we do not know the Truth. We are dead, no matter how long a doctor can keep us alive, because we do not know the Life.

What is the visible fruit of the hardness of heart—the unbelief—that is within us apart from Christ? *“They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.”* Have you lost sensitivity to law and gospel, so that it does not affect you? Have you handed yourself over to sensuality and vice so that what once was a sin you steered into in weakness has become the one doing the steering in your life? Do you consume sin as you consume the staples of life (food, drink, air), and do you feel just as desperate as you do for food when you miss lunch? Then consider your relationship with God. Consider who your teacher has been as of late: the futile entertainment and thinking of the unbelieving world, or the Word of God.

What should you do if you discover you have earned more credit hours in the school of this world than at Christ's feet as a disciple? Do what God called you do when he first called you in Baptism, do what he teaches in his Word: *“Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”* How? Return to your baptism by confessing your sins and receiving the forgiveness God has promised you there, drowning your old self in those waters of grace all over again in this way, and injecting new life into the new man that first arose in you there. Hear Christ speak to you through his Word, and learn how he would have you serve him. Learn

Christ, be sitting at his feet where he has always held class: the gospel in Word and sacrament. And thank God. Thank God that while our thinking is futile, God's bears the richest fruit—fruit even trees that once were dead.

4/13/05 - Ephesians 4:25-32

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. [26] Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, [27] and give no opportunity to the devil. [28] Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. [29] Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. [30] And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. [31] Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. [32] Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Did you hear that? We are members of one another. We are not only members of Christ. We are not only members of the church. We are members of one another. By baptism, we became one with Christ, became members of the church, and entered into a unique relationship with each other found only in Christ and unparalleled in the world. Paul says, *“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”* Why wouldn't we do that, considering we are members of one another? Because our sinful nature always wants to tear our mutual relationships asunder, because in those relationships we find comfort in times of trouble, encouragement in times of complacency, and hope in times of despair. You are members of one another. Thank God for that. Reflect God in that, acting toward each other, as Christ God has acted toward you. In light of such mercy, how trivial don't the things that so often upset us and drive wedges into our unique fellowship in the apostolic truth seem? In light of such mercy, how can we ever love each other too much, forgive each other too much, and serve each other too much? Let us not only cease the sinning that has entered our relationships, for that is not enough according to this passage, but let us begin doing good, building up where we have torn down, encouraging where we have discouraged. *“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”* You are forgiven, and so is your brother or sister in the faith. Rejoice in that, and you will then rejoice in one another.

4/14/05 - 1 John 4:7-14

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. [8] Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. [9] In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. [10] In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. [11] Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. [12] No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

[13] By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. [14] And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.

There's a lot of talk about love in this week's lessons, isn't there? What gives? God gives; he gives his love, and that is why our lives are defined by love, why love can never be discussed and contemplated too much. But notice what love is the focus of our attention: God's love. Yes, John does urge us to love, but he does so only in connection with God's love, because God's love is the only real love, rooted not in another's worthiness, but in their need. *“In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”* When did God do this? He did it when we were dead in trespasses and sins, obstinate in rebellion, and unable to offer him anything. If God has so loved us, how can we not then love one another? If our life is not

characterized by such love, do we truly understand and appreciate the love shown us in Christ? If we often feel that another must earn our love in order to receive it, has God's grace really sunk into our hearts and minds through the gospel? Yes, how little we deserve God's love, especially when we considered how poorly we have reflected it in our relationships with others.

“By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.” Did you notice what John just did? When it came time to give evidence that God loves and abides in us, and we in him, John did not point us to our love, but to his Spirit, who testifies through Word and sacrament, pointing us to Christ, and grafting us into him through the gospel. God loves you! Believe it. God loves you! Confess it, as mentioned in the next verse after our lesson. Reflect it, as you love as you have been loved: selflessly, unconditionally, and persistently. Love one another, because Christ has loved you, even when you were unlovable. Thanks be to God!

4/16/05 – Acts 17:22-32

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. [23] For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. [24] The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, [25] nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. [26] And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, [27] that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, [28] for

“In him we live and move and have our being’;

as even some of your own poets have said,

“For we are indeed his offspring.’

[29] Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. [30] The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, [31] because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

[32] Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” [33] So Paul went out from their midst.

Two things strike me about this text, because these same things often still strike me in my ministry. First, the gospel has two works: its proper work, and its alien work. The proper work is the work the gospel was revealed to work: to save its hearers. The alien work is the work of the gospel when rejected: to harden its hearers. We see two responses to St. Paul's message today: mockery or indifference, and genuine interest. Little has changed. The same sermon may move one to repentance, comforting the penitent with the promise of God's forgiveness, and at the same time merely add a callous to the already callous soul, as we heard earlier this week. When the proper work of the gospel is done, God gets all the credit, having sent his Holy Spirit to work faith in sinful men and women. When the alien work is done, the unbeliever gets all the credit, having refused the gift of the Holy Spirit who came to work faith in his or her heart.

Second, notice how Paul can tell these men they are indeed religious, but nonetheless damned apart from Christ. How common isn't the notion today that one can be spiritual without being a Christian, that is, with out having the Spirit! How common isn't the notion today, even among many Christians, that God wants “religious” men and women with solid morals, and not much more! How often isn't Christ left out of Christian churches, Christian classes, and Christian literature! *“I perceive that in every way you are*

very religious.” How terrifying those words will be when spoken one day to those who were “Christians” but did not know or feel the need for Christ.

“The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” That judge appointed is your Savior, who was raised from the dead, ascended into heaven, and will come again to judge the living and the dead. Will you have him be your Savior, by confessing your sins and receiving the mercy he purchased for you on the cross, or will you leave him simply as you judge? Do not leave him only as your judge, because he is just, and you justly deserve damnation. No one will be saved you stands before God with unpunished sin. In Christ, your sins have been punished. Apart from Christ, you will be punished for your sins. Today you have heard the gospel message. Your Judge is your risen Savior, who died and rose for you. You may be religious, but apart from faith in this fact, you are not a Christian, and you are most definitely damned. Yet the gospel’s proper work is the one God delights in, and God delights in nothing more than seeking and saving the lost. He has sought you. He has saved you. Believe it, because that’s what the gospel’s all about.

4/18/05 - Ephesians 2:4-10

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, [5] even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved— [6] and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, [7] so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. [8] For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, [9] not a result of works, so that no one may boast. [10] For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

This is perhaps one of the most well-known passages of Scripture, but, for that reason, like the other great martyrs of the Church, the creeds, the Lord’s Prayer, the Small Catechism, etc., it is one of the least appreciated. How often do we think about this passage? We were dead in our trespasses when God love us. We were dead, as in unable to do anything other than rot, stink, and take up space in the earth. Yet God loved us. What does one call such love, that loves without cause or reward? We call it grace. What do we call such love, that does not leave another to what they properly deserve? We call it mercy. When you were dead, God made you alive. How? In Christ. How? Through Christ’s death. Christ became like you so that you can now become like him: alive. You know it, but do you understand and appreciate it? Do you consider the immeasurable riches of God’s grace and kindness toward us in Christ Jesus? You can never consider it too much, because it is immeasurable, while your head is not. Your head is no bigger than a bucket, able to hold a few inconsequential stones. Christ is the very rock on which salvation depends, unable to be measured, unable to be fully appreciated. But, alas, salvation doesn’t depend on your intellect, on your ability to fathom God, on your ability to love him or to serve him. It is by grace, through faith that you have been saved, and don’t forget it. It is the gift of God, so do not boast, as if a couple of bumper stickers, offering envelopes, or hours in church made you now something more than anyone else. You are still that dead rotting soul left to yourself. Only in Christ are you alive, and only by grace, through faith, and in him, can you do what you have been created in Christ to do: good works. And even these you yourself cannot devise or create, because God has prepared them for you. Even opportunities to do good, to serve God, are a gift of his grace. God has made you alive. God dwells in you. God has mapped your footsteps of service. God empowers your every step. Get out of his way, and let him do what he created you to do: work through you for the benefit of himself and others.

4/19/05- Matthew 26:31-35

Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' [32] But after I am raised up, I

will go before you to Galilee." [33] Peter answered him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." [34] Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." [35] Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" And all the disciples said the same.

We can't really be too hard on the disciples here, can we? After all, how often haven't our great moments of faith and courage been followed by our deepest wallowing in doubt and sin? "I will not deny you!" And then we get sick, or a loved one gets sick, or we lose a job, or a child gets in trouble, and this or something else leads us to say, if not in words, then in actions, "Surely I do not know him." The old Adam still manages to come up for air during his daily drowning in our baptism, and when he does, he leads us to say the most unchristian things. So what hope do we really have?

Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." We have the same hope the apostles had. After they despaired of themselves, having fled and denied their Lord, they had only one hope left: the Lord they abandoned and denied. A Christian must never hope in himself or herself, because such hope is sure to fail. A Christian hopes in Christ, who, after he had been betrayed, abandoned, and denied, tracked down his frightened and despairing disciples, not to punish them, but to call them "brothers," and to restore them through the gospel. This same Lord, who we have abandoned and forsaken, says to us in the Book of Hebrews, "Never will I leave you. Never will I forsake you."

One of our unique burdens we bear as Christians in America, is that we speak English, because that means we do not get to rejoice in the beauty of Luther's translation of the Bible. In Philippians 3:3, Luther translates, "*For we are the circumcision, we who worship God in the Spirit, and rejoice concerning Christ Jesus, and do not abandon ourselves upon the flesh.*" The same Luther translates Psalm 119:42, "*Thus I may answer the one who reproaches me, for I abandon myself upon your Word.*" Here we find the abandonment to which all Christians are called. The abandonment of hope in one's flesh. The abandonment of one at God's merciful feet, which are Christ's beautiful feet—God made man to bring good news by them. We abandon ourselves upon Christ, that is, we throw ourselves at his feet like an unwanted beggar-child with no hope for survival on his own, knowing Jesus can do what we cannot do: lift us up to see God's merciful countenance and call us into service again.

We can't be too hard on the disciples here, can we? But we can also never be grateful enough for Christ, who seeks those who flee him and who claims those who deny him. He truly is the Good Shepherd, who has given his life for the sheep, and who, now risen, brings his straying lambs back to the fold, caring for them with the same love that led him to lay down his life for them. There is our hope!

4/19/05 - Matthew 18:10-14

"See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.

What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

So far as I know, my dad only had one record. I had music. My mom had music. My brother had music. My dad had one record, which made it the coolest record of all. It was Steppenwolf. I ended up buying the CD in junior high, because I wanted to know what was so great about it, that this was the record Dad had. Well, I can't say I was particularly moved, but I do remember one of the songs: *One Is the Loneliest Number*. "The number one..." the song repeats over and over.

The number one is an important number in our text today. Christ is concerned about one sheep. Which one sheep? The little, unimpressive one. While we are obsessed with numbers, Christ is concerned with one. Why? Because Christ died for that one. That one who reads this email. That one who you know at work. That one that lives next to you. That one who is you. The number one may be the loneliest

number to some, but it is the most precious number to Christ. Christ died for the world, but the world consists of individuals, of ones, and he is deeply concerned with each. That is why we have sacraments, where Christ personally greets and grants his grace to the individual, one at a time. That is why Christ leaves the flock for that one lost sheep, because individuals, and not organizations, are saved through him.

Remember that number. Remember you are that one. Remember that all those you encounter are that one. One may be a lonely number to some, but it is a sacred number to Christ, because Christ shed his sacred body and blood for each one that is out there. One—treasure that number. One—you are that number. One—seek to bring that number with you to heaven by introducing them to Christ. One—what a number!

