

Pastor Johnston's Email Devotions

8/3/04 - Galatians 6:7-10

(Our lessons follow the daily lectionary for the church year)

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

Paul ends his epistle to the Galatians with a few “life-application” chapters. The first four chapters had dealt primarily with doctrine, with THE DOCTRINE, with the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. After admonishing the Galatians for placing their trust in human works and repeatedly reminding them that Christians are saved by grace alone through the merits of Jesus Christ, Paul goes on now to encourage the Galatians to live that faith.

God cannot be mocked. God does not fall for disguises. God sees the heart. He sees every hour of every day, every day of the week. He is not a “Sunday morning” God who sees our smiling faces in church and then tunes out for the rest of the week. He cannot be mocked. We are not called by St. Paul to simply “know the faith,” but to “live the faith.” This is no easy task.

St. Paul says that a man reaps what he sows. How have we sown? Have we sown to please the Spirit or to please the sinful nature? Most of us, dare I say all of us, would have to say both. This side of eternity we are and shall remain sinner-saints. Our flesh does daily battle with the New Man that now dwells in us. We do our best to drown our old Adam, the sinful nature, but it is no easy task. So what do we do?

Before a farmer plants seed, he has to make preparations. He prepares the soil, procures the seed, and pay careful attention to the weather. Our spiritual sowing is no different. Prepare the soil. Water it daily with your Baptism. Fertilize it with Christ's Body and Blood. Till it with His Word. Make it a hospitable home for the Spirit whom you wish to please with your sowing. Procure the Seed—the Seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You know where to find Him. He is in your home, maybe on the dresser, by your bed, or on the coffee table. He is in God's house. He is wherever two or three gather in His name. As we heard last week in our epistle lesson, all we do, and all St. Paul did, is in and through the Seed, Jesus Christ. Pay careful attention to the weather. When things are sunny and clear, do not sit around content and forget your responsibilities—after all, sunny and clear is a great day for sowing—but thank God for these good days and use them to grow in faith and increase in good works. When overcast skies appear, prepare for the storm by taking shelter in the Word, the mighty fortress of all who call on God. And when it rains and pours, know that God's promise is still there, and that His rainbow of mercy is never far behind the showers.

And do you know what the most amazing part of all this is? When we present our harvest to God, He rewards us even though the harvest was His in the first place. What grace! And those weeds we bring—weeds of sin and doubt—He plucks them Himself, throws them into the fire, and replaces them with the fruit of Christ's labor, eternal salvation through the forgiveness of our sins. What mercy!

My friends, sow to please the Spirit out of thankfulness to your gracious God. Cast off your sinful nature, and when it does produce its thorns and weeds, pluck them from the harvest field through repentance and contrition, and return to the source of all your produce, the Seed, your Savior Jesus Christ.

8/4/04 – James 2:14-17

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Many theologians, usually Roman Catholic, will attempt to claim that St. Paul and St. James are opposed to one another. St. Paul seems to preach grace and St. James preaches law. Are they right?

Remember our lesson from yesterday? After four chapters of laying the foundation of salvation by grace, through faith, through the merits of Jesus Christ, St. Paul also exhorted the Galatians to good works. These good works, however, are done, “in view of God’s mercy” (Romans 12:1). Like a thief trying to outrun the cops and his imminent jail sentence, frantically looking in his rear view mirror at his pursuers for motivation to keep speeding up and driving away, we as Christians are constantly looking in the rear view mirror for motivation, not to run away from God, but to serve Him with our entire lives. Works flow from faith. Faith without works is dead.

Have you ever had a dead tree in your back yard? How could you tell? Did it fall over? Probably not. Its branches died. If you had watched closely, you could have probably figured out it was dying a long time earlier and done something about it. We cannot see faith, but we can see works. Are your branches dying, that is, are your works giving evidence that your faith is running out of life? Will you wait until it is too late, or will you do something about it? Sure, when your faith dies, you won’t fall over and cease to exist in this world—neither does the dead tree, at least for a while—but you will be dead spiritually, and you will be cut off from Christ, the True Vine, from whom every spiritual branch draws life, and you will be ready to be cast in the fire, as all dead wood is.

Reexamine your life. What are your fruits saying about the tree from which they grew? Be honest, because no gardener can save a tree unless she is certain about its condition. Has your connection to the Vine weakened? Let Him repair it. Turn to Him in Word and Sacrament, and He will deepen your roots and increase your fruits! St. Paul does not disagree with St. James. St. James is talking to Christians. Notice how St. James opens his letter. After addressing his recipients, Jewish Christians, as the twelve tribes, he then says, “know that the testing of your FAITH develops perseverance.” He is writing to believers who are in danger of losing faith due to persecution, spiritual laxity, favoritism, etc. St. Paul’s foundation, JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH, has been laid, and now St. James is exhorting them to live their faith, just as St. Paul did yesterday.

My friends, my brothers and sisters, fellow branches on the vine, live your faith. Take care of its roots, always reliving your Baptism through repentance. Strengthen its branches, spurred on by the Word. Bear fruit that resembles your faith; bear fruit that is alive and well!

8/5/04 – 1 Corinthians 12:12-26

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body-- whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free-- and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease

to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

You know one thing a new pastor learns quickly? Churches are manic-depressive. Those of you who know someone who has suffered from this condition or have suffered from it yourself, know what I am talking about. It is a disorder that will take a person from the highest of highs to the lowest of lows in no time flat. We at Christ as part of one Body in Him, made one through our one Baptism, are constantly experiencing highs and lows. In the past few weeks I have watched our members' loved ones pass from this life. I have watched members experience unexpected health problems. I have watched and sat with those ready to leave this life, eagerly awaiting the Savior's call, "My servant, come home!" I have baptized a child, watching the Holy Spirit turn a sinner into a saint in one amazing bath of grace. I have had the privilege of presiding at the marriage of a couple now enthusiastically beginning a new life together in the Lord as husband and wife. I have experienced ups and downs, as the congregation has experienced ups and downs. I have felt sorrow, joy, pain, confusion, surprise, and an always intimate companionship in faith with those involved. As a member of the Body of Christ, manifested here at Christ Lutheran in those who gather around Him in Word and Sacrament, I have experienced the highest of highs and the lowest of lows in no time flat. And you know what? I thank God for it.

Many of the men and women I visit are tempted to think they have become the less presentable parts of the body, which many incorrectly view as unimportant. They are old, or they are weak, or they are not the person they used to be; but they are not the person they used to be for one very important reason: God wanted to use them in a new way, to accomplish something new through them. One day I too will lie in a hospital bed, or I will grieve the unexpected loss of a loved one, or I will await my Savior's gracious call for me to come home, and so I watch and learn from those in that position now. I learn from these heroes of faith, who face their trials with the courage only God gives and trust in this Mighty Fortress alone. I am taught by those who hide themselves in their Baptism, in God's Word, in the Body and Blood of Christ that God allows these sinful hands and legs to bring them—oh is Jesus gracious and merciful, to use even me, your Pastor, wretched though I am. I draw strength from my fellow members whose role has changed, but not their value to the Body. They are indispensable to me, and I pray I prove indispensable to them. After all, that is what St. Paul is talking about.

Brothers and sisters, fellow members of the Body of Christ, give thanks continually to God for your fellow members here at Christ. Be glad that they are what you are not, and you are what they are not, because together, you make the Body of Christ complete. Rejoice with each

other. Suffer with each other. But most importantly, live with each other, just as you commune with each other, kneeling before God, side by side, assured of His forgiveness.

8/6/05 - Philippians 1:6-11

...being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ-- to the glory and praise of God.

Want to know what is most amazing about Paul's prison epistles? They are often the most joyous and upbeat of his writings. And you do know why they are called his prison epistles, don't you? You guessed it; he was in prison. And as he is sitting in prison, what is he doing? He is spurring on the troops, rejoicing in the fruits of their faith and in the spread of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

What are we like on bad days? Hopefully, most of you will never experience the mess I am first thing in the morning. How would we be if we were in prison, and not just any prison, but a Roman prison? Rome didn't have a prison system like our own. You didn't do a few years and then get out. Prison was a waiting room for the real punishment, which was never pleasant and rarely left the prisoner alive (at best the prisoner left seriously scarred or dismembered in some way or another). And yet Paul rejoices! In fact, this letter is often called the "Epistle of Joy." Why? Because he shares in God's grace with them. It is the inextinguishable joy of faith.

Paul is praying for you here. You, like the Philippians, are his spiritual children. His preaching of the gospel has lived on throughout history in his letters and his gospel has continued to bear fruit. Are you giving his prayer hands, or are you letting it fall on deaf ears? As is usually the answer to my questions like these, its probably a little of both.

Today is a new day. Seek to bring Paul's prayer to fruition in your lives. Let your "love abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight." Study the Word. Faithfully hear it preached. Meditate on it. Grow in your ability to discern what is best. Compare much of what the world calls "spirituality" with the knowledge and depth of insight you gain. What has God promised? Trust in that. In this way, you will remain pure and blameless until the day of the Lord, because you will remain in Christ, daily refreshed in Word and Sacrament, daily forgiven and washed in grace, and daily dressed in the blameless, spotless gown of the Lamb who first dressed you in perfection in your Baptism.

Be "filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ." But which comes "through Jesus Christ," the righteousness or the fruit? Trick question. The answer is both. Read Paul's prison epistles (Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philippians) and count the number of times the apostle says "in Christ." Everything we are as Christians is "in Christ." Everything we do as Christians is "in Christ." Remain in Christ. Don't step outside of him through sin. And when you do, quickly return through repentance. Don't let repeated and deliberate sin choke the fruit of your righteousness at its roots, that is, at your faith in Jesus Christ. You may not realize it, but every sin is a yank on those roots, and unless confessed and abandoned, those roots are continually pulled up bit by bit.

As we will hear in the second lesson this Sunday, in another of the prison epistles, “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in Him, rooted and built up in Him.” Pretty good advice from one pretty cheerful prisoner. By Christ’s death and resurrection, you are pure and blameless. Paul’s prayer is being answered. Keep giving that prayer hands. Stay in Word and Sacrament, always growing in depth of insight, and always increasing in the fruits that sprout from the Righteous One who lives in you; and “he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” You can count on that.

8/9/04 – *Proverbs 16:8,9*

Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice. In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.

This coming Sunday, the Holy Gospel will focus our attention on where our treasures lie and the return those treasures produce. Today, Proverbs does the same. So we ask the question, “Where are my treasures?” And the answer? Only you know that.

We live in a society of surplus, where even most poverty would be considered prosperity elsewhere around the globe. We live long lives, with some exceptions. We can therefore plan for our futures. Most of us have our five year, ten year, and umpteen year plans. Even school children plan, selecting high schools or colleges, and planning extracurriculars and social events. Because we have surplus, and because we have the blessing of a somewhat plan-able lifestyle, we can be tempted to treasure the wrong things. As they say, “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” and, for that reason, almost anything can become our treasure. In fact, we can become so consumed by our treasures, whatever they might be, that we begin to cheat our way into possessing them. Maybe we cheat our family of the time they deserve because we think we need what we want (a nicer car, house, clothes, etc.). Maybe we cut corners at work and do the bare minimum so we can get more done and look better. Maybe we cheat the guy buying our old car, assuring him there are no problems when there are. Maybe we only cheat big corporations, as if those corporations aren’t made up of individuals just like us, dependent on the paycheck that corporation’s profit supplies. Worst of all, maybe we cheat God, too busy chasing after the treasures of this life to meditate on His Word, or gather around His altar. Before we know it, much gain with injustice is dominating the battle against a little with righteousness.

How many times do we hear on the news of a stray bullet killing some poor man or woman driving down the road, or a drunk driver plowing into an innocent passerby, or a debilitating sickness striking an otherwise healthy person? What good did plans and treasures do for those people? Does much gain profit them now? What is the return on the investment? Nothing. Live each day like it is your last, because it could well be. Plan for the future by investing in the best treasure of all, one that doesn’t even require a payment, because payment has already been made. Yes, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Set your eyes on the LORD’s beautiful plan for you, a plan ends in eternity. While no deposits are necessary, make withdrawals frequently from God’s account, storing up His grace, mercy, and forgiveness; and then spread the wealth around. Unlike the world’s wealth, God’s grace will never rust, tear, get stained, or break down. Now that’s a treasure! And those other treasures? Use them the same way God used His greatest treasure, Jesus Christ. Use them for the benefit of others.

8/10/04 – Luke 16:10-13

“Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”

Notice Jesus does not say we cannot have both God and money, but that we cannot serve both God and Money. Having money is having a means to an end. Money is thus serving you, aiding you in paying bills, doing things with your family, and funding the preaching of the gospel. The problem is when the roles are reversed; when you stop working to pay the bills, do things with your family, and fund the preaching of the gospel, and instead start to work for money. Then money becomes Money, an ugly, demanding, unrelentless, and unforgiving false god who will always require more and more service. And like the only True God, money is also a jealous God. Money is a god that demands jealousy and produces jealousy, because when you are working for Money, and not to pay the bills, do things with your family, and fund the gospel, you can never be satisfied. There is never enough Money.

How have you handled that which you have? Have you been trustworthy? Where are your assets? How have you invested? Have you worked for more than you need to? Have you withdrawn from the bank of family time to deposit in Bank One, or some other institution? The answer to these questions will probably be similar to how you answered the questions we asked yesterday. If you cannot handle these lesser, material blessings, how will you manage your spiritual blessings as well? If God and Money compete, and you are siding with money, soon God will be absorbed into Money and you will have not two gods, but one, and it will not be the LORD. God will become for you the answer man. “I need this now God.” “I’ll call on you when I need you to get me out of a tight spot, God.” “Please let me have this new toy I want, God.” “Please let this or that trifling thing happen for me, God.” You see, God becomes Money, a means to the end, a convenient benefactor expected to keep quiet, rather than the Be All and End All Himself.