4/21/05 - 1 Peter 5:1-4

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

I must admit that I always get uncomfortable when a text about public ministers comes up. It cuts me to the heart, showing me how I have failed to be a faithful steward, not of my flock, but of God's. It encourages me, setting forth hope for the future. Yet, I am uncomfortable telling you about an office I myself hold. Therefore, I have decided to just include the text today, and let Peter tell you. In the meantime, I will seek to be a pastor like the ministers he describes in our text, and I will labor with the eager expectation of my Lord's return and the undeserved crown of unfading glory that will be given to his undershepherds, as you too serve with the same expectation of the crown of life, awarded to all believers in the same way faith and eternal life has been given them: by grace. May God make me a faithful shepherd, serving under the Shepherd, Jesus Christ! May God grant us both a reverent respect for the Office of the Holy Ministry that he has left to us, not because of the men who hold that office, but because of the Man who gave it to his Church!

4/25/05 – 1 Timothy 3:16

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.

The mystery of godliness is that which produces godliness, or piety, in the faithful. The mystery of godliness is Jesus Christ, as Paul confesses in this short creedal statement. Christ was manifested in the flesh, that is, he was made known. As we heard on Sunday, those who have seen Christ have seen God. Those who have seen Christ, have seen the Father, Christ says, because the Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father. He was vindicated by the Spirit, casting out demons, to prove his power over the devil, raised from the dead, to show his power over death. He was vindicated by the Spirit through the faith the Spirit works in spiritual things. Christ's manifestation in the flesh had spiritual significance, and, thus, Christ is vindicated, proven and declared right, when this significance is realized and believed. He was seen by angels who witnessed and declare the salvation our Lord has won. He was proclaimed among the nations, forming the foundation for the holy Christian Church, which transcends race, country, or tongue. He was believed on in the world. Not only was he believed in (as we may believe in aliens or superstition), but he was believed on. Faith rests and leans on him, and for this reason, faith's objects is certain and unchanging. He was taken up in glory. He now sits triumphantly at the right hand of the Father, ruling all things for the good of the Church, and from there he will come to judge the living and the dead according to their confession of faith, that is, according to the foundation upon which their faith rested. This is the mystery of godliness. This is the mystery, unknowable before revealed in Christ, that produces godly living. There are no schemes, principles, steps, or pneumonics. There is a confession of

Christ, which gives birth to a life for Christ. Do you want to serve Christ? Look down, at the foundation, at the cornerstone, and build on him.

4/26/05 – *John 6:66-69*

After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the Twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.”

If only synod had its parish assistance program at that time! Consultants could have come in and told Jesus how his methods needed to change, how this generation was different from its predecessors. He needed to reach them where they were at. Then his ministry could be a success, because now it certainly wasn't. I mean, come on, just look at the numbers. Twelve faithful members? Any pastor would be ashamed to report that in the statistical report.

Ah, but it was a success. Theologians of glory just have to take their heads out of their backsides and listen to see it. “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” Did you hear that? That is what a successful ministry sounds like. Listen to that confession of faith. It just dances in a pastor's ears. That's what its all about. Would having 5,000 confessions like that be nice too? Sure. But twelve solid confessions are better than the pooled ignorance of 5,000 men and women.

“You have the words of eternal life.” And those words don't change, because people don't change. I don't care if you're sixty or six, your needs are the same, and your needs are not what you think they are. A church that bases its message on what the seeker thinks he needs is like a parent who gives his toddler everything she thinks she needs. Let me tell you, Maggie would never eat healthy food or stop watching television if I did that, because she “needs” those things. No, what she needs most is what God gave her at the font: Jesus Christ and his grace. She needs his words that bring eternal life, and so do you, no matter where you are or who you are.

“And we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” That's who you need to come to church to see. That's who you need to open the Scriptures to meet. That's who you need to gather for Bible study to hear: the Holy One of God, and no one else. *“And we have believed.”* Jesus gave them the words, and they believed, and in those words they believed, they met Jesus. Sure, they had known Jesus for quite some time, but they met him in those words, hard words that caused some to turn away in unbelief.

So Jesus said to the Twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” I think every pastor has those moments, yet it is the next moment that makes it all worthy while. *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.”* What a ministry our Lord had! May God grant us such joy as well, that even twelve would confess his name so beautifully in faith!

5/2/05 – *2 Corinthians 4:1-6 (Second lesson for the festival of St. Philip and St. James, Apostles, which was yesterday)*

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. [2] But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. [3] And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. [4] In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. [5] For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. [6] For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

“We do not lose heart.” We don’t? Well, we’re not supposed to. Why? For the same reason the apostles weren’t supposed to: we have this ministry by the mercy of God. The existence of Ministers of the Word is proof of God’s mercy, because the ministry flows from Word and sacrament, where mercy is administered to guilty souls. We cannot make this ministry or its source more merciful or effective, so we need not try. Whether well-intentioned or not, any attempt to “spice up” the gospel or to make it more “effective” or “relevant” is a denial of God’s power, manifested in the gospel, which is the power of salvation for all that believe. Any attempt to insert ourselves into the picture, to give our voices or faces prominence in the church’s mission, is a lack of trust in the voice of Christ, who speaks to us as he always has, through the gospel, and the face of Christ, which, as it always has, shines through the revealed knowledge of God. “Let there be light,” God said. And there was light. “Believe,” God says through the gospel, and, by grace, we have believed, and others have believed and will believe. Does this always happen as quickly as we’d like? Does this always happen? No, some do reject this message, dismissing it as foolishness, but that does not strip it of its power. A gun has the power to blow a hole in someone whether or not someone refuses to pick it up. The gospel is the power of God for salvation, whether or not it is believed. We are not called to choose who will believe, or when they will believe. We are called to let the Holy Spirit do the creating and strengthening of faith. We are merely to be God’s voice, so that, as he brought light out of darkness in creation, he may bring light out of darkness in lost souls. This should not be frustrating. This should be a relief. It does not depend on me. It does not depend on you. It merely depends on the gospel, and on God who works through it. Let’s preach the gospel, and let God do the rest. This is why we need not lose heart. This is why we need not turn to underhanded methods. God is in control. Would you have it any other way?

5/3/05 - *Colossians 4:2-6*

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. [3] At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— [4] that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

[5] Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. [6] Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

“Always be ready to give a reason...” we heard on Sunday. *“Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”* Well, how do we prepare to do that? *“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”* We are prayerful and vigilant. We pray, watchful all the while, for an opportunity. We pray that we will be ready for that opportunity, that we will know what to say. How will we know what to say? *“At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word...”* We pray that a door for the Word opens in the contact Christians have with unbelievers. We study the Word, that when a door opens, it is a door for the Word, and not for our own opinion and drivel. We only have so much time in this life, and what better way to spend it than in the Word? And, when we are in the Word, how can we not be in prayer, because when God speaks to us, it is only natural to speak back? And, when we are in the Word and prayer, how can we not share that Word prayerfully with others, as our thanksgiving for the mystery of Christ, that is, that God gave his one and only Son for us, overflows into every aspect of our life? *“Always be ready to give a reason...”* *“Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”* Pray you will be ready to do so. Prepare to do so by marveling at the mystery of Christ in the Word. Do so, not because you have to, but because you want to, in thanksgiving. This isn’t magic. This is God’s promise. Amen.

5/4/05 - *1 Timothy 2:1-8*

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, [2] for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. [3] This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our

Savior, [4] who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. [5] For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, [6] who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time. [7] For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

[8] I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling...

It is interesting all the words Paul uses to describe prayer. In the Greek, there is not necessarily a lot of distinction between them all. I think his point is distinct, however. Our prayer life is to be thorough and comprehensive. This does not mean, however, that we spend hours in a closet each day. Rather, we “pray continually,” or, “without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Our entire life is one of prayer, peppered with words, but consisting of trust. Our every endeavor is done with the trust that God will bring what is best from it. Our faithful labor in our vocation is prayer with hands, asking God to bless others through our service. We eat with thankfulness. We desire God’s blessings for our brothers and sisters in the faith. We plan with the sincere hope that our Lord will supply our need. Faith is always praying, even when you are not. May we grow in our ability to pray with faith, consciously and intentionally!

When derided as disloyal and unpatriotic by the Roman authorities, church fathers often commented that the prayers of the Church did more for the Roman Empire than all the soldiers in the world. Luther commented that only the prayers of the Church have preserved mankind. Our prayers reach far beyond ourselves and accomplish infinitely more than we realize, because our prayers reach to God, who does all things well. Our prayers bring peace, not only in our outward life, but in our relationship with our Savior. A relationship where the spouses communicate is always more successful than one in which one spouse never speaks. God has spoken to us in his Word. We speak back in prayer—prayer for ourselves, for others, for physical blessings, and for spiritual blessings. God has commanded such prayer. God has promised to bless such prayer. God has moved us to such prayer by his grace. As we breathe in God’s mercy, how can we not breathe out thanks and praise? Let us pray, in every place and in all we do. This is pleasing to God. What better reason could there be?

5/5/05 – Ascension of our Lord - Luke 24:44-53

Then he said to them, “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.” [45] Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, [46] and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, [47] and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. [48] You are witnesses of these things. [49] 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.”

[50] Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. [51] While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. [52] And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, [53] and were continually in the temple blessing God.

Today is Ascension, perhaps the most overlooked festival of the church year, perhaps one of the most important festivals of the church year, after Christmas and Easter, because it is the last festival of the life of Christ before we enter into Pentecost, where we focus on the Church’s new life in Christ. Our Lord has ascended. He has not left us. He has ascended, to serve us even better at his Father’s side. We confess in the Apostles’ Creed: “He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.” St. Paul comments on Christ’s ascension in the second lesson for this day, Ephesians 1:16-23: “*And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*” Christ himself tells us: “*And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you.*” As Christ returns to heaven, the Spirit descends to earth, to work faith in Christ in the hearts of Christ’s people, ransomed

and returned to the Father through Christ's death and resurrection. Then the Lord left them with his blessing.

The Ascension is no small event in Christ's ministry. In many ways, it is the final and greatest event, because Christ returns to heaven, having accomplished his mission in our world. The message can now be proclaimed as an accomplished fact. This is the end of Christ's earthly ministry and the beginning of the Church's. The Ascension should be a great comfort, as we know that Christ is at his Father's right hand, meaning he is the power of God, and that he is using his power for his Church. The Ascension should be a celebration, because as Christ ascends, he promises the Spirit will descend. He will descend to be the power behind the gospel, to make our bodies into God's temples. The Ascension should be a great joy, as we see the Church begin its ministry that has, by God's grace, continued even until our own day, with the same mission: to proclaim repentance and the forgiveness of sins in Christ's stead. We do not have a service today, because, unfortunately, the feast of the Ascension has not fared well as of late in America, not because people dislike it, but because people don't understand it. Understand what today is all about, because today is not about Christ leaving, but about Christ completing his mission of salvation—our salvation—and Christ beginning his mission of dominion, ruling all things for the good of his Church. Today is the Ascension. Rejoice and be glad. Bless the Lord!

5/10/05 – Jeremiah 29:11-14

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. [12] Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. [13] You will seek me and find me. When you seek me with all your heart, [14] I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

God has always operated the same way, by threat and promise. He threatens with the law, warning of the consequences of transgression. He promises mercy and forgiveness to those who have been crushed by his threats, and even by the consequences of transgression. Here he repeats himself from Deuteronomy 4:29. A right relationship with God brings rewards. Rebellion brings disaster. The Book of Jeremiah is filled with threats of disaster. Yet, interspersed, we find these wonderful promises of restoration. Even in his wrath, God longs to show mercy.

Such is the case today. Hear the very real threats of our Lord to those who sin. Know what rebellion brings and the consequences of transgression. Be crushed by the law and see the complete hopelessness of your thoughts and plans. Then hear the plans the Lord plans for you. Hear the thoughts the Lord thinks concerning you. Hear his promise, and trust in it, impossible as it may seem for him to restore you, because nothing is impossible with God. All seemed lost for God's Old Testament people, yet they returned to the Promised Land. All was lost for mankind, you and I included, yet Christ has returned us to the Father, who hears when we call in faith, and reveals himself when we seek him. Threats and promises. Living under the former brings terror and emptiness. Living under the latter brings peace and wholeness. Live under promise, because you are children of promise, taught to you and applied to you through the gospel.

5/12/05 - 1 Corinthians 2:12-16

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. [13] And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

[14] The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. [15] The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. [16] "For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

How often haven't you marveled when that friend or relative just couldn't get it? It's so simple! Jesus died for our sins and rose from the dead, and now by grace through faith in him we are saved. It's nothing too difficult, but for the unbeliever, it is the most difficult thing of all to understand. Our flesh, our sinful nature, is conditioned to view salvation from the perspective of works, if it sees a need for salvation at all. Grace is a foreign concept, especially salvation by grace alone. Our pride is offended. How dare God leave us out of the process! How dare God help us when we didn't even ask him to do so! How dare he! What more foolish idea could there be than this: that God would become man and die for a race that by nature rejects him. Yet man's foolishness is God's wisdom. While we cannot fathom such love, because we are incapable of such love, such love took flesh in Jesus Christ.

We are often full of suggestions for God. We are often Monday morning quarterbacks when it comes to the way he has done things and has promised to do things. Yet "*who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?*" I haven't. You haven't. So how can we sit in judgment on God? Rather, he sits in judgment of our plans and ways. And, in his grace, he even helps us see the wisdom behind his will, because he gives us the mind of Christ, by giving us Christ in Word and sacrament, and by sharing Christ's thoughts on every page of Holy Scripture. If you want to make sense of God's ways, learn Christ. If you want to learn Christ, hear and receive the gospel. In this way, you will be taught by the Spirit, who our ascended Lord has sent to increase and preserve, build up and embolden his Church. No one has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him, but the Lord has opened his mind to us in Christ so as to instruct us. Class is in session. Get out your Book. Amen.

5/13/05 – Hebrews 11:32-40

And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— [33] who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, [34] quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. [35] Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. [36] Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. [37] They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— [38] of whom the world was not worthy— wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. [39] And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, [40] since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

There was a story about a church having a Star Wars series in the coming weeks. They had members take shifts dressing up in a Chewbacca costume to advertise it. Their website is <http://www.epicwired.com/>. You know what the worst part of it is? They are Lutheran. They are even Missouri Synod Lutheran. And they are using the same arguments to justify this foolishness that some in our own circles are using to justify their own ill-advised antics. What has happened to the Lutheran Church? What has happened to the Church? Why were the prophets killed? Why was Jesus crucified? Why were the apostles martyred? They had a promise, a promise that conflicted with the ideals of this world and of their own sinful natures. They refused to make Jesus just another name among others in pop culture or to subject him to the latest marketing fads. They followed a Christ who was God, and not just a face on a t-shirt, a passing reference in a rock ballad, or a buddy invited to the church barbeque.

We do not reach the lost by hiding Christ in a Star Wars service. We reach the lost by presenting Christ in all his crucified glory. If we are not ashamed of the gospel, why do so many hide it and use bait and switch means to "share" it as we share jello at a potluck, which gets swallowed up in a sea of meatloaf, cheesecake, coleslaw, and baked beans. I am concerned. I am very concerned. Does a promise mean anything anymore? "*And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was*

promised...” Yet how often aren’t we determined to make God deliver on his promise of glory now, rather than living under the cross. Getting people into a church building does not bring them to Christ or make them part of the Church, made up of believers. Preaching Christ and baptizing into Christ does that. The Church is not part of a culture. The Church is its own culture, and runs counter to every culture in the world, because it preaches Christ, and the sinful nature is hostile toward him. People were slain in two for this message, not with a light saber, but with the hatred of men and steel. Cling to the promise. Let God fulfill it.

5/16/05 - Isaiah 44:1-8

**"But now hear, O Jacob my servant,
Israel whom I have chosen!**

**[2] Thus says the Lord who made you,
who formed you from the womb and will help you:**

**Fear not, O Jacob my servant,
Jeshurun whom I have chosen.**

**[3] For I will pour water on the thirsty land,
and streams on the dry ground;
I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring,
and my blessing on your descendants.**

**[4] They shall spring up among the grass
like willows by flowing streams.**

**[5] This one will say, 'I am the Lord's,'
another will call on the name of Jacob,
and another will write on his hand, 'The Lord's,'
and name himself by the name of Israel."**

**[6] Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel
and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts:**

**"I am the first and I am the last;
besides me there is no god.**

**[7] Who is like me? Let him proclaim it.
Let him declare and set it before me,
since I appointed an ancient people.**

Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen.

**[8] Fear not, nor be afraid;
have I not told you from of old and declared it?
And you are my witnesses!**

**Is there a God besides me?
There is no Rock; I know not any."**

The LORD promises to send his Spirit and describes what doing so will accomplish: *"This one will say, 'I am the Lord's,' another will call on the name of Jacob, and another will write on his hand, 'The Lord's,' and name himself by the name of Israel."* The Spirit will lead God’s people to identify themselves as his own. And God’s Spirit will cast out fear, as verse 8 declares. The truth is, all are God’s, because there is no God besides him, but the Spirit will lead God’s chosen people to recognize, acknowledge, and treasure this fact.

Isaiah is clearly speaking of the Messianic age here, that is, the age of the Church. We see the Spirit’s activity in the Church from Pentecost up until now. How? Because men, women, and children have identified themselves as his own, made his own through baptism and the Word, even to the point of death. The martyrs did not fear torture and murder, because they were the LORD’s, and there is no other. He has been and will always be the Rock upon which the Church rests. You are the LORD’s. Recognize it. Acknowledge it. Treasure it. And make it known, not necessarily by writing it on your hands, but by

making it clear in Word and deed to those around you. You are his witnesses. You are his own. God's Spirit has made that clear. Let it be clear. You are his own. Amen.

5/17/05 - John 6:44-51

“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. [45] It is written in the Prophets, 'And they will all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me— [46] not that anyone has seen the Father except him who is from God; he has seen the Father. [47] Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. [48] I am the bread of life. [49] Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. [50] This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. [51] I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

We observed on Pentecost that the Spirit does not draw attention to himself, but to Christ. The Spirit, through the gospel, leads Christians to believe on the Savior and to proclaim him to the world. The same is true of the Father. In the New Testament, the Father does not draw attention to himself, but to Christ. He points sinners to his Son, that in his Son, they may have eternal life. Christ, in turn, declares the praises of his Father and the Spirit. Yet Christ, nonetheless, remains the chief object of our faith. It is in Christ's death and resurrection we trust for salvation.

“Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” Our faith clings to a crucified and risen Lord, a God-man who gave his flesh into death and took it back up again in life. Our faith chews on this reality, considering it from every angle and savoring the bitter price of sin, as well as the sweet taste of salvation. We thoroughly digest Christ's salvific work, so that it becomes a part of our very being and the fuel for all we do. Christ has given himself for us, and for all the world. Through his flesh, the flesh of the Bread of Life, you and I have life, and not only life, but life everlasting with the Father, who points us to the Son, with the Spirit, who brings us to faith in the Son, and with Christ, who gave himself that he might give us to his Father. Through the Word, by the Spirit, drawn by the Father, you have come to learn this from God himself. Chew on that. Digest that. Savor it.

5/24/05 – Romans 1:1-7

The epistle lessons for most of the season of Pentecost are taken from St. Paul's letter to the Romans. This summer, I will be preaching a series on Romans using the lessons from the pericope as they appear. To fill in the gaps between the passages used as lessons, I will be basing our devotions on the rest of the letter to the Romans. So, we begin today with chapter 1, verse 1:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, [2] which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, [3] concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh

[4] and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, [5] through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, [6] including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

**[7] To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

Paul is clearly the author, placing his name first, as was the ancient custom. Paul is a servant of Christ Jesus, having been called by God to proclaim Christ Jesus by proclaiming his gospel. Christ Jesus and his gospel are not mere occasional themes in Scripture, but, rather, all of Scripture is centered in Christ and God's promises concerning him. This Christ Jesus, who leaps off every page of Sacred Writ, is

true God, born without sin and capable of keeping the law. He is true man, descended from David, as promised to David, to take our place under the law and in death, that we might then share in his newness of life. That he succeeded in these tasks was made clear as he rose from the dead, the ultimate preachment of grace and the foundation of St. Paul's apostleship. It is the resurrection that gives the gospel its power, so that, when it is preached, the Holy Spirit brings men, women, and children to the obedience of faith, that is, he leads them to believe that they too have a place under the promise, that the grace of God that springs from the empty tomb applies to them as well. Through this same gospel, you have been brought to this obedience of faith, so that you are included as those who belong to Jesus Christ, baptized into his death and rising with him to new life. St. Paul can sum all this up with the simple greeting: Grace and peace to you. As Luther said in his commentary on Galatians, these two words are a summary of all Christianity. "Grace forgives sin and peace stills the conscience." Grace and peace to you today. Amen.

5/24/05 – Romans 1:8-17

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. [9] For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you

[10] always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. [11] For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— [12] that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. [13] I want you to know, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. [14] I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. [15] So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

[16] For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. [17] For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

"The righteous shall live by faith." The words that transformed the ancient world. *"The righteous shall live by faith."* The words that sparked the Reformation. *"The righteous shall live by faith."* The words by which, still today, the Church stands or falls. Who are these righteous? Look back a verse. These righteous are those declared righteous by God, those whose only righteousness is not their own, but Christ Jesus'. This is the righteousness that comes through faith, *"from faith for faith."* Thus, *"the righteous shall live by faith."*

One would think such a life would be easy—a life by faith. Surely, the Lutheran's opponents claimed that such a teaching would lead to laziness and libertinism. Yet, this life by faith, resulting from the righteousness of Christ imputed to us through faith, is most difficult particularly because it is a life of faith and brings a righteousness of God. Often, this life will run opposite of what is easiest, of what makes most sense, of what seems most beneficial. Yet, faith clings to God's promise, which by very nature is not something we can prove. We can taste the fish we eat on Friday. We can feel the waters of the Ganges. We can see Mecca as we take a pilgrimage there. We cannot see God's promise, except in the sacraments, and even there it is hidden. Indeed, the life of faith, unlike a life of works, often leaves us begging God to show his face, to come out of hiding. The life the righteous live by faith is anything but a walk in the park. In fact, oftentimes it is a walk through the very pit of hell, as trial, temptation, and doubt seeks to drag us into unbelief and into the fiery dungeon created for the devil.

Yet, *"the righteous shall live by faith."* But how? *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes."* The Christian is powered by the gospel, in Word and sacrament, received by faith and expressed through faith. Make no mistake about it, the Christian life is a life under the cross, a life often swum against the stream and contrary to the senses. Yet, *"the righteous shall live by faith,"* and may no one ever take this comfort from you, for in the midst of all the uncertainty of this life and often of our faith, this alone is certain: *in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed.* It doesn't depend on you, and your doubts and your questions cannot rob you of what is

not yours in the first place, but Christ's, given to you through the gospel. No one can take your righteousness, because it is God's, received through faith, which, like righteousness, is a gift of God as well. Ah, how God loves us! Not only does he give us righteousness and faith, but he gives it to us in such a way that we cannot bring it into question, sully it, or destroy it, for it never stops being his, even while it is reckoned as ours. In the midst of depression, in the face of sickness, in the darkness of doubt, let St. Paul's words, inspired by God, ring clear and chase away the demons: *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'"*

You have been declared righteous for Christ's sake. God has worked faith in you through baptism and the Word. Live by that faith. Yes, life by faith is a life that at times brings suffering, but it is also a life that brings Christ's suffering with it, and Christ's suffering is never without Christ's grace. Yes, it is a life under the cross, but it is a life under the cross, Christ's cross, and Christ's cross always faces the empty tomb, where we too journey until our earthly sojourn is done.