It is not wrong to ask God for things, but what you ask for is often telling. If you are so consumed with monetary concerns, how can you ask for the greater gifts: grace, mercy, faith, love, etc.? In so doing, you have proven unworthy of a very little and will most likely be dishonest if given more. Yesterday we talked about treasures. Find your treasure in the right place. Find it in what is little in the world’s eyes, but great in God’s: a crucified Jew, who comes to you by means of water, bread and wine, and the words of a book and His called servants. Then the rest will follow. Then Money will go back to being money, and god will be God, because you will serve Him, and money will serve you.

8/11/04 – James 3:13-18

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and

good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

You know when “doing” theology is the easiest? In the classroom, when it is just theory and hypotheticals. In the classroom, an important part of theology is missing: the reality. This is not to say that classroom theology is not real theology, but it is to say that theology is rooted in God and His relationship with man, and this relationship is studied and applied best in real life. That’s why, when we pastors leave the Seminary and get to the parish, we see if wisdom has taken hold, or if we’ve merely become “scholars.”

We Lutherans, especially Wisconsin Synod Lutherans, are some of the most knowledgeable Christians there are. Compared with many church bodies, we have an engrained awareness of what our Synod confesses as the truth of Scripture. Our children are catechized from little on. Our pastors have the best training of any church body in the world. We are knowledgeable, but are we wise? How does one tell? Wisdom translates into our practice (what we do), confession (what we say), and tact (how we say it). Wisdom does not show itself in who succeeds the most numerically, monetarily, or superficially, but in who concretizes the spiritual (their faith, rooted in knowledge) in the material (their manner of life). This wisdom come from Wisdom Himself, the Logos, who came down from heaven and displayed true wisdom for all to see. The wisdom that comes from heave, like the Wisdom that came from heaven, “is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.”

How do we attain this wisdom? By attaining the Wisdom in Word and Sacrament. When Wisdom lives in you by faith, He will also live through you, leading you “to will and to do” (Philippians 2:13). Then you can be the peacemaker this world always needs, at work, at home, and in the congregation, because you will be wise. “Me” will be swallowed in “we.” Selfish ambition will give way to selfless service; and that bitter envy will be replaced with the sweet taste of mercy, mercy received from God and mercy shown to others.

8/12/04 – 1 Timothy 4:12-16

Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you. Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

I am not making this one up. This actually is the daily devotion from the lectionary. It also just happens to apply really well to your new, young pastor. But don't worry, the 1,500 times I have heard, “Aren't you young to be a pastor” and the time the Fed Ex guy told me I have to be 18 to sign for a package haven't bothered me, its just encouragement for me to set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love and in purity. I pray that example has been and will be a good one, and when I fail to be a good example, watch me be the best example of all by where I choose to go. Watch me kneel to take my Savior's Body and Blood for the forgiveness of my sins. Watch me receive absolution. Watch me return to my Baptism. Watch me look to the Word; and then do the same yourselves. I will not be perfect, but I pray to be a good example, both in success and in failure, when I stand, and when I get back up after a fall. This sin-and-grace life I

live, this confession followed by absolution, is what I plan to preach and teach as well, because it is what I see and learn as I read Scripture, as I look at the similar lives Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Peter, Paul, etc—lives of sin and grace, confession followed by absolution, lives not of perfection, but of “progress,” as St. Paul tells St. Timothy.

I am an unworthy man. I have dirty hands and a dirty mouth, soiled by sin. Jesus Christ, however, is a Man worthy of all praise and thanks, honor and glory, as we proclaim in our Communion services. He has called me, washed my mouth and hands, and put the proclamation of His Word and the administration of His Sacraments in their care. Brothers and sisters, pray for me, that I may watch my life and doctrine closely, that I may persevere in them, in order that you may be saved by my message, both in word and deed, and that we all who are now passengers in this ark that is the Church may one day arrive together on the shores of eternity, leaving the flood of sin, and worry, and suffering behind forever.

Friends, you can look down on me, for when I fall, I will need you to look down to lift me up with God’s Word. But do not look down on the Me, for whom I work, and by whom I am called. When I act as a called servant of Christ and by His authority, I am neither young nor old—I am your pastor, and that’s all that matters. I will watch my life and doctrine closely. You can do the same. Amen.

8/13/04 – Matthew 10:16-23

I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. "Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

We American fans of the “old tyme religion” often mistake the gospel with pop psychology. If I am or become a Christian, my life will be peaceful and the divisions in it will decrease. Unfortunately, oftentimes the opposite is true. The gospel, because it is the message of Christ, a stumbling block, brings trial, temptation, and division. Family members may mock our confession of the truth. Friends may joke about our lifestyle. Our “religion” may be characterized and backwards, outdated, and bigoted. Our real love, love rooted in a concern for the eternal welfare of souls, is often misconstrued as hatred and intolerance. Even our own children rebel against our perceived lack of sophistication, since none of their friends “have” to go to church or get in trouble for the same things. No, the gospel is not a quick fix to a trouble life, but oftentimes a highway to one.

What do we do when these differences, divisions and disagreements rear their ugly head? We stay on guard. We pay attention to what we see the danger that lurks in untruths and sinful behavior. Lies and sins are more contagious than the flu, so we need to stay at a safe distance. A Hitler’s goons used to say, “Tell the same lie enough times, and they’ll believe it.” We also speak the truth in love when we face these situations. Do not worry about the words you will say, simply stay in the Word, and the Word will speak through you. Trust me, I have been in enough

situations to marvel at the words God will give you when you have no clue what to say. And sometimes, silence may be the best answer of all.

We do not look for persecution and hardship, but when it comes, we accept it, and act appropriately, “as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” The American church has not historically been a persecuted church. That may soon change, if trends continue. We accept that and stand firm on the only foundation that does not give way: Jesus Christ in Word and Sacrament. Is this easy? No. Will we fail at times? Undoubtedly. What will we do then? Get back on the foundation, and stand firm again. And know that when you suffer, it is not so much you the world hates, as Him who lives in you. They tried to get rid of Him 2,000 years ago, and they will not stop trying until He comes again. Needless to say, they will fail. Know that when you suffer, especially for your faith, He suffers in and with you. Know that when you suffer, He suffered in the same way and knows what you are feeling and thinking. Know that when you suffer, you are joined to His sufferings in a very real and amazing way. As St. Paul said in our service two weeks ago, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions... (Colossians 1:24). We are Christ’s body, and He is our head. The head always knows what the body is doing. It sends the orders. It registers the pain. It counts the cost. Christ is our Head. He registers your pain. He knows the cost. And He will never give you more than you can bear. Let me close with St. Paul’s encouragement to the Corinthians, “No temptation has overtaken you besides what is common to man. God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted beyond what your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

8/16/04 – 1 Timothy 2:1-7

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men--the testimony given in its proper time. And for this purpose I was appointed a herald and an apostle—I am telling the truth, I am not lying—and a teacher of the true faith to the Gentiles.

You ever dread the Prayer of the Church. You know, the part of the service where we pray responsively for the government, for the sick, for teachers and students, for pastors and missionaries, for the unchurched, etc. It can seem long and boring at times, usually because we forget that we are praying for individuals, for faces, for real life situations. It is not just words on a page in which we bury a face, but real people with real needs and with real concerns. Some of these prayers, while also good for those we pray for, also seek benefit for ourselves. A good ruler means a better life. A more orderly society means a better one in which to spread the Gospel and worship. Good teachers means students more apt at reading and digesting the Scriptures. Faithful pastors means a well-fed flock, rich in grace and mercy. Yes, when the Church prays, we all win. As Martin Luther once said, echoing the early church’s sentiments, “Our prayer and the prayer of all God-fearing people in the world do the work. Otherwise, if they were to cease, God have mercy on the world!” And another time, “Whatever good may be done is done and brought about by prayer, which alone is the omnipotent empress. In human affairs we accomplish everything through prayer. What has been properly arranged we keep in order, what has gone amiss we change and improve, what cannot be changed and improved we bear, overcoming all the trouble

and sustaining all the good by prayer. Against force there is no help but prayer alone.” Consider the great things our prayer is doing when we gather together to call on God, and the Prayer of the Church will never be boring again!

In this talk about prayer, however, let us not forget the Man who made prayer possible: Jesus Christ, who wants all men to be saved. Friends, pray hard, but then give your prayer hands, working to accomplish what you have asked God to do. God does not ask us simply to ask, but to seek and knock. We don't simply beg God to do something, but ask Him to use us in doing it. On one thing God always uses us in doing, is sharing His Word. I have been called to serve you as a herald, like St. Paul, but in a narrower scope. I am here to teach you the true faith. But I cannot fill the pews on Sunday. You can. You are the salt in the world. When I come to work, I sit in my office at church. When you go to work, you are surrounded by men and women whom God wants to be saved, because He wants ALL to be saved. Just as you put faces to your prayer, remembering we are praying for real people, put faces to God's desire for the salvation of all people. See those faces all around you. Tell them about the Man who makes your prayer possible, the God-Man who reconciled you to your Heavenly Father. Invite them to meet your herald, whom you have called, along with your brothers and sisters here at Christ, to preach and teach the true faith. Bring them to the knowledge and truth in which you also hope to always grow. Trust that the Holy Spirit is always present when His Word is and that He will accomplish something through it, whether now or later. Maybe that Word will lead to the hardening of faith, if it is rejected; but maybe it will lead to the creation and strengthening of faith, and all because you put a face to your prayer and God's desire for the salvation of all people! And this, “this is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”

8/17/04 – Nehemiah 4:1-15

When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, "What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble-- burned as they are?" Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, "What they are building-- if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!" Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders. So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart. But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the men of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat. Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall." Also our enemies said, "Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work." Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us." Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows. After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the

Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes."

This Sunday's sermon will focus our attention on God's promise. I pray every service I preside at here at Christ will do the same. As Lutheran Christians, we are always especially focused on God's promise, no matter what the world or our sinful natures may say about the prospects of His promises coming true. When sin overwhelms us, when guilt plunges us into depression, when betrayal closes our hearts to anyone outside of us, when doubt sows its seeds in our lives, when temptation batters at the gates of our soul like the siege work of the Babylonians, when frustration paints the world a drab grey, when anything and everything that we've feared could one day go wrong does, we Lutheran Christians look to God's promise, and nothing else, and hope, and trust, and pray that God, who cannot lie by His very nature, will do what He has said will be done. I know that that was a long sentence, but sometimes only a long sentence, read a few times, can express the way real life often is.

Nehemiah and his fellow Jews were undertaking a project that no one thought could succeed. Even they themselves at times wondered if they had returned to the land of God's PROMISE only to be killed. Nearby villages and nations plotted against them, praying to their false gods for Judah's demise, and God's promise of a Savior with it. Jews who had become too comfortable in exile snickered at the idealistic dreams of these men and women bound for failure. To the world around them, these faithful men and women were failures, dreamers, simpletons, and as good as dead. Fortunately, however, there was one Person who saw something entirely different when He looked at them: God. Nehemiah reminded his brothers and sisters in the faith of just that.

Things have not changed much since the time of our lesson. God's flock is still small and simple in the eyes of the world. It is often mocked as foolish and idealistic. The tasks it is determined to carry out according to God's promise are often dismissed as impossible and a waste of time and money. The sins of its members are often sensationalized, promulgated, and manipulated to discredit them and, more importantly, to dismiss their message. Even brothers and sisters within the flock attack and demean each other at times, forgetting the times they themselves have fallen and weighing their own sins against others' in the broken scales of arrogance, hypocrisy, and pride. Yes, God's flock is anything but glorious in this world's eyes, and often even in its own eyes. Fortunately, however, there is one Person who sees something entirely different when He looks at them: God. When the Father looks at His flock, He sees His Son, who lived for and now lives in these simple, foolish, idealistic dreamers, that is, in you and me. Let me, like Nehemiah, remind you of that.

Though our walls may often seem weak and ready to crumble, though the holes in our foundation are often gaping and in need of immediate repair, let us post our fellow members at the weak spots and get to work. Let us keep the lies of the world from doing damage. Let us keep the doubts within from taking root in the cracks. Let us fight for our brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, remembering the Lord and teaching them the truth of His Word. And before we know it, by God's grace, the mockery of the world will turn to anger as they see the church accomplishing what no one for the last two thousand years thought could be done: surviving in a world that desperately wants us to just go away. We, the Christian Church, began with a simple, crucified carpenter. We grew through the work of fishermen, of Galilean hillbillies. We were preserved by a German monk who lived in a town known for its dreariness and unimportance. We are here today as whoever and whatever we are. We're not an impressive bunch to those around us, but to our God, we are the apple of His eye, and the recipients of His promise. And

God's promise, that is a promise that can never be broken. So, "Don't be afraid. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome."

8/18/04 – 1 Peter 2:13-16

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God.

Freedom is an oft-misunderstood concept in modern America. Freedom has become, for many, equated with license, which means "intentional deviation from the rule." Those who advocate a measure of restraint or condemn irresponsible behavior are labeled as "restricting" and unenlightened. They are, in the eyes of many, the opposite of free.

When the Bible speaks of freedom, it does not speak of the freedom we mentioned above. Biblical freedom does not mean servitude to "deviation from the rule." Biblical freedom is anything but libertinism. The Christian realizes that those who live most "freely" in the world are not free at all, but are subjects of sin and the devil. Webster's defines freedom as "exemption from external control." It is only in Baptism that one can truly be exempted from external control and become a child of God. Apart from God's grace, no one is free. All are subject to sin. All serve sin. All are subject to death. All will someday bow to death. Only God can break these chains of servitude.

So what is Christian freedom? Christian freedom is the ability to serve God out of thankfulness and gratitude for the gift of His Son. Christian freedom is the ability to freely choose to follow the Word that is "a lamp to our feet and a light for our path." Christian freedom is the ability to wake up in the morning and rise above the temptations and desires that still plague our sinful flesh and to work for someone Greater than us. Christian freedom is the ability to run to Word and Sacrament for mercy when the devil and sin again try to stake their claims on our bodies and souls. Christian freedom is the opposite of license; it is willful submission to that which is best for others, for our Lord, and for us. It is the free and certain recognition that there is a better way to be traveled, and, compelled by God's grace, it is the way we walk. And in so walking, in being free and living free, we silence the ignorant talk of foolish men who would love to find grounds to accuse us, to place us back in the chains of depravity, and to dismiss our message.