5/26/05 - Romans 1:18-32

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. [19] For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. [20] For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. [21] For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. [22] Claiming to be wise, they became fools, [23] and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

[24] Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, [25] because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

[26] For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; [27] and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

[28] And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. [29] They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, [30] slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, [31] foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. [32] Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

How often haven't you seen it? Even worse, have you been it? Someone gives into temptation once, and then is sucked into a sin they cannot escape until they reach the point that they no longer want to escape it, and not only do not want to escape it, but advocate it for others as good and meet and right. In the last ten years, numerous examples could be provided from our own society, but law and gospel does not make Christian societies, it makes Christian individuals, and so dwelling on the sins of society often does more damage than good, because, in doing so, we overlook our own sins and in time consider them somehow less fatal than the sins outside our doors. Trust me, brothers and sisters, such sins as were once condemned in society with fury are now no longer outside your family's doors, or outside the church's doors. We ourselves are guilty of being and doing what a generation or two ago would have been scandalous, but, the shame has been removed, and, thus, little is said about it. In my opinion, the worst condemnation pronounced in Scripture is this one: *"Were they ashamed when they committed*

abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says the Lord” (Jeremiah 6:15). Jeremiah repeats this verse again, like a refrain, in chapter 8.

When was the last time you blushed, not because you got caught, and not because you looked stupid, but because you were ashamed? When was the last time you thought about what you watched, what you listened to, and what you regurgitated from those things through your own mouth, and blushed? Do we know how to blush, or do we use blush to conceal our transgression, couching and hiding it in euphemisms, excuses, and comparisons to other sins or sinners? Know that complete depravity, hardening, and separation from God does not follow long after sin. Sin is the horse, and hell is the cart. You can't pet the horse without coming closer to the cart. And the worse part is, once you get that close it is pretty much too late anyway, because, as St. Paul warns, by that time you most likely will no longer fear hell or consider sin sin, rather, the most wretched acts of all will by then seem good and meet and right, worthy of advocating to others.

So what should we do? Take a cold shower. Douse your corrupt body and mind in the frigid waters of repentance. Return to your baptism, joining tears of sorrow to the flood of God's grace, and correct your vision. Look through the eyes of Christ, to whom you are joined through the gospel, the power of God, from our last devotion. St. Paul goes from describing the gospel and the righteous who live by faith to now depicting those who live by unbelief. You can see the contrast in the text. See it in real life. Return to Christ. Return to verse 17, and fear ever stepping into the realm of verses 18 to 32 again. This is nowhere for righteousness to trod, because righteousness walks where its source and owner wills, and its source and owner is God, who gives his righteousness to you in Christ, through the gospel. The righteous shall live by faith, immersed always anew in their baptism, where they put God's righteousness on. The unrighteous shall live by unbelief, immersed always anew in the dissipation of the flesh, where God's righteousness cannot remain. *“What can be known about God is plain”* to you, not only through our natural knowledge of things, but through the gospel. Know him, because through the gospel, he knows you, and he loves you, and he rescues you from the mess in which you've wallowed.

5/27/05 - Romans 2:1-5

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. [2] We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who do such things. [3] Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? [4] Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? [5] But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

As we mentioned yesterday, it is easy to judge, berate, and damn the sin outside our doors, but in so doing we are not judging as the bible tells us to judge. We are to use the same measure for others that we do for ourselves. We are to search ourselves as vigorously and more vigorously than search others. There were many noble heathen and moral Jews who would have gladly jumped on St. Paul's bandwagon in the previous verses. He could have been elected in the ancient red states with little trouble. Yet, that is not what St. Paul wanted. Moral reform was not his chief goal, or really a goal at all, because moral reform can be carried out as well with the Koran or the congress as it can with the bible. Paul didn't want reform. He wanted renewal, worked through the gospel. In order for the gospel to work renewal, however, one has to see his or her need for rebirth. The self-righteous pagan or Jew saw no need, because they were the moral dream team of the day. Why have a Savior if you have the sin thing under control yourself? May God keep us from falling this same moralistic and Pharisaical trap, and may God forgive us for when we have!

This is not the only trap that lies in wait for believers, however. We can also be tempted to the other extreme. Rather than taking pride in our moral superiority, we may be tempted to delve into the pool

of sin that surrounds us when it seems that God takes sin lightly, because he has not yet punished those around us for their sins and, in fact, at times even seems to prosper them. We can make the mistake of thinking God's delay is an expression of his apathy instead of his kindness. God is patient, not wanting any to perish, hoping to lead the lost to repentance in his kindness. May God keep us from falling into this presumptuous and ill-advised trap, from thinking of the sins of others as fun we are missing out on, rather than damnable wickedness that God has kept us from in his grace, and may God forgive us for when we have!

We have all stored up wrath for the day of God's judgment. We are all by nature objects of wrath and have confirmed that status with our numerous misdeeds. We are as lost as our neighbor and are as weak in the face of temptation as well. We dare not judge them as if we ourselves could not fall in the same way. We dare not join them as if God has ceased caring about the enforcement of his law. We will be judged. His law will be enforced. But the Lord is patient and kind, and he has given us a time of grace, and he has called us to repent, and he has promised us forgiveness in his Son, taking away our sins as we confess them, giving us his Son's righteousness as we confess him. God is patient. God is kind. Don't squander that fact. Turn to him, and escape the judgment you so rightly deserve, and receive the salvation you have not deserved, but Christ has deserved for you.

5/28/05 - Romans 2:6-11

He will render to each one according to his works: [7] to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; [8] but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. [9] There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, [10] but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. [11] For God shows no partiality.

Notice that St. Paul does not say what works he has in mind. Rather, he strikes at the heart of the matter, at motive. Patience and seeking are mentioned. This is an ongoing striving. Striving for what: glory, honor, and immortality. Where does the Christian find these things? In God, and in God alone. We have no glory. We fall short of it. We deserve no honor. We have merited only shame. We definitely cannot bring about our own immortality. Rather, God alone gives these things. Yes, the Christian does the opposite of the unbeliever, who obeys righteousness. The Christian, through faith, places himself under—that is what the word obey means—the righteousness of God. And in God's righteousness, motivated and renewed by the gospel, the Christian is patient and deliberate in well-doing and seeks the gifts of God mentioned above. The unbeliever refuses to be placed under this righteousness of God and thus cannot reciprocate these motives and fruits of the Christian, and, thus, the unbeliever cannot please God, but instead remains under his unquenchable wrath. Yes, the doers of good will be rewarded and the doers of evil will be punished. Who are the doers of good? Those in whom the Father sees his Son and his Spirit, who cannot dwell in a man or woman without producing good, even without that man or woman's knowledge at times. Who are the doers of evil? Those who have rejected the Son and cast off the Spirit, without whom no man or woman can please God or escape the coming judgment. Jew or Gentile matters little, as we already learned in chapter one. What matters is Christ, working in us through the Spirit to produce a new life with godly motives. Thank God that he sees his Son in you and has made you the temple of his Spirit. Be ever careful not to reject the Son through false doctrine or wicked living, for the Spirit cannot dwell where the Son is not welcomed. Examine yourselves daily, turn from the evil you have done, strive to do good, being patient in well-doing, seeking the gifts only God can give, and has given through the gospel.

5/31/05 - Romans 2:12-16

For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. [13] For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. [14] For when Gentiles, who do not have

the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. [15] They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them

[16] on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

The law here is the Law of Moses, civil (for Israel's government), ceremonial (for Israel's worship), and the moral (for Israel's life, i.e. the Ten Commandments). The Gentiles had not been given the complete Law of Moses, but rather the moral law had been written on their hearts. They had consciences. They had natural law, by which societies as a whole demonstrate their innate awareness of certain moral standards. For this reason, we see the second table of the Ten Commandments (the fourth through tenth commandments) evident to some extent or another in every culture.

What is St. Paul's point? The Jew would be judged according to God's revealed law—all of it. The Gentile would be judged according to the natural law, written on their hearts, as St. Paul tells us in verse fifteen. Both would be judged according to the law, but the Jews alone would be judged by the Law of Moses. Yet, while the scope of the basis of God's judgment was greater for the Jew, the result of God's judgment would be the same for Jew and Gentile alike: damnation for all who have sinned even once in any way and thus fallen short of the glory of God. God would not judge as human judges, that is, only on the basis of the evidence brought to light, but rather God will judge on the basis of all that man has thought, said, or done, even the secret things, for there is nothing that is not disclosed to God and to all on Judgment Day. The Gentile would not be able to plead ignorance on the day of their judgment because they had already been judging themselves in their conscience, accusing and defending their various actions and, in so doing, demonstrating to themselves that there was a divine Judge and there was a divine standard which was, as mentioned above, written on their hearts. The Jew and Gentile alike would have to answer for what was revealed to them, not according to their hearing of it, but according to their doing of it, and, in this way, Jew and Gentile stand on the same level before the Almighty, judged in the same way, by what they have done.

Notice that I have spoken somewhat theoretically in the first two paragraphs. I have talked about what God would do. Now, let me tell you what God will do. He will judge you and I as well, not only according to those things others know about, but even according to the secret things that we have worked so hard to hide, that we have spent so many hours fretting that someone will discover. He will judge us according to what has been revealed to us in his Word and sacraments and according to the law written on our hearts. He will judge us, not by whether we have heard it or not, but by whether we have put it into practice or not, and, in this way, we will be judged all the harsher for having been blessed to have heard so much. Our conscience is a preview of this trial, but it is nowhere as comprehensive or stern. The scope of our judgment will be even greater than the judgment of the Jew and Gentile mentioned in our text. Even more than being judged by the Law of Moses or by the law itself, we will be judged according the gospel, in this case, the message of Christ, who we confess in the creed to be, not only the Savior, but the Judge of mankind. The good news of the gospel is that our Judge is also our Advocate, but when we have rejected our Savior by persistent sin and unbelief, he becomes our Judge alone, and we will have to render an account to him for every bit of mercy, forgiveness, and grace we squandered. In this way, hell will be an even more bitter place for those who have known Christ the Savior, just to reject him through apathetic indifference or zealous opposition, and to be left to know Christ the Judge alone.

My friends, take time to try yourselves according to your conscience today. Where have you sinned against God's revealed law? Where have you acted against conscience? Where have you hindered the free course of the gospel in your lives? Judge yourselves now that you might fall at the feet of Christ your Savior and receive mercy that he might be your Advocate before Christ your Judge. St. Paul does not convict us now that we might be lost and condemned, but rather he convicts us now that we might then be absolved, justified, and pardoned for Christ's sake, our Savior and Judge. Convict yourselves. Admit your guilt. Be declared innocent in the gospel through faith, for the sake of Christ Jesus, who has paid for all your sins, open and secret, big and small, intentional and unintentional. In him is hope. In anything else there is only hell.

6/1/05 – Romans 2:17-24

But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God

[18] and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; [19] and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, [20] an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— [21] you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? [22] You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? [23] You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. [24] For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

What made the Jew different than the Gentile ultimately led to the Jew's temptation to arrogance and pride: God had revealed his will most fully to the Jew. Thus, the gentiles were "the nations," for that is what Gentiles means, while the Jews were "the nation," the chosen people. But why were they chosen? It was not because they were more holy, more inclined to godliness, better suited for obedience, or closer to the image of God. No, they were chosen to produce the Savior of all nations. They were chosen in Christ, not in themselves. When they failed to remember this, they were given to the hypocrisy and double standards St. Paul condemns here.

We are tempted to the same thing as God's chosen people in Christ, as the New Testament Israel. How often don't we condemn in the world and in others what we secretly harbor and desire in our own hearts? How often don't we forget that what sets us apart from the unbeliever is not our personal holiness, inclination to godliness, suitability for obedience, or a closer proximity to the image of God in and of ourselves? No, we are set apart only in Christ, and when we forget that, when we find room for arrogance or pride in our own flesh, when we fail to see our value in Christ alone, then we have lost Christ and become no different than the "Gentiles," the unbelievers upon whom we look down.

God has revealed his will most fully to us, but, in so doing, he has also exposed our failure to live according to it. See your value in Christ. Recognize your own weakness, lack of personal holiness, inclination to ungodliness, resistance to obedience, and contrast to the image of God. Recognize these things so that you despair of them in yourselves and find them in Christ, through his blessed gospel. You are chosen. You are holy. You are godly. You are obedient. You are being restored in the image of God. Why? You are in Christ. With this attitude, we will battle the temptation to look down on others and we will be motivated to instead share with them where they too can find what they cannot find in themselves, how they too can go from being lost to chosen. We will point them to Christ, or, better yet, without pointing they will know where to look as they watch our own eyes, fixed on what is not ours on our own but is ours through faith in this Savior.

6/2/05 – Romans 2:25-29

For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. [26] So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? [27] Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. [28] For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. [29] But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

At the time of the Reformation, when some reformers became frustrated with what seemed many times to be a lack of improvement in the moral quality of the lives of their people, they began to question infant baptism, because baptism apparently had little effect on the people as a whole. For the same reason, some would also question the Lord's Supper. Because of human rejection of God's grace, they questioned God's gracious gifts. What did they turn to instead? The law, just like the Roman Church they had battled against did. They confused law and gospel. They allowed human wickedness to nullify God's goodness.

Circumcision was a powerful sign and promise given to Israel, but circumcision was of little value if it wasn't received in faith, because a promise is only received in faith, and only faith can see what is not apparent to the human eye, that is the power of the sign and the grace behind it. Circumcision was a powerful sign and promise, but it was also a purchase. God now owned that person. He adopted him as his child of the covenant. If it became apparent the circumcised man persistently lived as a child of the devil instead, then it became apparent that Jew had rejected his circumcision and could only return to it through repentance. God's promise was not nullified. It was rejected. That is a significant difference. If you refuse a check from a friend, that promise of money is not nullified; it was rejected. The check is still good, but it does not benefit you, since you refused it. In the case of our text, many Jews had rejected circumcision by treating it like magic, making it a law they kept to merit salvation, imagining that the act of circumcision was an automatic ticket to heaven, even if it was not received by faith.

In Colossians, St. Paul writes, *"In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead."* You, like many men and women, have been baptized. Many have rejected their baptism, so that it does not benefit them unless they return to it in repentance. They have rejected baptism, but they have not nullified it. You have been baptized. You have received a powerful sign and promise, marking you as God's chosen, marking you as his own. Do not, like the Jew, trust in your baptism as a magical thing, as a law you have kept that merits salvation, as a law that you have kept for your child that merits salvation so that you no longer need to raise them in the faith by teaching them everything whatsoever the Lord has commanded. Baptism saves, but, through it, the Holy Spirit creates and strengthens the faith that receives its benefits. It is an outward act attached to inward faith. You have been baptized. You cannot nullify this fact, but you can reject it. And, if you do, not blame God's gifts. Blame yourself, and despair of yourself, and return to those gifts you rejected, because while you can reject them, you cannot nullify them.

6/3/05 – Romans 3:1-4

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? [2] Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. [3] What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? [4] By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written,

**"That you may be justified in your words,
and prevail when you are judged."**

Amen and alleluia! You can't do it. I can't do it. Satan can't do it. No one can nullify the faithfulness of God. St. Paul uses the strongest possible Greek formula of denial here. By no means! God's faithfulness cannot be nullified. The value of God's gift in circumcision cannot be nullified, even though one may lose its benefits through unbelief. For instance, our riding lawn mower has the power to mow the lawn. If I refuse to believe it and use the push mower instead, I have not stripped it of its power. I have simply robbed myself of the benefits of its power.

Let God be true though everyone were a liar. For the Jew to deny the power of God's Word or to declare it ineffective and useless because he himself did not believe and obey it was to call God a liar, the crassest blasphemy. For the Christian to deny the power of God's Word or to declare it ineffective or useless because he himself does not trust it to do what God has promised or does not like its effect is to call God a liar, the crassest blasphemy. Rather than being disappointed in what God's oracles and gifts have accomplished in the small picture, one must merely step back and look at the big picture to have their disappointment turned into awe. Who can criticize God's justice and faithfulness when he views history? Has God not spared us numerous misfortunes we rightly deserved? Was God not unbelievably patient with Israel, especially considering her obstinacy and disobedience? Has God not blessed our own land in spite of our manifold wickedness and kept us safe from the tragedies and catastrophes so many other nations regularly experience?

No one can nullify God's faithfulness. Thus, after negating its effect in our lives through sin, we confess our wrongdoing and turn to God, because, try though we might, it is impossible that we have nullified his faithfulness. We may have rejected and denied it, but we could never nullify it. In fact, in our turning we justify him in his words. While that may make it sound like you lose in the process, nothing could be further from the truth, because the triumph of God's faithfulness always benefits God's faithful, that is, those who receive his promises and gifts through faith. That's you, no matter what you fear may have nullified his faithfulness in the past. Amen and alleluia. By no means could you ever have nullified his faithfulness! By no means let us fail to rejoice in that.

6/6/05 – Romans 3:5-8

But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) [6] By no means! For then how could God judge the world? [7] But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? [8] And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.

If our sinning ultimately brings glory to God by showing forth his justice and faithfulness in keeping the covenant, how can he be mad at us for sinning, in fact, shouldn't he be grateful for our sinning? St. Paul must have heard that reply before, or he anticipated it, and so he shoots down such logic right away. Unfortunately, such thinking has plagued the Church throughout history. Many have taken the good news of forgiveness in Christ as an excuse for libertinism, that is, sinning without care and restraint. Many have taken the good news that way, and, I would venture to say, unless we need to ring the church bells as each of you approaches on Sunday and proclaim the presence of an unsoiled saint, you have taken the good news that same way at times. The knowledge that God forgives sin has led you to view sin a little more lightly. Knowing that you will have time to repent later has taken the edge off of the urgency of turning from sin now. But how many have died suddenly in such crass and inane thought and been justly condemned for all eternity.

The gospel is not a game. We don't see who can put off their repentance longest and thus have the most fun possible in life and still be saved, and any attitude that considers sin fun is a hardened attitude that will in all likelihood be unbreakable on a death bed. What makes us think that God is dumb enough to fall for such child's play? What makes us think that God is so trite? Such thought is abominable and St. Paul apologizes for even having to speak it, qualifying his statement with the not that he is speaking in a human way. Sin is sin and it is not fun and it is not trite and it is not easily escaped. Our condemnation is just when we think and act such ways. Thus, St. Paul writes elsewhere, (2 Cor. 6:2), "*Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.*"

Now is the time of God's favor, and the gospel announces that fact. Take heart, that the abuse of the gospel cannot negate it. Now is the time of God's favor—the time for abominable attitudes and thoughts to be forgiven and for minds to be restored and renewed. See sin as sin, and flee sin as sin, because then the gospel will shine all the brighter as the gospel, that is, the antidote for sin and not the excuse for it. Now is the time of God's favor. Your condemnation is just, but so is your God, and he has punished your sin in his Son. Now is the time of God's favor. Flee God's coming wrath and hide in the outstretched arms of his Son, mercy made man.

6/14/05 - Romans 3:9-20

[9] What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, [10] as it is written:

"None is righteous, no, not one;

**[11] no one understands;
no one seeks for God.**

**[12] All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,**

not even one."

**[13] "Their throat is an open grave;
they use their tongues to deceive."**

"The venom of asps is under their lips."

[14] "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness."

[15] "Their feet are swift to shed blood;

[16] in their paths are ruin and misery,

[17] and the way of peace they have not known."

[18] "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

[19] Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. [20] For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

St. Paul now rejects a third possible objection, or misunderstanding, concerning the gospel. The beginning of verse 9 could read one of two ways: "Are we any better off?" or "Are we at a disadvantage?" What is the point? St. Paul is condemning a view that tries to pit one sinner against another, as if one has better or worse standing before God based on ethnicity or human judgment. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." "None is righteous." "No one does good."

St. Paul is still combating a view that approaches God through the law, looking for a loophole or something to tip the scales a bit. The fact of the matter is that, while the law drives us to Christ, it is only through the gospel that we can approach God with the expectation of mercy and salvation; it is only through faith in God's promise of grace. Apart from the gospel, and faith in it, all are under the power of sin. Notice St. Paul says "sin," the singular. He is speaking of the sin we are born with, the sin that gives birth to sins. Because of this sin, we instinctively sin against the First Commandment, from which all the other commandments flow. Because we do not love God, our throat is an open grave, our feet are swift to shed blood, etc.

Thus, the mouth is stopped. Gone are the excuses St. Paul has rebuffed. Gone is any attempt to find loopholes and tip the scales. All that is left is the awkward silence of the damned. All that is left is accountability. All that is left is a clarity of mind, the worst punishment of all, which sees sin in all its despicability, gravity, and damnability. Will that not be the greatest suffering of hell? Being separated from God and knowing for all eternity that you yourself merited every bit of that separation, that is, being keenly aware of sin.

We cannot justify sin, especially not by the law. We cannot even excuse sin by the law. Rather, we the law rejects any attempt to defend, rationalize, or diminish our wickedness and our culpability for it. The law merely declares the law's verdict on sinners, the fruit of the power of sin: guilty. And that verdict, echoed by the hammer of the justice's gavel, rings for all eternity, forbidding anyone to forget it.

But... While we cannot justify our sin, God can justify us, and he has done so in Christ. St. Paul continues, in the passage we will study tomorrow: "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law." Here is our hope. Here is our salvation. Here is our justification. It is no loophole. Christ's blood is no loophole—it is God's justice in all its severity. But... Thank God St. Paul keeps writing.

6/15/05 - Romans 3:21-26

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— [22] the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: [23] for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, [24] and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, [25] whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. [26] It was

to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Yesterday we were left somewhat hopeless, so I alluded to verse 21 in our passage today. After crushing the arguments of those who clung to the law and bloodlines, St. Paul now turns from the righteousness that does not avail before God to the righteousness that does avail before God. Hence, St. Paul begins “but now...” The word order in the Greek is significant. St. Paul writes, “But now, APART FROM THE LAW, the righteousness of God has been made known.” This is all apart from the law. We saw where the law leads in our previous devotions; the law kills.

“But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been made known.” God’s righteousness has been manifested. But what good does that do for us and our righteousness? That is the great part. In Christ, God’s righteousness is declared ours through faith, to all who believe, no matter what color, age, or gender they may be. This righteousness, given us by grace, is “received by faith.” As we heard yesterday, all have sinned, but, praise be to God, in Christ, all are justified, that is, declared righteous for Christ’s sake. Christ took our sin, all of our sin, and now gives us his righteousness. “But now...” “When the time was right, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under the law” (Galatians 4:4). “But now...” “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). “But now...” And, just like that, we go from hopelessness to hope, from reprobation to redemption, from hell to heaven.

“It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” What an intersection Christ has proven to be! God meets man. Justice meets mercy. Holiness meets grace. Wrath meets love. God is just, for our sin has been punished, severely punished in Christ. God is merciful, for our sin has been punished, severely punished IN CHRIST, who is God himself. What an intersection Christ has proven to be! You meet God, and see not his countenance burning with hatred, but his risen face shining upon with all the love that drove him to Calvary and brought him back to his Church from the grave. See how St. Paul crushed you with the law. He crushed you for your own good, that you might despair of your own flesh and works, that you might smell the fires of hell and shake with terror.