Look at the "freedom" of so many today. Where does it leave them? In addiction, with disease, depressed, broken, and hopeless. You too were subject to those chains, but you have been set free. Free to serve as Christ served you. Free to love as Christ loved you. Free to teach as Christ taught you. Free to be what you are: God's child. Live as free men and women. Live as servants of God.

8/19/04 – Romans 13:1-7

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

Although we may not always acknowledge it, one of the great gifts that God has given us is government. We have roads to travel in relative safety. We have emergency services. We have a military to protect our freedom. We have codified rights of which the majority of the world can only dream. If we are injured, we have the help of Social Security. We are or were once schooled, either by, or with the assistance of the state. We have measures in place to guard our health and prevent the outbreak of disease, to the extent that is possible. We have prisons to keep those who would rob or kill us off the streets. Are all of these systems and measures always perfect? No, but imagine what life would be like without them.

When we pay our taxes, it is easy to do so grudgingly as we focus on all the things that could be better. It is easy to get caught up imagining what we could do if we kept the money for ourselves. It is easy to poke fun at those in office and even slander their person, but we must always remember, whether or not we agree with all their policies and like their personalities, they are God's representatives by virtue of their office, and we may only disobey them when they command us to disobey God. And yes, this even applies to how fast we drive home today (sorry, but it's true). It is not wrong to criticize policy. It is not wrong to be concerned with irresponsible behavior and poor character. It is wrong, however, to speak of and act toward our elected officials as if the office they hold were not an office established by God. As St. Paul reminds us, respect for the government is respect for God, who gave His Son into the hands of Rome to be crucified in shame. It is service to our Savior, who submitted to policies and decisions that were anything but favorable to Him.

We will talk more about Church and State relations, Lord willing, on the fourth Saturday of September (the 28th), if there is interest in having a one-day presentation on the topic (9:30-noon). As our country's religious makeup and moral views shift, it is an important issue to consider. Please consider attending and invite others. If we as Christians are going to provide a strong witness in these changing times, we need to know how to deal with the other kingdom, that is, the government.

8/20/04 - Jeremiah 18:1-6

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message." So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. Then the word of

the LORD came to me: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the LORD. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.

There are passages in Scripture, many passages, that are both law and gospel at the same time. If one reads the verses that follow our lesson today and the Book of Jeremiah as a whole, he or she will quickly realize that Jeremiah is speaking to a Judah that is as divided as our own nation today. There were a faithful few, and to them, Jeremiah speaks promise. Unfortunately, however, there was also an unrepentant majority that had turned its back on the LORD who had called them from Egypt and turned the very gods of the people whose land the LORD had given them.

"Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel." You and I are clay. We can be shaped for destruction or for salvation. In the first case, we reject the guidance and care of the Potter and are left to our own fallen, malformed, unintended shape, as clay in the hands of another potter, fit only for the Potter to throw us in the fire. In the second case, we do nothing to make our shape better, but the Potter does, as He patiently works out the deformities of our sin, corrects the faults in our patterns, and pays vigilant attention to our well-being until His work is brought to completion.

Who has shaped your life as of late? What does the clay of your life look like? Are you fit for the fire, or for display at the heavenly feast? What if you are fit for the fire? What now? The LORD supplies the answer in this same chapter, verse 11, "Return, every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds." The Potter is ready to reshape you. He can take get rid of the lumps and weak spots. He will fill your vessel with forgiveness, until it runs over. Relive your Baptism, that your vessel may be clean. Receive the Sacrament with joy, that your vessel may be full. Hear the Word with diligence, that your vessel may be ready for whatever the LORD intends for it.

8/23/04 – Mark 9:33-37

They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

Two things strike me in this passage. First, that Christ calls Christians to be Christians, that is, followers of Christ. He calls us to serve, not as lords, but as servants. In the world, income, stature, rank, and the amount of letters after your name may mean things, but in the Church, they are meaningless. What matters is service, one to another; and this service is only possible when we have first been served by the ultimate Servant, who sets a table for His guests, and gives His life, once given for them, to them in the Sacrament. This service is only possible when our vessel has been filled with the Word, which then overflows into the lives of those around us. Who is the greatest? The One who never was concerned about that question. The ones who never think to ask?

Second, notice how Jesus has no second rate citizens in the church. The children are a valuable part of His body. We have a responsibility for these little ones, for when we welcome

them we welcome Christ. Let us welcome them. Let us welcome them to the Church at the font. Let us welcome them to the church by explaining what they see and hear there, and by conducting or services in such a manner that there is repetition and patters for them to learn from. Let us welcome them by shaking their hand and talking to them the same as we would an elder, a council member, or member of the altar guild. Let us welcome them, most of all, by impressing upon them in how we act, how we pray, how we study, and what we say, that the church is no mere social club, no mere tradition, but the very center of our lives, because it is where Christ is, and where He always promises to be, in Word and in Sacrament. Think about it. When we welcome these little ones, we welcome Christ. When we welcome them to church, we welcome them to Christ. Wow!

8/24/04 – 1 Samuel 17:40-51

Then he took his staff in his hand, chose five smooth stones from the stream, put them in the pouch of his shepherd's bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine. Meanwhile, the Philistine, with his shield bearer in front of him, kept coming closer to David. He looked David over and saw that he was only a boy, ruddy and handsome, and he despised him. He said to David, "Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. "Come here," he said, "and I'll give your flesh to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field!" David said to the Philistine, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will hand you over to me, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give all of you into our hands." As the Philistine moved closer to attack him, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him. Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell facedown on the ground. So David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone; without a sword in his hand he struck down the Philistine and killed him. David ran and stood over him. He took hold of the Philistine's sword and drew it from the scabbard. After he killed him, he cut off his head with the sword. When the Philistines saw that their hero was dead, they turned and ran.

A band of slaves escaped from Egypt. They were pursued by the Pharaoh with his troops, the best on the earth. A small nation, led by unimpressive judges, established itself in a land they claimed they had been promised. They were surrounded by enemies determined to eliminate them. A young shepherd boy claimed that he could kill a giant. Grown men are sure he is a goner, but, too afraid to attempt to kill the giant themselves, they let the boy march to his death. A carpenter's Son hung on a cross. He had claimed to be the Son of God. He had claimed He would live forever. An early church huddled together in catacombs and houses. Persecuted and dismissed as uneducated fanatics, Rome was sure she would have this new faith wiped from the face of the earth soon. Barbarians had destroyed the empire. Surely the Christian faith would disappear in the Dark Ages to come. A German monk challenged the pope, the emperor, and the bishops. He claimed that he was proclaiming the true gospel. Surely he would be stopped by the powers that be. A small synod gathers around Word and Sacrament, maintaining the faith it has received from its fathers, a faith that rests solely on the Word of God and its teachings. Most of

the world and much of Christianity considers the synod's beliefs outdated and ignorant. Surely it will succumb to pressures and change with time.

God uses the weak. God uses the foolish. God uses those who are least in the eyes of the world. God uses the chief of sinners. God uses the darkest hour to bring the brightest day. It is not for us to decide how God will preserve His people and His Word, which cannot be separated, it is simply for us to believe that He will. A shepherd boy kills a giant Philistine. People of David's day must have thought it was a story from the *Enquirer*. Who would believe such a farce? God would. His servants would. We would. So, brothers and sisters, pick up your smooth stones and sling, and go to town. Know that God's Word does not come back empty and that its power does not depend on the person sharing it, but on God. Trust what it says, no matter who the giant may be that challenges you, whether depression, financial problems, familial issues, or something else. Yes, we have battles to fight in life, "but the battle is the LORD's," and thank God for that!

8/25/04 – Luke 7:1-10

When Jesus had finished saying all this in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." So Jesus went with them. He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

"Lord, I am not worthy to receive You, but only say the word and I shall be healed." Growing up, I spoke these words every Mass before receiving the Eucharist. And, I must admit that while much of what I grew up with in the Roman Church has fallen by the wayside, these words have stuck with me. "Lord, I am not worthy to receive You, but only say the word and I shall be healed." Wow! I am unworthy. I can do nothing. But Christ says the word, and, poof, healing, whether physical (in this case) or spiritual, namely, the forgiveness of sins.

What faith the centurion displays in our lesson today! What trust in His Word! What submission to His authority! What belief that Christ would do what was best! Notice also his dismissal of the Jews claim that he deserved to have Jesus do this. "Lord, don't trouble Yourself, for I do not deserve to have You come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed."

We approach God the same way in God's service. We begin with our Baptism in the invocation (in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit). We confess our unworthiness and receive Christ's word of healing forgiveness. We attentively sit and listen to His powerful Word in the sermon. We kneel and receive Him in Holy Communion, knowing we don't deserve to have Him come to us in such a way, but that He nevertheless wants to and had promised to. We have the faith of the centurion. Faith in the Word of Christ, which is powerful

and active. Faith in Christ's mercy, which is bestowed on those who know and confess they deserve it least.

8/26/04 – Acts 12:18-25

In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed. Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while. He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. Having secured the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king's country for their food supply. On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died. But the word of God continued to increase and spread. When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.

"This is the voice of a god. Not a man." Nice compliment, huh? Herod must have enjoyed hearing it. Hopefully he did, because it was the last thing he heard before the terrors of hell. He loved the praise of men more than the praise of God. He assumed God's throne and pontificated as a god himself and took pride in the people who accepted his speech as a divine word, even if they were just doing it out of flattery.

There are lots of voices of gods among us today. In fly-by-night churches there are voices of gods calling out everyday, promising earthly wealth and health, just as Herod was presumably promising food for peace. People love messages like that. They love a god like that. They want to be part of a church like that.

Every week at Christ a fat, awkward looking, young, and very average man gets into your pulpit and speaks. What do you say? Do you say, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man? I pray not, unless you are discerning in what you hear. In a very real way you can say, "This is the voice of God Himself, not of a man," but only when I am preaching God's Word and not my own theories, opinions, and whims. Otherwise, you can only say, "This is the voice of a fat, awkward looking, young, and very average man." That should bring in new members, don't you think? It would be a great mission statement. "Here is the voice of a fat, awkward looking, young, and average man."

Thanks be to God that you can honestly say, "This is the voice of God Himself, and not of a man," and mean it. You can say it when you are absolved by a pastor acted according to his divine call from Christ and in the stead of Christ. You can say it when you remember the words spoken at your Baptism. You can say it when you hear, "This is my body. This is my blood, given and shed for you." You can say it when God's Word is faithfully and carefully expounded upon and proclaimed from His pulpit. You can say it, not because you are necessarily always hearing things you want to or like to hear, but because you are hearing what God has declared you need to hear.

Let us here at Christ serve with humility. Let us be unconcerned with the flattery of the world, but rather consumed with concern for their salvation, for what they need to hear. Let us be a church that is the voice of God Himself, because it is a herald of His Word, faithfully revealed and presented in Word and Sacrament. Let us block out the voices of the gods that call to us,

whether it be from churches or radio or television, etc., and rather cling to the places we know only true God Himself has promised to speak, and has promised to speak continually and clearly. And then what St. Luke said about the early church will also be said about us, "The word of God continued to increase and spread." And that wouldn't be such a bad thing, would it?

8/27/04 - Galatians 1:11-24

I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus. Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles-- only James, the Lord's brother. I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie. Later I went to Syria and Cilicia. I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only heard the report: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they praised God because of me.

I will not write much about this passage, because I will have a lot to say about it in our Thursday night Bible study on Galatians with commentary by Martin Luther. Let me simply say this. Read St. Paul's brief biography here. Consider what he was. Consider what God made him. How gracious is God! How often does he use the weak to shame the strong and the "sinful" to shame the "righteous" (as Jesus warned the Pharisees)! It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. All since Adam's fall are sick, but only those who realize it will see their need for the doctor, and when that need becomes apparent, before they can even as the Great Physician to treat them, He is there with His medicine: water, Body, Blood, and Word. And then what a marvelous thing he does. He not only treats the patient, but then uses the patient to treat others, with the very same medicine that made them whole. Christ Lutheran is a hospital for sinners. It is God's pharmacy, dispensing the medication He has prescribed. And those who gather there, who come tired and sick from a week in this contagious fallen world of sin, leave renewed and invigorated, ready to battle the disease of sin that waits outside our doors. Keep taking your medicine, because you never know when the devil will strike with his germs of doubt, temptation, and false teaching. And when you see your friends and family, coworkers and acquaintances suffering from the same symptoms of sin and unbelief, tell them where to find the cure. Sure, they may be amazed that God would use you to share such a treasury of grace, but they were also once amazed God used St. Paul, but they later "praised God because of [him]."

8/31/04 - Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are-- the Holy One of God!" "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" The evil spirit shook the man violently and came

out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching-- and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him." News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

Take a second before reading ahead more and consider this question, "What is the most important thing about this account?" Think. If you are reading this now, you are cheating and reading ahead too fast. Think. Do you have an answer? Now I'll give you my humble opinion: "and with authority." Those are the words that stick out to me.

A couple of weeks ago some high school friends of mine came up to visit. I was glad they could come on a communion Sunday because I wanted them to see the whole cornucopia of grace that God sets before His people in the divine service. After the service, we went to brunch. I asked them what they had thought about the service. They said that it was different than the churches they were used to because when I preached God's Word and when I administered the precious Body and Blood of our Lord, I acted with authority and the congregation acted with respect and devotion. What they had noticed was what Lutheranism is supposed to be all about: Christ's Word and His visible Word, the Sacraments, holding center court in God's service. They had been so used to the super-casual, informal, man-centered and non-authoritative approach of generic American Protestantism that when they came they asked, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority!" They did not ask this because I preached so well, or because you sang so well, or because we were so amazing as people in and of ourselves, but because Christ spoke through the hymns, the absolution, the Word, and the Supper, and He spoke with authority, because He spoke forgiveness. Who knows, but either way, they heard God's authoritative Word.

Why did Jesus cast out evil spirits? Why did He do miracles? Was it just to impress? Was it just to get famous? No! It was to point to His teaching. It was so that people might hear His message and believe. This is the same reason God allowed the apostles to work miracles in the early church. Everything was to work to draw attention to the message. At the wedding at Cana, Jesus' first miracle, St. John, an eyewitness, records that the ultimate and desired result was that people believed. When Paul and Barnabas worked a miracle at Lystra and the people focused not on their message, but on them, the messengers, they were horrified. The miracles weren't meant to draw attention to them. No, all was to point to their teaching, to His teaching, that all might believe and be saved.

Notice that it is mentioned twice in these few verses that Jesus taught with authority and that He therefore stood out from other teachers. The same is still true today. While other religious teachers may be inclusive and urge tolerance because "all roads lead to heaven," Jesus still comes with His exclusive claims and says "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life." Jesus still speaks through the mouth of His called servants and does so with authority. His message is still loud and clear in the Sacraments, and that message is still authoritative, because it has never changed, and never will. When you come to God's service next, notice that. Listen closely to the hymns. Pray the prayers thoughtfully. Hear Jesus speak with authority. Hear Him speak through your pastor in the sermon, applying His timeless Word to your time. Hear Him speak through your Baptism as you drown your sins again in His Absolution. Hear Him repeat "for you" as you take His Body and Blood in the Sacrament. And this, this is no "new teaching," it is the same old one, but it is "with authority" and it is from the "Holy One of God, Jesus of Nazareth," whom even demons must obey.

9/1/04 – 2 Kings 20:1-7

In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, "This is what the LORD says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover." Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, "Remember, O LORD, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes." And Hezekiah wept bitterly. Before Isaiah had left the middle court, the word of the LORD came to him: "Go back and tell Hezekiah, the leader of my people, 'This is what the LORD, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you. On the third day from now you will go up to the temple of the LORD. I will add fifteen years to your life. And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria. I will defend this city for my sake and for the sake of my servant David.'" Then Isaiah said, "Prepare a poultice of figs." They did so and applied it to the boil, and he recovered.

St. Paul writes in Philippians, "To live is Christ. To die is gain." We see that illustrated in our account today. The LORD had told Hezekiah he would die. He was giving him a little while to get his estate planned, but then Hezekiah's breath was going to leave him. Hezekiah turned to the LORD and pleaded for more time. Notice what he points to: his life. God hears Hezekiah and spares him. Notice what God points to: His mercy. God says, "I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you." And not only would God heal him, but "to live is Christ," that is, God would use Hezekiah for the good of His people and for the preservation of the line of David which would produce the Savior.

Many of us here at Christ have dealt with sickness and death lately. We too have prayed. Has God been ambivalent? Has He not cared about our prayers? We too, like Hezekiah, may even have pointed to our lives, which we can do as Christians who have produced fruit by God's grace. St. Paul and David both pleaded their innocence before God. We too have cried. Has God been less concerned with our prayers than with Hezekiah's? No. God is still the God of mercy, and for some reason, the merciful thing in all of this has been to let us suffer or to let our loved one die. Why? I do not know. Maybe He wants us to grow in strength in Him through the weakness of our own bodies. Maybe He wants to teach us patience and to lead us to long even more for the perfection and wholeness of heaven. Maybe He wanted to spare our departed loved one from further suffering. Maybe He couldn't wait any longer to have such a dear child live with Him in heaven. Maybe there was some event in the future that God was protecting them from. Maybe our loved one had been holding on for too long simply for our own benefit, and God decided that it was now time that he or she have rest. I just don't know, but God knows, and He has heard our prayers, and He has decided to do what is best, and He will explain it all to us when we see Him face to face. Christ too, God's own Son, wept and prayed for deliverance in Gethsemane, but He prayed "thy will be done," as we also do, and so now, although He went through unbelievable and unprecedented suffering, He sits victoriously at the right hand of His Father and rules all things for the good of His Church.

When you suffer, or when a loved one suffers, and death seems near, pray. Pray, weep, plead, but always know that God will and must do what is best, and what is best may not be what seems best to you at the time. Yes, death is scary, because we've never died before. That moment when we close our eyes on last time is shrouded in mystery, but the next moment is not. Our Lord has told us what happens then. We open our eyes to Him, and He says, "Well done, good and faithful servant," because when He sees us, He sees His Son. There is nothing wrong with mourning sickness and death. Jesus wept when Lazarus died, and He knew He would raise him in just a few minutes. Weep and mourn, but do not lose your joy in the process, your joy in the

resurrection and promise of our Lord. "To live is Christ. To die is gain." Every moment He gives us, is a moment to serve Him, as Hezekiah did. Every moment death draws closer, we draw closer to the greatest moment of all: the moment we see His face.

9/2/04 – *Matthew 9:35-38*

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

Has the scene changed for Jesus? When He looks out on the crowds and masses today, does He still have compassion on them because they are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd? I would not doubt that He does. Yes, there are many shepherds, but many of those shepherds' sheep are without a shepherd in Jesus' eyes. In a Christian culture where the pastor has been marginalized and reduced to being coaches, equippers, and presidents of social clubs, shepherding has become a lost calling. Look at the lists many churches compile of what they want in a pastor. Look where faithful preaching of the Gospel and right administration of the Sacraments appears. I'll give you a hint. It's at the bottom.

For this reason, we as an orthodox (right believing) Lutheran church body have the great honor and responsibility of producing and supporting shepherds to protect and gather the sheep. We have the great blessing of having such shepherds to care for our own tender souls. Look around you. Have compassion on those harassed and helpless masses, coached, equipped, and socialized to hell, and desperately in need of shepherding to heaven. Support such shepherding with your prayers. How often do you pray for your shepherd, and pray for him about the right things? My flock, pray for me, that I may preach the Word rightly, fearlessly, tirelessly, clearly, and proudly. Pray that I may not become what so many of us pastors can be tempted to become: opinion givers, pep talkers, swaying reeds, and men scared to discipline because of a lack of support from our voters or members as a whole. Pray for me, that I may administer the Sacraments properly. Pray that I may preach you to the altar, so that you demand the Supper from my hands, hunger for it all week, and treasure it above everything else. Pray that I never let you forget your Baptism and always lead you back to it. Pray that what I do for you, I do for myself and my family as well, that we too may be fed by the Good Shepherd, of whom I am an under-shepherd. Pray that I may be a LUTHERAN pastor, a soul-carer, willing to preach the law to you when necessary, but quick to follow it up with the gospel. And don't just pray for me, pray for shepherds everywhere in our synod, that they may do the same for those in their care.

Our synod is at a crossroads right now. We are financially strapped and must cut precious ministry funds. One area being cut is ministerial education, and this is a tragedy. God's people need and deserve men rooted in the gospel and equipped to study and preach it by a thorough training in the languages of the Church, an in-depth examination of the Scriptures, and a comprehensive study of our Lutheran Confessions. If we merely produce coaches "on fire for the Lord," but devoid of knowledge and grounding in the Lord's revealed Word, we will become what much of generic American Protestantism has become: men and women who want milk and nothing but milk, never maturing in the faith we have received, unable to defend and preserve the truth for our children. My brothers and sisters, support the ministry by supporting the schools that produce our future ministers. There is no better investment you can make, because the men who come out of our Seminaries may not only be your own shepherds some day, but shepherds who

feed your children and grandchildren, who baptize your generations to come, who confirm your progeny in the same faith in which you have been confirmed, if God so permits that our church remain faithful, unworthy though we are. "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.'" Ask the Lord to send out workers, but then give hands to your prayers, and support the training of those workers with your time, with your prayers, and yes, with your money. Because when you do so, you are supporting the Gospel, which you hear, take, and are sprinkled with from the mouths and hands of God's shepherds.

9/3/04 – Mark 5:22-43

Then one of the synagogue rulers, named Jairus, came there. Seeing Jesus, he fell at his feet and pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live." So Jesus went with him. A large crowd followed and pressed around him. And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering. At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?" "You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?'" But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering." While Jesus was still speaking, some men came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue ruler. "Your daughter is dead," they said. "Why bother the teacher any more?" Ignoring what they said, Jesus told the synagogue ruler, "Don't be afraid; just believe." He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. When they came to the home of the synagogue ruler, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said to them, "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep." But they laughed at him. After he put them all out, he took the child's father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha koum!" (which means, "Little girl, I say to you, get up!"). Immediately the girl stood up and walked around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Since this is a longer lesson, I will keep my comments short. Notice that both were healed by faith. Jesus tells the woman "your faith has healed you." He tells Jairus, "Just believe." But in what was the woman's faith? In whom was Jairus to believe? Whose powerful Word called the dead girl from her "sleep"? Jesus is the object of all faith and His Word is the means of producing it. Jesus says, "Believe," and there is faith. Jesus says, "Get up," and the girl gets up. Pretty cut and dry. One of my professors once told me that the mark of good preaching is that the preacher preaches Jesus and not faith. The difference is subtle, but important. Like most important distinctions in Christian theology, it finds its clearest expression at the death bed. If a

Christian has had Jesus preached to them all their life, they will look to Jesus in death. If a person has had faith preached to them all their life, they will look to their faith, and be in doubt as to whether it is strong or sincere enough. Faith becomes a work of the individual, rather than an anchor in Christ, placed there by Christ. Look to Jesus today. Trust in Jesus today. Read His powerful Word and know that He will accomplish what He promises there. Know that while your faith will always be imperfect and wavering this side of heaven, Jesus is always perfect and His promise is unwavering, and that is what matters. "Just believe." How? Look and listen to Jesus.

9/7/04 – Matthew 10:40-42

"He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."

Isn't it amazing how gracious our God is! Not only does He give us salvation as a free gift, but then He even rewards our half-hearted, imperfect works that spring from our wavering faith. In the support of a prophet, He does this in a very clear way. By supporting a faithful, orthodox pastor or teacher, you are supporting yourselves, because these called workers feed you with God's Word and with the Sacraments. Even more, God tells us that He rewards us in heaven for the works we do. But beware! We are not laborers for wages. Read Matthew 25. When Jesus separates the sheep and the goats, and tells the sheep they had done certain good works, they are shocked. "When did we do that," they ask. You see, they had acted by faith, not in hope of a reward. Jesus answered, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to Me."

That's the amazing thing about Christian works, that is, works born from faith. When St. Paul tells the Philippians to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling," in Philippians 2:12, he immediately adds in verse 13: "for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." St. Paul writes in Galatians 2:20, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." Do you see what I am getting at? If not, I will tell you. The amazing thing about Christian works of faith is that they are done by Christ in us for Christ in others. As Christians, we have become "little Christs," as Luther is often quoted as saying, not in a blasphemous way, but as a concrete reality by virtue of our Baptism where we are grafted into Christ and where He begins to dwell in us. Thus we work, not for our own benefit, and not for future rewards, and not for fear of punishment if we do not, but for the good of those around us, especially those viewed as the least of all, and for the good of our Lord, who tells us He delights in such service. And then, and then God in His grace rewards such service for the sake of His Son who works through us and for whose benefit and out of love for Whom we work. Neat, huh? Kinda makes it not seem like work at all, but joyful service!

9/8/04 - Mark 12:41-44

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything-- all she had to live on."

This appears to be, from all the information available to us in the Gospels, Jesus last visit to the Temple before His death. Where is He? In the women's section, watching the widows. He is not rubbing elbows with the intelligentsia of Judaism. He was not making a scene. He was watching the least of God's children do the greatest acts of service. How often isn't that the case today? If you want proof, do one of the things I like to do most: watch people go to communion. Weak, elderly, handicapped, depressed, sick, and confused children of God, unimpressive in the eyes of the world approach their God, humbly bend their knees, if they still can, and receive what to the world seems like nothing, but to them is their greatest treasure. These are the same men and women who have already given from their poverty. These are the same men and women who apologize to me that they cannot give and do more. I assure them they are already doing more than they realize. These are men and women of faith. They are chipped, fading, misshapen vessels. They are the kind of jars God is most pleased to fill. *"But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."* Thus writes St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 12. Thus confess many of our brothers and sisters in the trials of this life which have grabbed hold of them and refused to let go. So also, by God's grace, we too will confess when we face testing. God does not want lip service and going through the motions. God wants what every spouse and child wants: expressions of love. That love comes from faith, and that love swallows up anxiety, poverty, and sickness, and gives to God what is His in the first place: our entire being. And that entire being, weak though it may seem to us and those around us, is more meaningful and more substantial than anything the world's richest or strongest man could offer, because it is faith, and because it is faith in Christ, the greatest Man of all.

9/9/04 – Exodus 22:20-26

Whoever sacrifices to any god other than the LORD must be destroyed. "Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt. "Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless. "If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest. If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset.

Exploiting the weak or showing favoritism betrays more than greed and callousness; it reveals a lack of understanding of how God has dealt with us. Apart from Christ, all stand before God not only weak, but dead, and covered with the filth and stench of sin. There is no reason God should even want to approach us, according to human standards, let alone jump into our mess by becoming man for us and for our salvation. Most of us, who were baptized as infants, were perfect pictures of this helplessness and unimpressiveness, as we came to the font in the arms of another, with nothing to offer but the tears to follow as our old Adam was drowned and Christ came to live in us by GRACE, a word that more than any other implies that something we do not deserve was done for us. When we remember what we were when God stooped to our aid, taking on human flesh and blood, which He gives us in the Supper, suffering death at the hands of those He created, then we will be more inclined to treat those who are helpless and unimpressive in our own eyes with the same love and mercy which God showed us. Not only will

we be more inclined to do this, but we will rejoice in doing so, because we know and remember the joy that the mercy and love of Another brought us, and will feel blessed to bring such joy to another through the works of kindness our Lord has prepared beforehand for us to walk in (Ephesians 2:10). Let us not sacrifice to the god of greed, or arrogance, or callousness. Let us sacrifice to the only true God, giving of ourselves for the good of others, especially the others who need us most. This is no new or novel idea. It is simply a repetition of what our Lord has done for us. It is our sacrifice of praise and thanks. It is love for Him who first loved us.