See how St. Paul crushed you with the law, so that, as Christ was raised from death, you may be brought from spiritual death to life through the life-giving message of the gospel. *“It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”* You are the one who has faith in Jesus, wavering as it may be at times. But take heart, when God has given you his one and only Son, when God has given you his righteousness, how will he then not also richly feed and fortify your faith, a gift itself which receives the bounties of his grace that in his mercy he has set before you.

6/16/05 – Romans 3:27-31

Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. [28] For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. [29] Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, [30] since God is one. He will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. [31] Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

“Give me some props.” Many of you didn’t grow up saying that, but some of us did. What does it mean? Give me credit. Feed my ego. “Give me some props.” Why did I think of that now? I thought of it because St. Paul talks about boasting, and all boasting outside of Christ is illusory and shallow—props—like props on the stage of a play. It may look nice, but it is not the real thing. When the show is done, the props are thrown out or burned. When life is over, our boasting is fit for the same trash bin or fire.

“Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith.” Notice, the fact that we cannot boast in the law does not throw out the law. Notice, that the fact that we cannot boast in the law does not mean the law does not indeed command

God's will which is to be upheld. Rather, the fact that we cannot boast in the law means that we have failed to keep it and cannot be saved by it. It means that for every work we attempt to boast in, there are several more that testify against us to our shame. The one who confesses this truth upholds the law, because he acknowledges the perfection of the law, his inability to keep it, and the seriousness of the threats and punishments that result from such transgression. The one who boasts in the law or claims salvation by it does not uphold it, because he inevitably robs it of its perfection, stripping it of those commands he cannot keep, pretending it is something trite and unproblematic, playing down the threats and punishments that result from transgression, denying them when he must. Such a person is like someone who claims it is not hard to reproduce a Picasso work, and then proceeds to ruin the original in order to make it easier to copy.

The law is fulfilled in Christ alone, for it is Christ alone that kept the law all his days, Christ alone who submitted as the venomous threats of the law were carried out as physical and spiritual torture on Good Friday, Christ alone who was laid in the tomb that we also might rise from it. There is no middle ground. "It is finished," or it is not. Boast in works or trust in Christ. Revel in shallow praise or take refuge in Christ's wounds. Be damned by works or justified by faith. Either way, the law is to be kept, in the vain hope of salvation, or as a sacrifice of praise and thanks to the God who has redeemed you. The law has not been negated. It still bears God's commands and reveals his will. For that reason, it must be kept. The flesh will keep it to avoid punishment and earn favor. Christians will keep it because they love the Lord, and thus they love his law, seeing in it an opportunity to serve their God and their neighbor, seeing in it God's love for them as he commands the very things that benefit both us and society. The law is not excluded. Boasting in the law is. The law is not rejected. It is fulfilled, but not by us. It is fulfilled in Christ, and it is only in Christ that we can observe it with works flowing, not from pride or self-interest, but from faith and love, with hearts knowing we cannot fulfill it, with hearts knowing that Christ, however, has done so on our behalf. In him, we boast. In him, we serve. In him, we offer up our sin-stained works—for even are best works still bear our sin—and in him, the Father rejoices in these sacrifices of praise, which is itself an act of grace.

6/18/05 - Romans 4:1-8

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? [2] For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. [3] For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." [4] Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. [5] And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, [6] just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:

**[7] "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,
and whose sins are covered;**

[8] blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin."

I have used this illustration many times in Bible class, but permit me to use it again. Imagine if you went to your boss at work and told him you put in twenty solid hours during your forty hour work week. Would he reward you? That is what we do when we seek to present our works to God, as if he did not deserve to receive them and infinitely more (we always conveniently fail to present the many times we acted against his commands or did not carry them out when we should have). Imagine even if you did go to your boss and could rightly claim that you put in forty solid hours. Would he then have to give you a bonus? Doesn't he already pay you for forty solid hours and have every right to expect them from you, just as you then have the right to expect to receive your due. There is no gift involved in all this. There is simply work and wages. But St. Paul says God doesn't count righteousness as a wage, but as a gift, which is a very different thing. When we deal with God, however, we must remember that he has not hired us, he has created us, and for that very reason he does not merely deserve an agreed upon percentage of our time, but all of it in every way.

We do not labor for God to be counted righteousness, because someone who labors for a gift turns that gift into a wage. In reality, no work is truly a good work in God's eyes, that is a work done by faith, if it is a work done in the hope of reward. Remember in Matthew 25 how surprised the sheep were to hear that they had done good deeds for which the Lord commends? These were not works done in the conscious hope of merit and reward, but rather expressions of a living and active faith.

Your salvation is a gift. Your forgiveness is a gift. Your justification is a gift. Rejoice in that, because God does not give and take away like we so often do. God gives eternal gifts received by faith and lost only through unbelief. God never withdraws his gracious hand, although we may push it away through a hope in our own works or a refusal to believe his promises. God has given you a gift. Do what people do when they receive gifts: say thank you. That may seem obvious, but remember for how many years your parents had to remind you to say thank you at your birthday parties and Christmas. Receive God's gift through faith as a gift, and don't insult him by pretending it is anything less than a gift and that you can in any way make it more complete. Imagine how insulted your relatives would have been at your birthday party if after each present you had asked, "Now what do I have to do to earn this?" Or, "Now how can I make this gift more complete?" God has gifted you righteousness, mercy, and grace. Believe it, you blessed beggars of God.

"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin." Rejoice and be thankful, for not only has God given you something, but he has taken something away as well, covering and removing your sins by placing them on Christ and putting Christ on you. I know in Saginaw they keep playing commercials on the radio about how difficult it is to get your neighbors to take your big trash items, but that this-and-that company is your neighbor who cares and will remove your rubbish. Not only would no one else remove your sin, but they couldn't have if they wanted to, but Christ has taken your trash, covering your sin with his grace and leaving it in his empty tomb. He has taken what made you unpresentable to his Father and given you his righteousness to wear to the feast. All this he has done, not to receive repayment from you, but as a gift. Now do what mom and dad always reminded you to do: say thank you, and as you grow in your gratefulness for the grace of Christ, you will be surprised how that thank you will express itself in ways you never imagined, in ways you may not even notice until someone else points them out, in ways that seek no reward because they just naturally flow from the gift you've received.

6/20/05 – Romans 4:9-12

Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. [10] How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. [11] He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, [12] and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

The question of the salvation of the Gentiles and their place in God's promise was a serious question for the early Church. Could the Gentiles be saved? If they could be saved, could they be full participants in God's promise and Church in the same way that the Israelites could? Did they too have to be circumcised? Did anyone have to be circumcised, and, if not, wouldn't they all be becoming like the Gentiles instead of things working the other way around? Keep in mind that all this came after centuries of separation between Jew and Gentile—separation commanded by God. Yes, many Jews acted out of pride, but many would have had legitimate issues of conscience and stood in desperate need of patient instruction. We see even Peter struggle with this very question in the Book of Acts.

In our reading today, the specific question was whether or not the promise God gave to Abraham was contingent upon circumcision, that is, his identification with Israel, his physical offspring and the children of the covenant from whose lineage the Messiah came. Understanding Abraham was crucial

earlier in this book for understanding God's crediting of righteousness through faith, and now an understanding of Abraham is crucial again. Abraham was declared righteous in chapter 15 of Genesis. It is two chapters before he was circumcised, which probably was a span of several decades. Clearly, if we observe the order, St. Paul shows, the promise and righteousness came long before circumcision. Circumcision did not make Abraham righteous or create a new status for Abraham before God. Rather, circumcision pronounced what God had already accomplished and was given to Abraham's children as a sign and seal of the same promise and righteousness God gave Abraham through faith.

It is often much easier to cling to pride in our flesh, in our lineage, in our tradition, or in any number of other things than it is to cling to the promise. Let's not be mistaken, circumcision was a wonderful thing, a powerful sign and seal given to the Old Testament people of God, but circumcision was not the end. Christ was. May we always take care not to lose Christ in the things designed to point us to him. May we always take care to cling to God's promise and answer any questions that arise on the basis of it. God has promised us what he promised Abraham and the Israelites: righteousness through Christ. That always comes first. Everything else is chapters later.

6/21/05 - Romans 4:13-17

For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. [14] For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. [15] For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, [17] as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

"For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression." As I started to study the Bible more seriously before joining the Lutheran Church and then at Martin Luther College, I always found Romans to be a rather intimidating book, but I recognized its importance, and so I would often stumble through it, struggling to follow St. Paul's line of thought. To be honest, there are still plenty of places in this book where I wrestle and wrestle to understand St. Paul more clearly. This verse is a prime example, but, although it took me a while to get it, I am glad I did, because it is one of the most beautiful verses in the Scriptures.

"All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18-19). If we reject Christ, we stand before God with the law as the sole standard for our judgment, and the law brings wrath, because we have transgressed its commands. Yet God does not judge his faithful based on the law alone, because the faith he has worked in the faithful clings to Christ, and Christ has removed the law as a standard for our judgment. Yes, the law still brings wrath and judges, but its wrath and judgment has been visited upon Christ and not us. The promise to Abraham did not come through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. So also, God's gospel promises to us do not come through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. Where there is no law, there is no wrath, no transgression to be judged. *"And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross"* (Col. 2:13-14). Apart from Christ, there is law, there is transgression, there is wrath before God's judgment seat. In Christ, there is the promise that comes through the righteousness of faith, based not on works, but resting on grace, so that it may be guaranteed, not only to Abraham, and not only to Israel, but to all the sons and daughters of Abraham who share his faith and thereby have become his offspring. There is no law, not because the law has been nullified, but because it has been fulfilled in Christ, and it has visited its wrath upon Christ, and what is done in Christ

and upon Christ is done for the benefit of Christ's brothers and sisters, the Father's children through the promise.

Perhaps St. John Chrysostom said it more clearly than I can, "Now if [the law] worketh wrath, and renders them liable for transgression, it is plain that it makes them so to a curse also. But they that are liable under a curse, and punishments, and transgression, are not worthy of inheriting, but of being punished and rejected. What then happens? Faith comes, drawing on it the grace, so that the promise comes into effect. For where grace is, there is a remitting, and where remitting is, there is no punishment. Punishment then being removed, and righteousness succeeding from faith, there is no obstacle to our becoming the heirs of promise" (*Homilies on Romans*, Homily VIII).

6/23/05 - *Romans 5:1-5*

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. [2] 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. [3] More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, [4] and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, [5] 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.

"We have peace with God." "We rejoice in our sufferings." Which one is it, Paul? Or is this just another time when the Christian says yes to what seems to be two irreconcilable situations? Yes, because the irreconcilable is reconciled in Christ, man to God, peace to suffering, etc.

We tend to think of peace in the negative, don't we? Peace means no war. Peace means no conflict. Peace means no tension. We think of the peace of the hippies. But God's peace is infinitely more than the cessation of something. It is the giving of something. The Hebrews in the Old Testament did not only say "peace" to each other, but "shalom." St. Paul was schooled in the Old Testament, and the New Testament springs from and fulfills the Old, and, for this reason, much can be drawn from St. Paul's use of the word "peace." The peace St. Paul talks about is wholeness, a renewal in our intended relationship to God and in his image. This relationship with God through Christ and renewal in his image in Christ cannot be taken away or compromised through suffering. Rather, through suffering we are able to identify all the more to the Suffering Servant who identified with our suffering by experiencing it as no one else ever has or will, by taking our place under the wrath of God, by severing his relationship with the Father, being forsaken, that our relationship with him might be repaired.