9/10/04 - Jeremiah 2:13-20

"Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this. When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this."

Again we see God's relationship with mankind reflected in the relationships of the human race. The Israelites, by showing concern for the weak and the foreigner, were doing two things: remembering their own past and aiding those in need. To fail to help those in need would have been forgetting their own past. To forget their own past would have led to a failure to help those in need. Hence, St. James writes in his epistle, "Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like" (1:23,24). The Christians to whom James was writing had begun to forget the grace God had shown them, and thus they acted with favoritism, with conceit, and with callousness. Therefore, four verses later he can say, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." The "religion" of which St. James is speaking, is the response of faith to God's grace. As forgiven Christians, we too now forgive, and thus pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass us." Similarly Jesus says in John 15, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you" (12), and St. Paul urges in Romans 12, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, IN VIEW OF GOD'S MERCY, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship" (1). And, for the same reason, the LORD adds at the end of our passage, "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this." As Christians, we are saved by faith alone, but faith is never alone. Faith is living and active, and as such, is constantly bearing fruit, fruit that benefits everyone we encounter, especially those who need our help the most.

9/13/04 - Galatians 5:16-24

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred,

discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.

In the Greek, St. Paul literally says in verse 16, walk in the Spirit. We walk in our Baptism. We walk in the Word. We walk in Holy Communion. That is, we walk in the Gospel, in God's grace. As Christians, justified by grace through faith, we are not subject to the law. We are justified by faith, not works. And now we can really start to keep the law in a God-pleasing, that is, not for salvation, but by faith and out of thankfulness. If you look closely at the list of sins St. Paul provides, you will notice one thing: they are all the product of unbelief. The unbeliever will not inherit the kingdom of God. He inherits what his flesh has earned. Notice what the things on St. Paul's list of virtues have in common: they are all products of the cross, conveyed to us in the Means of Grace. There is no law against such things. In other words, these are not things the law can produce or condemn. They are the work of the new man. They are Christ's work through us. In such a way, we crucify the flesh. Every evil deed is an assault by our old Adam on our faith and relationship with God. Every fruit of faith is a crucifixion of the flesh and a product of our faith and relationship with God, possible only through faith in Christ. We have all failed at times to crucify our flesh. Too often we have delighted in our flesh. Many times the very works St. Paul here condemn are the ones staring back at us when we stare in the mirror. What then? Bury your sinful nature in your Baptism anew through repentance. Nail it to the cross in Absolution. Poison it with Christ's Body and Blood, by which the Spirit sets our feet walking by faith again. Stay in the Word, so you can recognize the tricks of the flesh and so the Spirit can lead you out of them and to love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. And when you grow in these virtues, remember what they are. They are products of what God has worked in you: faith, hope, and love. They are gifts to you from God, which you then offer back to Him.

9/14/04 - Isaiah 40:25-31

"To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One. Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing. Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God"? Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Isaiah has often been called "the evangelist of the Old Testament." Evangelist is a word that, properly used, means one who preaches the gospel. The Old Testament contains 39 books. The New Testament contains 27. That is a total of 66 books in the "Book of Books." Isaiah contains 66 chapters. The first 39 are primarily law, although there are exceptions (think of the great Advent and Christmas lessons). The last 27 are primarily gospel, a promise of renewal, salvation, and forgiveness. Because of her sin, Israel was going to go through some tough times. Isaiah predicts the exiles to come and the horrors that would be visited upon this rebellious people. Isaiah holds nothing back. The consequences of sin are presented with brutal realism. If we ended our reading of Isaiah at chapter 39, we would be left where many are left when a bad sermon is preached: in the law. But Isaiah does not end there. God kept Isaiah's lips moving and moved him from threats of destruction to promises of forgiveness. Isaiah now speaks of the future. As an Old Testament prophet, at times he sees what are really distinct, chronological events as one and the same grand occurrence. When he speaks of renewal and salvation, he is often not only seeing the restoration of Israel in the promised land, but the restoration Man's relationship with God through Christ and His establishment of the Church, and the ultimate restoration of God's people in Christ's Second Coming. And it is appropriate that this all appeared as one to Isaiah, because it all flowed from the same promise, the promise upon which all Scripture stands: Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.

Has there been suffering in your life of late? Maybe there is sickness. Maybe there is death. Maybe you are struggling with the consequences of your sin in a brutally real way. Maybe you are suffering simply because suffering is unavoidable in a fallen world, and not because of a specific transgression. No matter what the reason, and no matter what the suffering, Isaiah has the same promise for you that he had for Israel so many years ago, and it is the promise of the gospel: Christ for you. Gone are the consequences of the fall into sin. Gone is weariness, sadness, uncertainty, and frustration. Gone are questions about whether or not God cares about our peril, if He is ignoring us, or if He is angry. Present is what matters most: the One who makes all things new, and we are included in all things. "How can God fix the mess I am in?" you may ask. God answers that in our lesson: "To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One. "Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing." He can do what He promises, no matter how impossible it may seem, for one important reason. God is God. And hear His awesome promise again, a promise we will live for all eternity: "Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble

and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

9/15/04 – 1 Timothy 1:12-17

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Do you ever remember your sins with joy? You should. No, not with a sinful joy that delights and recalls the sinful pleasure you derived from them. Rather, with the joy that wicked though you have been, chief of sinners though you be, God has called you to faith and now uses you for His glory and good purpose. Think about that. God could have the angels do His bidding. He could do it Himself. But, NO, He uses us, knowing full well that we are weak, that we will fail at times, and that we will probably nag Him throughout the whole purpose. “Why? Why? Why?” we often ask over and over again like a toddler. “Because” God answers like a parent. “Because I want to display My unlimited patience as an example to other lost sinners, that they may see they cannot be too wicked for my grace, and that they too may believe, be saved, and serve Me.” Maybe you don’t marvel at that, but I do, and so did St. Paul. Marvel. God called you. God uses you, in more ways than you even know. Why? Because He wants to. He wants you. Wow! Oh yeah, and amen!

9/16/04 – 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

Do you remember what for many of us was the most terrifying part of grade school recess? I am talking about picking teams. The captains were practically staring into your souls, you thought. “Just don’t let me be last,” you may have prayed. You quickly thought through all the qualities you could bring to the team or the game. Eventually you were chosen, and you displayed the wisdom or foolishness of the captain’s pick in how you played next.

God has picked you. When? He picked you first, because he put you before Himself, taking your place on the cross and in the grave. He chose you from the beginning. The moment mankind fell into sin, your face popped into God’s head and He knew He was not willing to let you go the way of destruction. He chose you. He called you. He called you how? By the gospel,

that is, by Word and Sacrament. He sanctified you, setting you apart for His service and for a new status: child of God.

Brothers and sisters, do not give up this treasure. Do not let God's calling look foolish. Do not trample on the very thing that made you what you are: the Gospel. Stand firm. Learn your Bible well so you can proclaim it to others and, yes, so you can confess it against error. Hold on to the teachings St. Paul and all the apostles and prophets have passed down to us. Notice, he says "teachings," not "teaching." Everything that has issued from God's mouth and the Apostle's pen is precious and worth confessing. No doctrine is incidental or dispensable. Every doctrine, no matter how small, if denied, will eventually lead to a denial of all doctrine, unless God in His grace grants you the ignorance to not take such denial to its logical conclusions.

Know that when you confess God's truth, you are not alone, and you are not dependent on your own power alone. You are not doing something arbitrary or burdensome. You are being blessed with the privilege to confess and, if you are very fortunate, you will be blessed with suffering for that confession. When you remember what the Word has done for you, that it has picked you first to be on God's team, you will gladly do all in your power to study it, share it, and defend it, because that is what a first-round pick does. He or she keeps their eyes on the prize, and looks to the big dance to come. Friends, *"May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word."*

9/17/04 – *Philippians 1:12-18*

Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly. It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice...

The other day in class the question of how we can say other religions/denominations are wrong when only God can know. The answer, of course, is that God has revealed His Word and commanded us to judge the prophet by it. Romans 16:17 demands that we mark and avoid error. In the verse that hangs on my office wall, Moses writes, *"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law."* St. Paul rejoices that men defend the precious truth of the gospel, hanging on all of God's Word and surrendering none. St. Paul here does not rejoice that there are men who preach Christ with improper motivation or truth mixed with error, but he does rejoice that the truth nevertheless comes through.

Marking and avoiding false teaching within the visible Christian Church does not mean condemning all who belong to heterodox churches to hell. We rejoice that Christ is still in these churches in the readings and in many of the hymns. We rejoice that Christ will not extinguish the smoldering wick. We praise God for his unfathomable mercy that even in places where men do their best to cloud and distort His gospel, some are nevertheless brought to faith and saved.

Marvel at the power of the gospel. It shines through our weakness, our ignorance, our apathy, and our mistakes. Always pray that we may proclaim in with proper motivation and in all its purity. Defend error, but do not condemn those whom God has not, that is, mark and avoid those who refuse correction, but leave it to God to decide their eternal fate. Rejoice in God's grace: the grace that brought you to faith and a proper confession of it. Rejoice it that you belong to a church of Word and Sacrament, where the gospel is the center of all we teach and do. Cling to that gospel, and pray that, no matter how much the world may try to dim it, its light may shine clearly throughout the whole Christian Church and we may see a rebirth of a biblical, confessional spirit.

9/20/04 – 1 Kings 17:8-16

Then the word of the LORD came to him: "Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food." So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, "Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?" As she was going to get it, he called, "And bring me, please, a piece of bread." "As surely as the LORD your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any bread-- only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it-- and die." Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD gives rain on the land.'" She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the LORD spoken by Elijah.

Why would these people do such things? Why give all you have when there is no visible indication that you will get more? Why bother telling another human being what must sound to them like pure insanity? "The are of flour will not be used up..." Yeah, right. "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." Yeah, right. Drink this bread and wine and you are forgiven. Yeah right. Pour water on a baby's head and now it is God's child and saved. Yeah, right. Some guy in an alb tells me I am forgiven and I am forgiven. Yeah, right. Yes, it is right. Seriously. Why? Because it is "in keeping with the word of the LORD spoken by Elijah."

The Word of the Lord does not need human minds to make it reasonable. The Word of the Lord has no concern for the laws of nature or standard human practice. The Word of the Lord is no respecter of persons and has no time for scientific, empirical proofs. The Word of the Lord is the Word of the LORD, the One who is who He is and is that with or without human consent. "The jar will be full." That is that. "You are forgiven." That is that, because the LORD said it. Have you been doubting the Word of the LORD. Have you doubted that He could bring good from the mire you are in? Have you doubted that He can free you from the sin that has taken you captive? Have you doubted that He could really be serious when He says you are forgiven? Well, it doesn't matter if you doubt it, because it is true whether or not you can wrap your head around it, "for this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says."

The Word of the Lord has come to you, as it came to Elijah and the widow. It came in the form of a promise. Cling to that promise, and know that no matter how incredulous it seems, it is the most credible thing in the world, because the One who made the world, who created true

reason and true wisdom, sustains it, has said it, and stands behind it. You are God's jar. Do you believe He can fill you? Well, to be honest, it doesn't really matter, because jars don't decide to be filled. Rather, people decide to fill them. God has decided to fill you, with water of salvation, with bread and wine of forgiveness, with pages on which the Savior's portrait is painted, with words spoken by God through the mouth of a called servant. May God always keep you full! May He keep you full by Word and Sacrament!

0/21/04 – St. Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist – Matthew 9:9-13

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Today is the feast day of St. Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist. He was an apostle, that is, he was one of the twelve the God called into that great office through which the Church would be founded throughout the world and increased. He was an evangelist, that is, he wrote one of our four Gospels in Scripture. Let's briefly take a look at the calling of this saint.

Matthew was a tax collector, which made him about as popular as ambulance-chasing lawyers today. Tax collectors were infamous for extorting taxes much greater than what was actually proper. They were viewed as traitors, because they worked for the Romans, who occupied Judea. They were outcasts, because no one wanted anything to do with such awful men. They were the last person a "religious" man would want as a follower. They were the last people with whom a pious man would dine. So notice what Jesus does: He calls Matthew to follow Him. Jesus came to save sinners and He calls sinners to help Him in doing so. And notice what Matthew does: he follows. Jesus powerful Word, which raised Lazarus from the dead, now raised Matthew from spiritual death to life, from the most crooked profession to the most blessed.

As one might expect, many could not believe what they saw. Many did not like it. Many wanted nothing more than to hate Matthew for the sins of his past. Many "healthy" souls did not want to see the Good Physician treat the sick. These are the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. "Why should we sacrifice all our lives and miss out on fun to be saved when Matthew can just be converted and be saved without doing anything?" Do you see the problem? "Why should we sacrifice all our lives and miss out on fun to be saved...?" Jesus answers them, "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." Those who fail to see their sickness refuse to make an appointment with a doctor. Those who fail to see their sin fail to appreciate the great mercy of the Savior. They had been sacrificing, but failed to remember what the sacrifices symbolized: the fact that they had sinned and blood was needed to atone for it. The sacrifices had simply become a good work they offered to God, and not a testimony to their deep-rooted awareness of their sinfulness.

Matthew knew he was a sinner. Why else would he include this account in his Gospel? Matthew knew why those sacrifices were necessary. Matthew knew why the ultimate sacrifice of God's Son was necessary. Like the tax collector who prayed humbly while the Pharisee prayed self-righteously (Luke 18:13), Matthew can speak the words with feeling: "God have mercy on me, a sinner." Matthew records another time when Jesus quotes the words in our text, "I desire

mercy, not sacrifice” in chapter 12, verse 7. Jesus’ point stuck with him. St. Matthew’s God was a God of mercy.