We not only have peace, but "peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." This peace has brought us where we could never stand on our own: into God's grace, having been given access through faith. No matter how our human relationships may suffer, no matter how our standing in this world may shift, our relationship with God has now been made whole and we stand planted firmly in the grace of God. When depressed, we have access to God. When confused, we have access to God. When overwhelmed, we have access to God. When broke, we have access to God. When betrayed, we have access to God. In all these situations and more, we have access to God, and not only access to God, but access to the God who has given his Son that we may have access to him, not in his wrath, but in his grace, who uses the trials and temptations of this life, brought by Satan, for our own good, strengthening the muscles of our faith as they are stretched and tested through earthly trouble.

When the unbeliever is depressed, he is depressed, and at best is prescribed medication. When the unbeliever is confused, she is confused and at best must seek answers in herself or the empty platitudes of the world. When the unbeliever is overwhelmed, he is overwhelmed and at best can escape his troubles through drugs or alcohol. When the unbeliever is broke, she loses all she has, because all she has is material things. When the unbeliever is betrayed, he has nowhere to turn, because there is no one left to trust. Not so for us. No, we are not carried away to a trouble-filled and fluffy world of ease, but we are also never abandoned to the struggles we face. In our depression, we remember that God has pulled us out of depths before—out of hell itself—giving his Son for us to show how much he values us. When confused, we know that we don't have to know all the answers, but that God does and has promised to

work things for our benefit. When overwhelmed, we rejoice to know that there is no burden that Christ, who carried the sins of the world on his shoulders, cannot help us shoulder until its time has passed. In financial troubles, we know that we have treasures no moth or rust can destroy that no one can take and that our Lord himself walked this world with no home or wealth. When betrayed, we know that our Lord was betrayed as well, that he knows what we are feeling, and that he himself will never leave us nor forsake us. We can rejoice in suffering, because in suffering we have peace, not the peace that passes when conflict arises, but the peace that means the most precisely when conflict comes. We can rejoice in suffering, because, while suffering wears the unbeliever down, suffering builds the believer up, because we believe upon Christ, who is strongest in weakness, won his greatest victory in suffering, who uses our trials to teach us trust and build up the muscles of our faith.

7/5/05 – Romans 5:12-17

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned— [13] for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. [14] Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

[15] But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. [16] And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. [17] If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

Therefore is an important word. It tells us to look back, because what follows goes with what precedes. These verses explain the significance of Christ dying for the ungodly, of Christ reconciling lost sinners to the Father. These verses make it clear that Christ's death and resurrection are the single most significant events in human history. Before Christ came, the most significant event was the fall into sin, which brought death into the world. The lingering impact of that event was clear, because all died, whether slowly or quickly, after leaving the womb. The very same womb that brought forth life in essence brought forth death. But a better, greater, more significant event would come, as God promised, through the more blessed womb of a virgin.

Christ came. God became man. Did you stop to think about those two short sentences, those five words? Probably not, because we speak of these things as if they were old news or run of the mill events, but they are not. Christ came. God became man. Life was sown through death so that through dying we now enter life. Christ has done what no man can do: he has cured death. Christ has done what no man can do: he has restored paradise. Christ has done what no man can do by undoing what man has done. Christ has done what no man can do by becoming man.

Grace abounds. Undeserved love abounds. Grace and love abound because Jesus Christ was shown no grace and was stripped of his Father's love on Calvary. Christ drank the cup of God's wrath down to the dregs so that the cup of his grace may never run empty, always flowing with his blood as the widow of Zaraheth's oil jar once flowed with oil. Sin abounds, but grace abounds more. Death abounds, but life abounds more, for no longer do we Christians die, but rather sleep to awake at our Lord's return. The Seed of Adam was placed in the ground and died, as seeds do. But the Seed did not stay dead, but rather brought forth what Adam could not: a harvest of life. We too like him will die, but we will not die Adam's death. We will die the death of our Savior, the Seed, which is no death at all, but a new birth into life. Grace abounds.

7/6/05 - Romans 6:1-11

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? [2] By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? [3] Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? [4] We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

[5] For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. [6] We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. [7] For one who has died has been set free from sin. [8] Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. [9] We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. [10] For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. [11] So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

And the font sits in the corner. And the certificate is somewhere in the attic. And the date goes unremembered and uncelebrated. And the concept as a whole is just plain lost even though we claim to be Lutherans who cling to Word and sacrament. And what is it but word and water, the sacrament of baptism?

Why would God give us such a sacrament, one that kills and makes alive, drowns and saves at the same time? Why would God give us such a sacrament, one that is relived daily through the confession of our sins and God's forgiveness? Why? Because, as we heard on Sunday, what wretched men and women we are! How quickly don't we run back to sin and death, like a dog to its vomit and a sow to wallow in the mire! Why do we shower every day, or several times a day even? Because we get so dirty. Why must we return to our Baptism every day, pleading our union with Christ and his death through it, begging God's mercy? Because we get so dirty. Because we are in constant need of newness of life. Because, by grace, God gives it again, just as he first did in baptism, by grace and grace alone, God brought many of you to the font in the arms of parents, without asking you beforehand, without giving you any opportunity to run away, and he made you his just like that, and he has kept you that way to this day, even though, as your legs have gotten stronger they have so often raced you away from the cross, the font, the altar, the pulpit, the Bible.

Now what? Live in newness of life. Do not sin that grace may abound, but also do not become so foolish so as to despair as if grace did not abound, because it does. The gospel is not an excuse for sin; the gospel is the forgiveness of sins. The gospel is not merely pronounce a freedom from bondage, but a new freedom to serve as a slave to the Savior and not only to the Judge. Why serve? *"We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him."*

You have been crucified with Christ. You have died with Christ, and the death Christ died was a death to sin. Consider yourselves dead to sin. It is no longer your master. It is no longer the measure of your happiness. It is no longer the object of your addiction. It is no longer the center of your universe. It no longer sets your equilibrium; rather, it disturbs your balance and walk with Christ. Have you sinned? Be baptized. Drown your sin in those waters of salvation, confessing them to God, confessing them to your pastor, who speaks in God's stead, if they particularly trouble you. Drown your sin, but don't just drown your sin. Drown yourself as well, because that is what happens when the absolution is proclaimed: death. No, not a death like Adam's death, but a death with Christ to sin, and a death that, as we heard yesterday, brings life.

The font should never sit in the corner. In fact, you should never see or pass this fountain of grace thoughtlessly. The certificate should not be packed away in the attic; it should be more prominent than some trinket you bought at a garage sale or a painting of a barn. The date shouldn't go unremembered or uncelebrated, because it is your better birthday, the date you were born with Christ to new life rather than born with Adam to die. No, it should never be just a concept you learned in catechism class or heard

pastor wax eloquently about in bible class. Concepts are abstract. Water is concrete, and water with the Word hits the old Adam and the hardened sinner like concrete, knocking the old way of thinking out of their ears and proclaiming a new Life, a new Way, a real Truth. In short, it shouldn't be any of these things listed in the first paragraph, because it should be baptism, and baptism is never just a place or certificate or date or concept, baptism is death with Christ and life in his resurrection. Baptism is freedom from slavery and freedom to serve. Baptism is the voice that every morning cries into your ear: "*So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.*" Tune down all the distractions and hear it, because baptism is Christ and Christ is in your baptism.

7/7/05 - Romans 6:12-14

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. [13] Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. [14] For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

St. Paul has proclaimed sin's tyrannical rule in our bodies overthrown. The body of sin and death has been destroyed. Now what? Was destruction the end result? No, "*let not sin reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions.*" Before we were like a donkey, driven this way and that by the will of Satan and the passions of the flesh. Now, however, our cruel rider has been cast off, and a new Master, Jesus Christ, leads us. Not only have we been freed from sin and its horrible reign, but we have also been freed to serve, given a new will in moral matters, so that, through faith in Christ and empowered by Christ and in Christ we can now serve and love Christ in and through our neighbor. In this way, we can cease doing what is contrary to our renewal and begin doing what is in keeping with it.

St. Paul does not say this is easy. Oftentimes rebuilding after removing a tyrant takes as much or more time than removing him. Our mortal bodies have been ravaged by sin, our members knowing sin's pleasures, our minds knowing sin's thought processes. Thus, tearing down, building again, and then, and only then, providing service is no easy task. St. Paul tells us to present our "mortal" bodies. Our bodies are still subject to the passions of the flesh, and for this reason our resistance must be vigilant, constant, prayerful, and well fed. No one would hire a starving man to guard a priceless treasure, and Christ does not expect a starving man or woman to protect his priceless treasure, his instruments of righteousness, his living sacrifices. He feeds us with Word and sacrament, encouraging and instructing us for battle.

St. Paul gives us commands today in the first two verses of our lesson, but like a good preacher, like Christ himself, St. Paul doesn't end without a promise. "*For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.*" We are under grace. We are forgiven, and, when we are forgiven we are empowered. Sin win its battles, but it has no dominion, it has no reign, it has been thrown off the donkey. All we need to fear is that we—not God, but we—choose to let him get back in the saddle. In Christ, through Christ, with Christ we surely never will. "*Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.*" Christ has presented us as righteous to the Father, taking our sin and giving us his righteousness through his death and resurrection. Let us present ourselves as righteous as well, doing what the righteous do, going where our Master leads us.

7/11/05 - Romans 6:15-19

What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! [16] Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? [17] But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, [18] and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. [19] I am speaking in human terms, because of your

natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.

Here St. Paul answers the same objection again that he addressed earlier, that the gospel would give way to licentiousness, that is reckless abandon without fear of punishment. The gospel has been assailed in this way since the beginning. If you take away punishment, if you take away the necessity of works for salvation, people will just do whatever they want, so the argument goes. But such thinking misses one point: good works are necessary, just not for salvation. The Christian will necessarily do good works because they are commanded by God, because he belongs to God, because he is a new creation in Christ, because he is motivated to service by the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection in our place for our salvation. Good works are just not necessary for salvation, that is, they do not contribute to our standing before God, because Christ alone is responsible for the grace in which we now stand and the righteousness that is now declared to be ours. Yet, make no mistake about it, good works necessarily flow from faith, and where they do not flow, we must surely be aware of the risk to our salvation, because one cannot be a slave to sin and to God at the same time. The Holy Spirit cannot dwell in a temple to another god. Sin is still what it has always been, what it has been since Satan and his evil angels were cast from heaven. Sin is rebellion against God.

What does it mean to be a slave to God? A slave to God is at God's service. When? When God calls. But what about vacations? Slaves didn't get vacations. They ate with the master, traveled with the master, in short, lived with and for the master. Hence, they were slaves, not employees. Yet how often are we off the job so to speak? I always wonder what Jesus will find us doing when he returns. Will we reply that we were off the job, on vacation, taking a break? How can Jesus say, "Well done, good and faithful servant [a bondservant, slave]," to those who would rather offer their services for a French work week at best? You cannot be a slave to two men. You cannot serve God and the devil, or God and your belly, or God and your culture.

"But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations." You did not chose to be slaves. You were committed. You were committed to servitude to sin at birth. You were committed to servitude to God in baptism. You were committed, and thank God, crazy as that may sound. God knows you. He chose you. He searched you inside and out, like a Roman buying a foreign man captured in war. But he did not search you to expose your faults. He searched you so that, in Christ, he could repair your faults, and thus present you to himself holy and blameless in his sight through his Son. He has made you *"obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed."* What is this teaching? It is THE teaching of Scripture: the gospel. Through the gospel, as we have mentioned so frequently in these devotions, Christ has set you free to serve as slaves to righteousness. Why slavery? Because there is no stronger word for absolute and constant service. But make no mistake about it, this is meant to be a joyful service, the service of the free. It is not a service that is necessary for salvation, but rather a service that freely and necessarily flows from one's new gospel freedom in Christ.