Of what is your God a God? I pray He is the God of mercy, not simply the God of affirming how great you are. Do you pray more for God’s mercy on others than you do for His mercy on yourselves? Do you confess your sins in prayer, or do you gloss over that part and skip to what’s wrong with everyone else? Do you spend your time marveling that God could forgive you, or fuming that God has forgiven someone else? “Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” You are a sinner, and be grateful you are, because that means you are one whom Jesus came to save. Recognize your sickness, and then rush to the Good Doctor, who can heal the most unseemly of blemishes. Rejoice that you have a God of mercy, because that mercy is also for you. And when we live in God’s mercy, when we marvel at it every morning and night, when we see it displayed in the lives of others, our Christian life no longer becomes a sacrifice (i.e. missing out on worldly fun), but rather a blessed privilege and opportunity. Jesus says to you, as He said to St. Matthew, “Follow Me.” Because His Word accomplishes what it says, I know you will. Thanks be to our God of mercy!

9/22/04 – 1 Corinthians 7:20-24

Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you-- although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to.

God takes us as we are. God uses us as we are. When God comes and claims us, He does not ask us to forsake our personality and be molded into some sort of generic Christian clone model of existence. Our sense of humor is our sense of humor still. Our introversion or extroversion remains. You get my point. When God comes and claims us, He also does not ask us to give up our station in life, unless that station in life is inherently sinful. He uses us in the place he finds us. Are you a line worker? Now you are a Christian line worker. Work the line to the glory of God. Are you a manager? Now you are a Christian manager. Manage to the glory of God. In your vocation, with your unique personality, be responsible to God, using that vocation and personality in His service. Does that mean the slave must remain a slave, even if offered freedom? No. Does that mean the line worker must remain a line worker, even if offered the foreman’s position? No. But, whether a line worker or foreman, the Christian remains a Christian. Your most important position remains your position with respect to God: His child by Baptism. Your most important characteristic remains your faith in Christ. For this reason, the slave, who is a Christian, is a freedman, whether or not he remains a slave in this world, because He is freed from sin, death, and the devil in Christ.

Always remember this truth: you were bought at a price. Your job does not define you. Your faith does, and you express that faith as you do your job with honesty and humility. Your personality does not make you unique before God. Your Baptism does, and you express your Baptism through your unique personality, now sanctified by God. What a joy! What a privilege! We get to be who we are as Christians: Christians. Christian workers. Christian parents. Christian children. Christian students. Christian spouses. Christians, who express their faith through the outlets God has given them. We are not slaves of men, working only to please bosses, coworkers,

families, and associates. We are God's children, working to please Him, and, chances are, when we are working to please Him, we will end up being blessings to our bosses, coworkers, families, and associates as well.

9/23/04 – 1 Kings 17:1-6

Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word." Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah: "Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. You will drink from the brook, and I have ordered the ravens to feed you there." So he did what the LORD had told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.

As we did a few days ago, we again see the power of God's promise. God promised what seemed like an unreasonable and unprecedented prospect and it took place. Why? Because God promised it. God has promised another unreasonable and unprecedented prospect, and we encounter it in the beginning of the divine service: "As a called servant of Christ and by His authority I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." "God must not be aware of all my sins," we think, "or otherwise He wouldn't possibly have forgiven them." "This is too good to be true," may race through our mind. "No one else has ever forgiven me in such a way," many reflect. Yet God says it, and just as the ravens fed Elijah and he drank from the brook, so also our sins are forgiven—gone!

9/24/04 – John 4:31-38

Meanwhile his disciples urged him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." Then his disciples said to each other, "Could someone have brought him food?" "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. Thus the saying 'One sows and another reaps' is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor."

This is one of my favorite portions of Scripture because I am aware of my sinful pride and arrogance at times. It is easy to walk into a situation, to have it go surprisingly well, to stick out my chest, and to think, "What a job I have done here. God must be awfully grateful to have me on His side." Jesus says, "Thus the saying 'One sows and another reaps' is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor." Wow. Better suck that chest back in and rethink the whole God being grateful thing. Maybe I should be the grateful one. How many have come before us here at Christ? How many have paved the road we travel on? How many laid the bricks of the walls within which we gather? How many had those baptized who had the one baptized who baptized us? Imagine all the work that has gone into every minute detail of our congregation and its work. How many have witnessed to the soul that walks through our doors to get him or her ready to hear the Gospel today? How many have invited the prospect before he or she gets the guts to give Christ a chance? How many put hours and abilities into the Sunday School classes that prepared our

current leaders for leadership? How many made the meals that celebrated the students who entered ministerial education and fueled not only those students' bodies, but their spirits, for the work ahead by their very important encouragement? How many? We are part of a chain of service. When we have success, we are reaping the fruit of others' sowing. When we suffer hardship, we are sowing seeds for future generations. What a privilege to be a worker. How humbling to know so many have worked for what we now enjoy. What a joy to know we now work for what will bloom in the hands of our children. And all this by grace, because Christ has called us, unworthy though we are, to work for Him who gave His all for us, who gives us benefits that never end and a harvest of righteousness for all eternity, who plants the Seed in Baptism and offers His Body and Blood with the wheat of the field and the fruit of the vine.

9/27/04 – *Lamentations 3:22-33*

Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him." The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD. It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young. Let him sit alone in silence, for the LORD has laid it on him. Let him bury his face in the dust-- there may yet be hope. Let him offer his cheek to one who would strike him, and let him be filled with disgrace. For men are not cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men.

“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1). Thank God that we all at some time or another get a chance to believe. What do I mean? I mean that the Lord allows the devil to bring hardship into our life so that we learn what hope truly is. Hope says what I see is not all there is. Hope says that what I feel is not what is necessarily true. Hope says that even though God has hidden His face, He is still there, and He is still gracious and merciful. Hope says that although the promises once shouted have dulled to a whisper, they are still just as certain. Hope says with Job, “Though He slay me, yet will I hope in Him” (Job 13:15a). Faith is a condemned criminal slowly dying on the cross taking time to say, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,” “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise,” and, “Father, into your hands I commit My Spirit.” What Father is He speaking to? The same one to whom He called out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” What paradise does He promise? The same Paradise that was flooded with the tears of the angels, as they witnessed this greatest crime in all of history. But, alas, “men are not cast off by the Lord forever. Though He brings grief, He will show compassion, so great is His unfailing love.” And, sure enough, that same condemned criminal walked out of His tomb three days later. And, sure enough, though we suffer, though it seems all is lost, though it seems the Lord has forgotten, our vindication will also soon come. Hope in the Lord. His compassion never fails. Wait on Him, and you will not be disappointed.

9/28/04 – *James 1:2-12*

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is

like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does. The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business. Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

How much sweeter heaven will taste to those who have suffered such bitter food in the trials of this life! How much more beautiful the crown of life will appear to those who have donned the crown of tribulation in this life! How much larger will the muscles of our faith become when they are stretched and burned by the tests we endure! How disappointed many will be when their riches rot, their skills succumb to time, and their plans plummet into ruin! Things are not always the way they appear. Yesterday we talked about hope, and how hope is really at its best when everything around us runs contrary to it. Today we look at how what appears to be bane in this life is often really blessing. What is your bane now? How are you viewing it? Have you looked for ways that it may be turned into blessing? Have you considered that it may be seasoning for the heavenly feast, where everything will seem more succulent when contrasted with the bitter vinegar that now flavors life? Have you asked God to use this trial, even though you hope it passes, to make you stronger, to turn the coal in your crown into jewels of life? Have you clung all the more to the promise as it seemed to be darkened by the shadow of uncertainty? As Christians, we are like teenagers. We must go through the awkward years to reach maturity. In these times, it often seems as though our whole world is crashing in and we can't deal with even one more day, but God is preparing us for something. He may be preparing us for something new and important in this life. He certainly is preparing us for something new and improved in the next! "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him."

9/29/04 – Job 2:1-10

On another day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them to present himself before him. And the LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the LORD, "From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it." Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil. And he still maintains his integrity, though you incited me against him to ruin him without any reason." "Skin for skin!" Satan replied. "A man will give all he has for his own life. But stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face." The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, then, he is in your hands; but you must spare his life." So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. Then Job took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself with it as he sat among the ashes. His wife said to him, "Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!" He replied, "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" In all this, Job did not sin in what he said.

What a guy! Imagine being Job. Life was not good. Everything pointed to the assumption that God had hated Job, that He was cursed by God. It is only logical, then, that if God had cursed Job, Job should curse God. But, aha! Job did not look with earthly eyes, but with the eyes of faith. He clung to the promises of God. He clung to the fact that God is just and merciful, holy and gracious. He clung to the hope of his vindication, when God would say, "Well done, good and faithful servant," and when his friends would see that God did not hate Job, but rather God loved him and knew Job could handle what He allowed to take place.

Have you ever look at suffering like that? Have you ever taken hardship as a compliment from God, as His way of saying, "You are strong enough to bear this." Sometimes we think we are not strong enough, but God makes sure that we are, reassuring us in Word and Sacrament. By suffering and dying, Christ sanctified suffering. A Christian who suffers in a real way experiences the love of their Lord, who suffered infinitely worse for our salvation. Knowing this, we can take up our cross with determination and, fueled by faith, bear it to the glory of God. Family, friends, or acquaintances may at times urge us to curse God and die. Out of ignorance, some may insist we wouldn't be suffering if we had faith. We may in moments of doubt buy into the idea that God has abandoned us. But, fed by the Body and Blood of Him who suffered hell for us and emboldened by God's promise of eternal peace and well-being, we, renewed in faith, can say with Job, "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" Certainly we shall not. Rather, we will remain confident when we descend into ever deeper valleys of tribulation because we know that the mountaintop to which God will thereafter bring us is growing all the more higher and more fantastic by the moment.

9/29/04 – Feast of St. Michael and All Angels – Revelation 12:7-12

And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down-- that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short."

St. John experienced this grand vision that comprises the Book of Revelation in a time of persecution. Christians' faith was being tested to the point of shedding blood. It appeared these Christians were losing to the world around them, literally losing their limbs and heads for the gospel, but we see here that they were victorious. The devil, whose very name means "accuser," could no longer accuse Christ's members. They were victorious in His blood, even when they shed their own. Satan had been cast down from heaven by St. Michael and His armies of angels. Victory through an occupied cross and an empty tomb provided the impetus for this momentous development. Now believers are blameless in Christ, even when accused because of their faith. Now believers are victorious in Christ, even when losing their reputations or their lives. Now believers are confident in Christ, even when swallowed with doubts about their earthly future. "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ." Thus we announce before we celebrate the Holy Supper and taste with out tongue

the Blood that overcame the serpent whose venomous tongue first brought sin into the world. But beware. The devil has been loosed on the earth and, acutely aware that his time for tempting and trapping is short, he is working feverishly to bring as many to hell with him as possible. His bite is real and dangerous. We see that in the cross, where He struck our Savior's heel. But thanks be to God, Christ's heel was greater, and it crushed this scoundrel's head. Satan is defeated. He cannot strike us unless we allow ourselves within his reach. He is a chained dog, rabid and angry, but nonetheless chained. Stay out of his yard. Stay alert in his presence, knowing he is eyeing every opportunity to attack. Defeat and withstand him with the only thing he fears: Christ. Overcome him with your testimony, that is, with your staunch confession of God's Word, in good times and in bad. Know that the victory is won, the game is as good as over, and all that is left is our wait for the clock to run out. May St. Michael and all God's angels surround and protect until we join the heavenly congregation of the saints. Amen.

10/11/04 – 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more. Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

As Christians we are bound together by love. We are bound together by a concern for others. We are bound together by a common faith to which we bear witness by our manner of living. As Christians, I pray we are not bound together by an insatiable desire to meddle in and investigate the lives of our brothers and sisters. As Christians, I pray we are not bound together by an unhealthy appetite for the sins of another, that is, a yearning to delight in another's problems. The Germans call it Schadenfreude. It has been defined as a malicious glee. Our sinful natures are not always content to hear, "The elders have dealt with it," or "I have absolved so and so and you need know nothing else." We all too often want the dirt. What we ought to crave is not the dirt, the sinful details, but rather the joyous declaration of God's grace and forgiveness for the sinner.

The other day in our Sunday Bible class I got on the tangent of judging other's sins in the light of your own. This does not mean that we do not condemn a sin if we ourselves have committed it at some point. It does mean that in recognizing that another has fallen we remember our own proclivity to err and bear the guilt of our fallen brother and sister with them. We bear each other's burdens. We sympathize, and then we rejoice that the same God who has forgiven us when we've sinned also forgives our brother or sister in the faith. And this way of viewing life and others will make an impact on the outside world. This way of dealing with each other will not go unnoticed. Rather, many may well begin anew to say of the church as they did of the early Christians, "Oh, how they love each other!" All of us, as children of God, have been taught by God how to love. When we had nothing to offer Him, when we had rejected Him and hated Him, when we had turned to every form of filth and delusion, God gave His life for us. He saw in us our great need and was moved by it. He forgave those who were not yet sorry. He redeemed those who did not yet want to be free. He saved those who would not yet admit they were in any danger. He called those who did not yet ears of faith with which to hear. He washed. He fed. He taught. He absolved. He reassured. He promised. He cared. He loved. Tell other people that. Yes,

tell them with your words, but also reflect it in your life. And by God's grace, you are already and will always do just that.

10/12/04 – 1 John 3:11-18

This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us.” This whole passage flows from this. John places this verse in the middle of the passage, where any good storyteller normally places a climax. Our love for others flows from Christ's love for us. We love others, whether or not they “deserve” it, because Christ loved us when we did not deserve it. Christ did not say He loved us. Christ did not simply talk nice to or about us. Christ loved us with His Body and His Blood, given and shed for us and our salvation. He practiced what He preached.

Luther observed that we are saved by faith alone, but faith is never alone. Our faith always produces love, because our faith receives the love of Christ, which overflows into our entire lives. When we find ourselves living cold, uncaring, and loveless days, we need to run to Word and Sacrament and feed our faith, because it is clearly starving and growing weary. A Christian loves. I do not say, a Christian should love. I say a Christian loves. We love, not because we have to, but because it is the very nature of a believer that his or her faith expresses itself in love. Sure, this love is imperfect and often inconsistent this side of heaven, but it is nevertheless there and, by God's grace, growing. St. John here speaks to Christians and tells them to do what is natural to their New Man. He tells them to love. And he even goes so far as to say that this love is evidence of their rebirth and regeneration. It is proof they have passed from death to life in Baptism. You have passed from death to life. You are a baptized child of God. You are a product of love and you are fed by the love of Christ on a regular basis. Love. Love because Christ has loved you. Love as Christ has loved you.

10/13/04 – 1 John 4:7-16a

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 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. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.

Wow! Thanks for saying what I tried to say yesterday, but even better, St. John. Where does love come from? "Let us love one another, for love comes from God." What is love? "This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." What does this Gospel truth work in us? "Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." How do we know we can do this or that we are living in Him? "We know that we live in Him and He in us, because He has given us His Spirit." What does this Spirit work in us? "We testify that the Father has sent His Son to be Savior of the world." How do you judge whether a person is a Christian or not? "If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in Him and He in God." We look at their confession of faith. "Where do we turn for the strength to go on? "We know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love."

God's love for us is the foundation and source of our love. The ability to love as God has loved us comes from the Spirit, given through Word and Sacrament. The Spirit, through the Means of Grace, works faith in us and we express that faith in our confession of the person and work of Jesus Christ. God only lives in those who have this faith. We only come to the Father through the Son. The Father gives us the Spirit, that we may come to the Son. The whole Trinity works together in love for our salvation. Having been loved like that, is it any wonder we seek to love as we have been loved!

10/14/04 – Deuteronomy 30:11-14

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

God's will and Word are not nebulous, elusive, obscure things. God has not commanded things we can not accomplish, that is, if we lived only according to our New Man. Instead, His commands and His Word are plain and simple things. Sure, there are some difficult passages, but, on the whole, God's Word is clear and understandable. Sure, sometimes God's commands are difficult, when Satan and our sinful nature make it difficult by clouding our judgment and leading us to deem God's laws, given for our benefit, somehow cruel and selfish. In reality, however, God has left very little grey for us. He has given us a sure prophetic Word and has placed that Word in our hearts and minds through the Sacraments and sound catechetical instruction. This Word does not return empty, but works in us fruits of grace and slowly renews our minds in the mind of Christ. Let us always give thanks for God's gracious Word and for His loving commands that reveal His will for Christian living and keep us from harm and danger. Keep the Word near you through frequent study, faithful attendance at God's service, and participation in Christian education opportunities. Where God's Word is, there is Christ, and we can never be too close to Him!

10/16/04 – Jude 20-25

But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to

bring you to eternal life. Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh. To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

How much can be packed into five verses? St. Jude shows us. Let us take these words to heart. Let us live each day like it is our last, as if Christ were coming tomorrow. Let us work vigorously to snatch the lost from the fire, quenching its flames with Holy Baptism, medicating doubts with the Body and Blood of our Lord, reinforcing foundations with the Word of our Lord. We cannot keep ourselves from falling and we cannot build ourselves up in the faith apart from these means, because that is the work of the Holy Spirit and of Christ, to whom the Spirit draws us by the Gospel. As we near our death, let us hate the stain of sin and flee from it, lest we too become soiled. As witness to the world, let us beware of the world's witness to us. Let us wash away the stain of sin in daily contrition and repentance. Let us cast our faults to hell and dress ourselves in the righteousness of our Savior, who alone makes imperfect men and women perfect in the Father's eyes. Let us treasure this most holy faith that has been transmitted to us and eagerly await the day we may present it intact to the best of our ability to the Father who mercifully gave it to us. Feed your faith with God's love in Word and Sacrament. Flee from sin, and to Christ, in whom God's love took flesh. Remember who your God is: the only God our Savior, to whom belongs glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

10/18/04 – Matthew 9:1-8

Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town. Some men brought to him a paralytic, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, "This fellow is blaspheming!" Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, "Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..." Then he said to the paralytic, "Get up, take your mat and go home." And the man got up and went home. When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to men.

Do you see how good a doctor Jesus is? He does not waste his time on the trifling symptoms but tackles the most serious sickness. When he happens upon a paralytic, he does not first heal him physically and then worry about absolution, but rather reverses the order. We too may run into people whose life is a total mess. They may be sick, broke, depressed, unemployed, members of a dysfunctional family, etc., and we think the church can help them fix their problems; and we are right for thinking that, but usually have the wrong problems in mind. Yes, we as a church can offer financial help, caring counsel, aid in finding employment, insight for a healthy family life, etc., but that is not the most amazing and important duty our Lord has given us. Our most amazing and primary duty from our Lord is to absolve—to announce the forgiveness of sins. And I am truly convinced that if we took that to heart and acted accordingly we would be surprised at how often those broken people we encounter melt before God's grace and treasure that forgiveness more than they are perturbed by the troubles that surround them.

Everything flows from God's grace and forgiveness. An unbelieving paralytic is an unforgiven paralytic, and "unforgiven" is the most deadly portion of that appellation. Unfortunately, look at what the crowd marveled at. It was not Jesus' absolution, but his miraculous healing. How many today still get distracted by what seems grand and miraculous to sinful eyes and are little impressed by what is most grand and miraculous to the eyes of faith, that is, the fact the Christ would forgive me. How could Christ forgive me? I was dead in sin. I was covered in filth. I was deaf, dumb, and blind spiritually. I was paralyzed by sin, and there was nothing I could do to get up and out of it. I was me, and I know all too well the last thing I deserved was forgiveness. I will never be able to wrap my mind around that. Did Christ physically heal a paralytic? Yes. Is it amazing? Yes. Ought we to marvel at it? Yes. But how much more ought we marvel at what came first: forgiveness. Christ forgives me. Christ forgives you. Wrap your head around that! If that doesn't fill you with awe and lead you to praise God, I don't know what will. May we ever be the crowd that gathers around and marvels at God's grace! May we ever proclaim the greatest miracle of all: Christ forgives me, and Christ forgives you, just as He forgave the paralytic. Praise be to Christ! Amen.

10/20/04 – Romans 3:21-26

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

"But that's too easy!" I have been guilty of saying this more than a few times, especially as I went through Adult Instruction Class to become Lutheran. Our sinful pride is offended by the gospel. We are offended by the notion that Christ has done it all for us because that means there is nothing we can do to EARN salvation. And, sadly (for our pride), there is nothing we can do to earn salvation, because salvation cannot be earned, it is granted. "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and Prophets testify." This righteousness is from God, not us. This righteousness is apart from the law, that is, the law has nothing to do with it. This righteousness has been made known, that is, it has been declared in Scripture. This righteousness "comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe." To all who what? Who fast? No. Who observe certain days? No. Who are good people in general? No, because we are supposed to be good people no matter what, not to earn anything. Good means being good and expecting nothing for it. This comes to all who believe. But... No buts. No ifs. No ands. ALL have sinned. ALL fall short of the glory of God, whether by a lot or a little. Either way, they fall short and are lost. ALL stand guilty before God and cannot make themselves innocent or con the judge. But, alas, there is another all in our lesson: "ALL are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." To redeem means to buy back. Christ bought us back from the devil, from sin, and from death. Christ has, by His death and resurrection, declared the guilty not guilty, because He served their sentence. In Christ, God's justice and mercy meet. In Christ, the Righteous One is also the One who declares the unrighteous righteous. Thus, we can say with Luther: Lord Jesus, You became what You were not that I may become what I was not. Christ became sin that we might become righteous. What

is there left for us to do? Believe; and even that comes from God, as by Baptism, Absolution, Holy Communion, and the Word the Holy Spirit works, strengthens, and preserves the very faith that believes. For that, let us be ever grateful, living our thanks daily and determinedly, always vigilant that the faith that has been gifted us is guarded, fed, and expressed. Yes, it is that easy, and thank God it is, because when we close our eyes in faith in this life we can cast our doubts, our sins, and our shame into hell and know we will open our eyes to see Jesus.

10/21/04 – Revelation 19:6-10

When I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear." (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.) Then the angel said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!'" And he added, "These are the true words of God." At this I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, "Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."

“Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’ Blessed are the dead, because they are not dead at all, but guests at our Savior’s heavenly feast. Are you ill? Are you financially strapped? Are you poorly dressed? Are you unwelcome at many of this world’s grand events? You may be here, but not at the wedding supper of the Lamb. There you wear all your acts of faith like fine linen and the stain of your sin will be gone. There you sit in seats of honor at tables set with grace, mercy, and all the joy of heaven. There you praise the Host, not out of obligation or by rote memory, but with awe and unending zeal. “Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!” And blessed are those who feast on Him here in a foretaste of the supper to come. Feast with and on the Lamb in Holy Communion. Converse with Him in prayer. Listen to Him through His word. Enjoy the rehearsal dinner now because soon we will celebrate the wedding feast. We, the Church, His bride, wait with eager expectation for that long awaited day, when, dressed in the best, we will be eternally joined with our bridegroom and when nothing will ever separate us again. Come, Lord Jesus! Come!

10/22/04 – 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.

What is the difference between a Christian and non-Christian? A Christian admits his or her sins and places them into the light for God to see. He or she does this because of faith in what God will do next. God takes those sins and forgives them. The Christian will not claim his personal sin is not sin, or less sin than the sin someone else struggles with. The Christian will not surrender himself to his personal sins, but rather will struggle against those sins by faith, freely confessing them when he fails, trusting God's forgiveness once he does. The Christian knows she is imperfect and weak this side of heaven, according to the sinful nature, and therefore will faithfully examine herself and hold herself up to the standard of Christ and the law. The Christian also knows that God knows she is imperfect and weak, that He already knows her sins before she tells Him about them, and so she clings by faith to His grace and mercy, conveyed in Word and Sacrament. The unbeliever hears the Absolution and in pride thinks, "Who is He to forgive me?" The Christian hears the very same words of forgiveness and marvels, "How good is God to speak His love to me through the mouth of His called servant for my own benefit and comfort!" The non-Christian will confess he is saved because he has led a good life. The Christian knows his life has been anything but good, because it has been perfect, and thus confesses his sin willingly and gladly. The Christian rejoices in the confession of sins because the Christian knows what comes next: the Absolution. Do not hide who you really are from God, but rather openly admit your faults and shortcomings and through Word and Sacrament, let God make you who He really knows you can be: purified from all sin and in fellowship with him. Live by the truth. Live in the light. Live in a constant confession of your sin, because then you will live in God's gracious Absolution, and there is no better way to live, than in His forgiveness.

11/1/04 - All Saints' Day - Revelation 7:9-17

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes-- who are they, and where did they come from?" I answered, "Sir, you know." And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, "they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at

the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Yesterday we celebrated the Festival of the Reformation. We celebrated those brave and steadfast men and women who long before we saw the light of day confessed the revealed Word of God in the face of every challenge, error, and threat. We celebrated these men and women who lost much joy and security in this life, not for some concrete and provable advantage, but on account of their faith in the gospel. Some may have looked with eyes that cannot see past the horizon of this world and thought such sacrifices were impractical or foolish. Some may have thought that what often seems to be mere battles over words to be trivial and divisive. Some may have thought that all that history has little to do with today. Well, some were wrong. Nothing is more practical than the gospel, because the gospel addresses something bigger than today; the gospel addresses the eternal tomorrow. Nothing is more worthy of debate than words, when those words are the revealed message of God and the gracious carrier of Christ into the hearts of men by faith. Nothing is more relevant today than history, because our faith is rooted in HISTory. We worship a historical Savior who really died at a real time in history for real people. This Savior has graciously ruled His Church throughout HISTory so that it is never without confessors, because faith comes from hearing and because any message that men and women are not willing to unwaveringly confess is no message at all.

Yesterday, we gathered with saints and confessors from every age of the Body of Christ and did what the Body of Christ does: we gathered around our head and drew spiritual sap from the vine. We heard the Word they heard. We received the Body and Blood they received. We relived the Baptism they drew life from. We did now by faith what we will later do in person. We gathered around the Lamb, sung His praises, and feasted on His grace, mercy, and love. Why take the time to do so? Why spend so much time studying and distinguishing words and messages? For the same reason that the Reformers and the saints throughout the ages were willing to put their lives and reputations on the line: because no matter how hard things may seem here for the faithful, **there "the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."** Who in their right mind would let that message be corrupted? Who would possibly trade an eternity like that for anything this fallen world can offer? That, brothers and sisters, is what its all about.

11/2/04 - Ephesians 1:3-6

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will--to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.

Today is election day and so I have chosen an election text. Today as you go to the pole you have choices. You will decide who you want to be your next president. Your guy may or may not win. We'll have to wait and see. Hopefully, your vote is rooted in something you have found in a candidate that agrees with your convictions, concerns, and hopes for the future. Our elections are based on merit—who is best for the job.

God too held an election. What was it based on? Well, it wasn't based on anything in those He chose, but rather in His own boundless love. He has elected you for salvation. How do I

know? Because God wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of His Son, and you have come to such a knowledge. You've come to intimately know the Savior in your Baptism, where you died with Him to sin and rose with Him to new life, through the Spirit. You've come to know Him in His Supper, where you feasted with Him and He became part of you. You've come to know Him in the Word, where He presents His convictions, His concerns, and His hope for the future. His conviction is that all may be saved, especially you. His concerns are that you work out your salvation with fear and trembling, that is, that you continue to feed your faith, knowing that it is the gift of God, based on a reality outside of your own works and decisions, and can easily be lost in apathy and backsliding. His hope is that your faith will come to its consummation one day at His heavenly table where what you have seen, heard, tasted, and felt here by faith will become a concrete and eternal reality.