God knows your natural limitations, that you still war against the sinful nature. That is why St. Paul uses such strong language as slavery to describe the service due God from the Christian. We ought not, as we battle temptation, fail to see the importance and that necessity of our service to righteousness. Yet God also commits us to the standard of teaching which made us a Christian in the first place, and which still proclaims his forgiveness to us when we repent of our insufficient servitude. We are to present ourselves *"as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification."* St. Paul is talking sanctification, godly living, which is produced by God alone in God's people. You are God's people. Do what God's people do. Draw comfort from the promises of the gospel. Give thanks through your service. Always be aware that, while good works do not contribute to our salvation, they can rob us of it, because we cannot serve two masters. That is why God has committed us to the gospel, that we may grow in faith in those promises and in service to the one who gives such wonderful gifts (not wages).

7/2/05 - Romans 6:20-23

When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. [21] But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death. [22] But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. [23] For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Apart from Christ, we were indeed free from righteousness, that is, it had no hold on us, because it was not applied to us in Christ. We were free to live in any sort of depravity that pleased us because the same wages were due us either way: death. Whether we sinned in small ways less perceptible to our neighbors or in big ways that got the whole block talking, apart from Christ we could expect the same fruit: spiritual and eternal death, and all the havoc that comes with it in this life. We had the freedom our society increasingly celebrates: freedom from moral standards, from the will of God, and even from shame. But sometimes the best way to judge something is by what it accomplishes, and what has such libertinism accomplished? Are we better off? Have you been better off at those times in your life when you ignored God and his will for you?

How much greater is the fruit of righteousness! How much better is the life in tune with God's will! After all, the Ten Commandments were given for our own benefit, that we might avoid the consequences of sin in this life and live in well-ordered and beneficial families, cultures, and nations. Yet St. Paul is not only talking about the temporal blessing that come from observing the law. He is primarily and most importantly talking about the eternal fruits of faith, the work of the gospel in our lives, that is, our sanctification, our growth in Christian living, which leads us to live this life in the light of the next, which reaches its culmination in eternal life. St. Paul is not talking primarily about what we give to God, but what God gives to us. *"The free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."* And this free gift garnishes wages that far exceed the pleasures of the flesh here and now, and this free gift brings no shame, as our previous sins have. St. Paul is talking about life in Christ Jesus our Lord, which is what sanctification is: life in Christ for Christ because of Christ.

Do you blush at how you have exercised your freedom in regard to righteousness and how you have allowed yourself to be enslaved by sin? Have you witnessed its horrible fruit? Have you been tattooed with its shame? Are you keenly aware of the wages it has brought for you? Well, then, how blessed you are, because another has eaten sin's bitter fruit for you. Another has been tattooed with its shame, branded with nails and thorns. Another has received your wages, and paid your debt in full. Another has done these things and has gifted the fruit of his obedience and his righteousness to you, and with it has come life, salvation, and a new freedom from sin, a new freedom to serve in regard to righteousness. Another has gifted you all these things, and, beyond that, even now allows you to reap the fruit of his obedience for you and in you in sanctification. Who has ever heard of such selflessness, of such philanthropy, of such love! Yes, the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord—life now in service to him who first served us and life forever with him in the new heavens and the new earth.

7/14/05 - Romans 7:1-6

Or do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives? [2] Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. [3] Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.

[4] Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God. [5] For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at

work in our members to bear fruit for death. [6] But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.

You have died. You may think: No, I haven't, I am right here. No, you have died. St. Paul is emphatic. You have died to the law through the body of Christ. What does that mean? Think back to chapter 6. St. Paul is writing a letter and, as we break it up into digestible pieces, we must not forget what we have previously studied. *"We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."* In baptism, we became a member of the body of Christ, and as a member of the body of Christ, we have become a partaker in what Christ's body has accomplished for his body, the Church. We have died with Christ to be freed from slavery to sin and the tyranny of death. We have died with him to receive forgiveness, life, and salvation, as we receive every time we eat his body in the Sacrament of the Altar. Because we have died, we are no longer bound to our overbearing and abusive husband, the law. We, the Church, Christ's body, have a new groom, the Lamb of God, and like the wise virgins we await his return, alert with oil in our lamps, sober-minded and free from any entanglements that might distract us. We are fellow members of his body, and so we wait together, belonging to each other, longing for the salvation of the community of God. We encourage each other, we spur each other on, we warn each other when the passions of the flesh sink their teeth into our still-weak flesh, we hasten to pull each other from the fruit that leads to death, which, may shine like the sun on the outside, but inside is rot and worms and maggots. We remain in Christ, partaking of him in his Supper, discerning his voice in the absolution and preached Word, hearing him in Scripture and speaking to him in prayer. And all the while, as former slaves keenly and painfully aware of the hardships and terrors of slavery to sin, which we have been freed from through Christ's death alone, which has become our death through water and the Word, we are always vigilant and determined never to be taken captive again, treasuring our new life in the Spirit. Your old husband is dead. Christ drowned him. Christ cast him to hell on Calvary and proclaimed him defeated when he descended to that abode of sin and all its servants. Your new husband is alive, as are you, through his resurrection, which you have become a participant in through baptism and which you yourself will fully know on the Day of our Lord. You have died. Yes, you have. You have died and now you live by the same life-giving and life-guiding Spirit that made you alive in Christ. Sin has no claim on you. Death is now but sleep for you. Satan's mouth has been stopped and his accusations stripped of their sting. Christ is your groom. You and all your fellow Christians have become one in his body, and in his body is life, freedom, forgiveness, deliverance, hope, salvation, and every good thing. You have died with Christ and you now live for him; and the same Spirit who brought you death will now empower you in new life.

7/14/05 - Romans 7:7-12

What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." [8] But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law, sin lies dead. [9] I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. [10] The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. [11] For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. [12] So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

A Jewish boy was not obligated to keep the Law independently until he was thirteen years of age, similar to the fact that a Roman Catholic child is not expected to keep the various fasts and laws until he reaches a certain age. Before St. Paul was placed under the commandment and thus made subject to the punishment of sin in the Jewish mind, he was not fully aware of sin. It was the commandment that made him take note of sin and its horrible consequences. It was the commandment not to covet that both exposed coveting as sin and through which sin seduced him to covet, because, after all, if you want someone to do something, make a rule against it. "Rules were made to be broken," I remember a rather

mild-mannered cousin of mine reciting in Billy Idol fashion on a camping trip back in the good old 80's, and the expression does express well the thinking of the sinful nature. In fact, we even expect a certain amount of rule breaking from our teens, don't we? It has become a rite of passage of sorts. That is the mentality St. Paul is talking about here. The commandment, through no fault of its own, is twisted into an inducement to sin by sin itself, working through our sinful flesh.

The law is good and, if we could keep it, would give life. But sin uses the law to its own end, and thus, rather than giving life, the law now always kills, declaring the punishment the sinner receives, which is eternal death. Even the senior in college begins to realize the temporal consequences of law-breaking, how it affects the body and one's success in the real world. How much more serious are the damages done to any relationship to the Lawgiver. The law is not sin, but we sin against the law, and the law can only give life to those who keep it perfectly. The law thus leaves us in death, the wages of sin. But St. Paul is going somewhere with all this. There is something that can do what the law cannot, that is, give life. There is the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ, who fulfilled the law and now gives us his holiness, righteousness and goodness, and creates in us the desire to keep the law, not for fear of punishment, but in love for our Savior God. Thus, this chapter, which details our struggle with sin and our lost condition under it will appropriately end: *"Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"* And, as we examine ourselves according to the law, and according to each commandment, how can we cry out with any other words. *"Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"*

7/20/05 - Romans 7:13-20

Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. [14] For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. [15] I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. [16] Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. [17] So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. [18] For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. [19] For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. [20] Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

St. Paul gets personal here. This is his experience. St. Paul knows what is right. St. Paul will what is right. St. Paul's new man delights in what is right. Yet St. Paul's sinful nature, inherent in all of us, gives birth to actions that contradict his will and intention. Is St. Paul innocent? Know, he rightly confesses and is absolved as all of us do. He is, however, a Christian, which means that he is at the same time a sinner and a saint. Thus, the Christian Church is a hospital for sinners and not merely a showroom for saints. Why do we show up on Sunday? For treatment. Through baptism, absolution, the Lord's Supper, and the preached and read Word our sinful nature is poisoned, that and our new man is fed and nourished. *"For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out."* And anyone who thinks that this does not apply to him or her as well, who thinks he or she has overcome sin, stands in a dangerous, precarious, and fatal position, because the sick patient who denies his sickness will not seek treatment. Examine your life. I am sure that every day, week, month, and year, has its share of battles with the flesh and losses, sometimes big and sometimes small, that is, unless we should be ringing the church bells every time you pass. What do we do at those times? Do we despair? Do we stop caring? No, we go to the hospital. We poison the sinner and feed the saint. Lest anyone think St. Paul is despairing here, remember the words that follow: *"Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? [25] Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin."* Christ has done what we cannot: he kept the law according to his intentions and his actions. Christ has done what we cannot: he has overcome death by overcoming sin. Christ has done what we cannot: he has opened hospitals to treat those who previously were untreatable. Come to Christ, for in Christ the sin that dwells in you is drowned and the saint born in you through the gospel is washed and emboldened.

7/21/05 - Romans 8:1-8 (ESV)

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. [2] For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. [3] For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, [4] in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. [5] For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. [6] To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. [7] For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. [8] Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

That is the scary thing about sermons that don't mention Jesus. That is the scary thing about hymns or songs that don't mention the cross, the resurrection, or justification. That is the scary thing about services that preach the law but not the gospel. What is the scary thing? *"By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, [4] in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."* Preaching the law without the gospel can only send out failures and produce despair or self-righteousness. The man or woman fed a steady diet of law without Christ and his saving work will either recognize their inability to fulfill the law and despair or assume they are fulfilling the law and become self-righteous, and the self-righteous are definitely harder to deal with than the despairing, because the self-righteous feel little need for talk of a Savior.

"For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot." Islam seeks to curb the flesh. Hinduism seeks to curb the flesh. Judaism seeks to curb the flesh. Christless Christianity seeks to curb the flesh, but it is not the job of the Christian Church merely to curb the flesh, and that is what makes it different from all other religions, and that alone is what makes it relevant. Christianity declares the fulfillment of the law and freedom from the flesh. It turns the curb into a guide, the threat into a thank you. How? Through faith in Christ, in and from whom we receive new minds set on the Spirit. *"For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace."*

Must we preach the law? Yes, most definitely. We preach it as a curb, to keep sin from gross outbreaks. We preach it as a mirror, to show the sinner his or her sin, to show the sinner his or her need for the Savior from sin. And, to Christians only, we preach it as a guide, filling the mind of the Spirit with ways to serve the God of redemption and new life, for the mind of the Spirit, unlike the unregenerate mind of the flesh, keeps the law, not to merit things, earn praise, or avoid hell, but to express its new ownership by the Spirit, who creates and dwells in us by faith and through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Sermons that don't mention Jesus are popular, because the world can hear them and not be offended, because we like to be told how to get things done on our own, but we cannot fulfill the law on our own. Hymns or songs that don't mention the cross, the resurrection, or justification are popular, because the focus on me, and who doesn't like singing about me and praising me, but there is only flesh in me, while in Christ and his saving work there is the Spirit. Services that preach the law and not the gospel are popular, because everybody likes to hear pastor or someone else really stick it to that guy (and the sinner is always that other guy, isn't he), and because everybody wants some rules that set them apart from their neighbor, but the law sets no one apart from his or her neighbor, because it condemns them both alike and leaves them both in the condemnation of the flesh. We proclaim Christ, because it is in Christ that we have what we could otherwise never have: freedom from sin and death, peace with God, and an opportunity to serve freely and not to avoid punishment or receive praise. St. Paul says it clearly, and don't forget it next time you listen to a sermon, sing a hymn, or attend a service: *"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. [2] For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in*

Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. [3] For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, [4] in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”