God has chosen you in Christ. He has freely administered His grace to you. He has taken great pleasure in adopting you as His child and to make you holy and blameless through Word and Sacrament. No, He did not vote based on any promises you made or merit you presented, but rather, He chose you based on His own promises of mercy and salvation and for the sake of the merits of His beloved Son, Jesus Christ. Today, as you cast your vote for president and numerous other positions and issues, remember the most important election of all: God's election of you for salvation. Let this be your comfort as you watch the polls and ponder the future. Yes, we may be unhappy with some of the results tonight, and we may disagree with the path our country treads, but we can always be content, more than that, we can be immeasurably happy with the choices and promises God has made for and to us. Presidents come and go. Taxes go up and down. Initiatives pass and fail. But God's election stands firm, because His promise stands firm, and His grace knows no bounds or term limits. Rejoice in God's election. Amen.

11/3/04 – Matthew 10:16-23

I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. "Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

Modern Americans are often stunned that men would allow religion to be so divisive. Why can't we all just get along? Jesus came to teach us to love one another, didn't He? He wouldn't want people fighting over words, would He? Well, Jesus answers that for us today.

The truth is always divisive, because when the truth is asserted the fact that something else is false also necessarily follows. Jesus is Truth, and, therefore, is about as divisive a person as there can be. How many struggles have been rooted in the simple question, "Who is Jesus?" There are thousands of answers swirling around in answer to that question. He is a teacher. He is an example. He is a prophet. He is a good man who was misunderstood. He is a political activist. He is a visionary. He is a great philosopher. The list could go on. The one thing that most people will not admit Jesus is, however, is the Savior, because most don't think they need to be saved. "God made me this way," has become the refrain of choice for sinners who want to excuse their

sin. This thinking has even infiltrated many churches. This thinking is even proclaimed by men in albs and stoles, just like your very own pastor wears for God's service. This thinking is published in "Bible" commentaries, "devotional" books, and "sermons." Do the sheep know the difference?

My sheep, as your shepherd, as an under-shepherd of the Good Shepherd, let me tell you, listen closely to the teachers of our day, myself included, and judge their words by God's Word. To do that, you must be in God's Word. Only by God's grace and an educated laity, will the pure preaching of the gospel and the proper administration of the Sacraments continue in the Lutheran Church. My sheep, as your shepherd, as an under-shepherd of the Good Shepherd, let me tell you, do not be surprised when your vigilance and steadfast confession does not make you friends. Pray for those who reject you, knowing Christ was rejected as well, and continue to confess the truth. "Do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you." Be in the Word. Hear the Word preached. Let the Spirit give you the Father's words to speak in the face of the questions or opposition of those who do not grasp the gospel. Be prepared. Be washed, fed, trained, and ready.

The Word continues to be preached throughout Israel and the world. The Word still often finds rejection, apathy, and mockery. But the Son of Man will come soon. He will come, and all the suffering and derision and persecution of this world will seem like the blinking of an eye in light of the eternal vision of glory Christ's saints triumphant will enjoy, the glory Christ Himself has won and prepared for us. My friends, "Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves;" and look forward to the day when, dressed in your earthly suffering as one adorned with the finest jewels, you will be happy as larks.

11/4/04 – Hebrews 10:26-31

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

The letter to the Hebrews is one of my favorite books in all of Scripture, because it moves from law to gospel with almost unparalleled eloquence, turning back and forth from Sinai to Zion. Here we encounter the law, and what law it is! As Christians, as Lutheran Christians, we have been given a great, marvelous, and fragile gift: faith in and knowledge of our crucified Lord. With that gift, comes a great responsibility. Those who have heard and believed the message and then turned from it would have been better off never having heard it, Scripture says. This gift of faith is great, greater than any promise or pleasure this world can offer. This gift of faith is marvelous, more marvelous than anything men could ever devise. This gift of faith is fragile, for it is easily lost if it is not bathed, nourished, reassured, and instructed with consistency. Muscle is a wonderful thing, but it will quickly turn to fat if it is not worked continually. So too, faith, if it is strangled by sin and indifference, quickly turns to an unresponsive coldness that gradually numbs us to the grace and mercy of God. This sin and

indifference tramples the Son of God underfoot, dismissing the cross as unimportant, and esteeming His Body and Blood less than the insignificant, fleeting, and empty cares and distractions of this life. How will the Father view those who, having known and encountered His love in His only begotten Son, given for them, later despise that love by their very failure to respond and cling to it? “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

Where are your priorities? On your list of treasures, where does Christ’s Body and Blood fall? How much time have you spent listening to the trivialities of the world through a radio, a television, or the computer, compared to the amount of hours you have devoted your ears to the thoughts and promises of God? Is your life distinguishable from the lives of your unbelieving acquaintances, or is there little difference (can Word and Sacrament be without effect!)? Do you talk to your Father throughout the day, or do you babble the same few sentences thoughtlessly before you fall asleep, or even while you fall asleep? Do you consider your motivation, goals, worldview, and lifestyle to be molded and formed by the gospel, or encumbered by it? Has confessing your sins become something you do on Sunday when that time in God’s service arrives, or is your life one of constant and honest examination and confession? “How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?” “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

The Holy Spirit did not record these words simply to make us feel bad? No, His motivation is much more loving and sincere than that. These words are recorded that we may hear them and repent. Sunday we focus on the Last Judgment, as it is the End Times season in the church year. As we look to Judgment Day, which could come well before Sunday, let us look with two sets of eyes. First, let us see our sins and confess them. Let us feel the wrath of God that we deserve and the shame that sin brings to a candid conscience. Let us confess that sin and readily acknowledge that we have nothing to offer Father, to deserve the sacrifice His Son has made. But then let us secondly look at our Savior and confess Him. Confess that He is your Savior, that Your sins are drowned in His blood, nailed to His cross. Let the Spirit Himself intercede for you with groans too deep for words. God has recorded these words in His Word that in this, your time of grace, you might believe and be saved. Believe and be saved. His Blood was shed for you, and that has never changed.

11/5/04 – 1 Peter 4:1-7

Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do-- living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you. But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to men in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit. The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray.

“The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray.” How often are we anything but clear minded and self-controlled? We are distracted by the latest television series, sports season, job promotion, dear season, internet service, video

game system, beer brand, etc. In America we are bombarded with the new and distracted by the improved. What are really rather trivial and empty things become monumental in our day while the things that really matter are the things we flee from in order to get the frivolities we obsess over done. "The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray." My friends, Christ is coming, and He is coming soon. What have you done to get ready? If a good friend or mother-in-law is coming over, you clean the house, prepare a meal, organize entertainment, and plan the day as a whole. What have you done to get ready for Christ's coming? Have you been in the Word? Have you been in the Sacraments? Have you been eagerly waiting and looking for His arrival, or will He find your spiritual house a mess? Focus on the gospel in the End Time season. Prepare yourselves for Christ's coming. Dress in your Baptism. Attend to His Meal. Get acquainted with Him better in His Word. Let this be your families main plan and the event you look most forward to. Jesus is coming, and that's a good thing!

11/8/04 - 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."

This idea has come up in a couple of Bible classes now, but I think it is useful to use again, because I do not think we can hear it enough and some of you have not heard it yet. Think about Judgment Day. Who is the Judge? The Father? No, although most people assume it is the Father. The Son will be your judge. Who is your accuser? Satan, whose very name means accuser. Who is the defendant? You are. What is the standard? Either guilty or not guilty. Who is your defendant? ... Jesus Christ Himself. But He's the Judge! Yup. He's the Judge and the Advocate for every believer. The devil has plenty of evidence to supply. The stupid choices you made in high school and college, the pet sins that you thought no one knew about, the times you failed as a father or mother, son or daughter, the unfaithfulness you've exhibited in your use of the Means of Grace, and so on. The evidence is convincing. We are guilty. We have done those things; and there are no degrees of guilt in this court, and the sentence is always the same. Things are not looking good, but, remember, your Advocate is in with the Judge.

My friends, that is what Christianity is about. You have an Advocate on high who has already served your time. Apart from this Advocate, you have no chance of being declared not guilty, because you are guilty. Without the Advocate, you simply have a Judge for whose crucifixion and humiliation you are responsible. Every church that claims there is more than one road to heaven, that makes Christ a teacher or example rather than the Savior, that downplays sin and revels in what you do for God instead of what He's done for us, every church that turns your attention from your Advocate in Word and Sacrament to any other man-made Jesus may serve you just fine for this life, but it will leave you high and dry on Judgment Day.

You have an Advocate! Rejoice in that. Be ever grateful for that. Look forward to Judgment Day with joy, knowing that not guilty will be declared when the gavel strikes. Not

guilty? But we are guilty. No. We were guilty, but our Advocate has washed, dressed, and prepared us for trial, and He has paid the debt that we owed. Who can ever hear that too much? Who can ever forget such kindness from our Advocate/Judge? Who can keep that message to themselves? Who can stop the floodgates of thankfulness from spilling over into everything they do? "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." My friends, that's you. Amen.

11/9/04 – Revelation 20:11-15

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Notice there are two books mentioned here: a book of deeds and a book of names, a book that brings death and a book that brings life. The unbeliever, and many waffling believers, often hinge their hope on the fact that God simply will not remember all they have said, done, and thought, that He will not hold them responsible. But here we see that is simply not the case. Not only are our deeds remembered, they are recorded. God and His angels have taken notes on our transgressions. Imagine the terror of the man who realizes that every careless word, every secret deed, every seemingly innocent thought is listed there. No man, woman, or child, great or small, can escape the book of deeds. It is recorded in permanent ink and has permanent repercussions. This book does not have multiple endings, but one: death, Hades, fire.

But there is another book. This is a book of names. This is a book of life, mentioned seven times in the Revelation to St. John. This is a list of all those who have been brought to and preserved in faith through the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments. But how can any be saved when all will be judged according to the book of deeds? Who will be left to hear the reading of the book of life? You will. I will. Throughout Scripture we are promised that God will remember our sins no more, that He will blot them out, that He will remove our transgressions from us as far as the east is from the west. All that will remain in the book of deeds is our deeds of faith, the fruits of our sanctified life. Because our name is in the book of life, our sins will not be in the book of deeds. Those sins became Christ's on Calvary and His innocence ours. Our transgressions were erased from one book and our names added to another.

Imagine the relief and joy we will feel on that day! How many sins of others will be read on that day that will aptly describe our own iniquities as well! How many others will be condemned for the very things of which we have been forgiven! The biographies of the lost may not read all that differently than ours. "There, but for the grace of God, go I," races through our mind at the very thought. Thank God. Thank God that we will not be judged by our deeds, but by Christ's deeds. Thank God that we will not be seen in the filth that so often filled our heads, but by the Baptismal waters that washed them. Thank God that we will not be judged by the things that have come out of our mouths, but by the Body and Blood that was placed in them. Thank God that we will not be judged by the inappropriate things we let tingle in our ears, but by the

gospel promises that graced them. Thank God that, not our confession, but His Absolution, is what will resound for all eternity. Thank God that there are two books, because if not for the book of our names, we could never survive the book of our deeds. Lord, let the book of life spill over into the book of deeds today and every day, as we, your redeemed children, serve you in boundless gratefulness for the pierced hands that recorded our names.

11/10/04 – Ezekiel 14:12-23

The word of the LORD came to me: “Son of man, if a country sins against me by being unfaithful and I stretch out my hand against it to cut off its food supply and send famine upon it and kill its men and their animals, even if these three men-- Noah, Daniel and Job-- were in it, they could save only themselves by their righteousness, declares the Sovereign LORD. Or if I send wild beasts through that country and they leave it childless and it becomes desolate so that no one can pass through it because of the beasts, as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, even if these three men were in it, they could not save their own sons or daughters. They alone would be saved, but the land would be desolate. Or if I bring a sword against that country and say, ‘Let the sword pass throughout the land,’ and I kill its men and their animals, as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, even if these three men were in it, they could not save their own sons or daughters. They alone would be saved. Or if I send a plague into that land and pour out my wrath upon it through bloodshed, killing its men and their animals, as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, even if Noah, Daniel and Job were in it, they could save neither son nor daughter. They would save only themselves by their righteousness. For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: How much worse will it be when I send against Jerusalem my four dreadful judgments—sword and famine and wild beasts and plague—to kill its men and their animals! Yet there will be some survivors-- sons and daughters who will be brought out of it. They will come to you, and when you see their conduct and their actions, you will be consoled regarding the disaster I have brought upon Jerusalem—every disaster I have brought upon it. You will be consoled when you see their conduct and their actions, for you will know that I have done nothing in it without cause, declares the Sovereign LORD.”

Connections can get you a lot of things and a lot of places in this life. Free food, a deal on a car, free tickets to a game, a job, etc. It is good to know people; it is good to be able to name drop. But the usefulness of connections ends where God’s interaction with us begins. Even Noah, Daniel, and Job could not save Jerusalem. These were three men who had overcome seemingly unbearable suffering, persecution and obstacles. This was the dream team of the Old Testament. Yet even their presence in Jerusalem, even their connection to this people would count for nothing when it came to postponing or averting God’s wrath.

Were your parents Lutherans? Good. Was great-granddad a pastor? Great. Are you Lutheran because that’s what your parents were? Ok. Are you related to someone who is something special in the church at large? All right. But none of that matters when it comes to your relationship with God. That relationship, God’s judgment or mercy for you, is based solely on who you are, who He is, and who Your Advocate is. You, not your parents, were baptized by the Lord on the day of your new birth. You, not great-granddad, are offered Christ’s Body and Blood when you approach His altar. You, not that someone you’re related to, have a sermon applied to you every Lord’s Day here at Christ. You, not anyone else, are the most important confessor of sin and recipient of Absolution either in public worship or in private. As we prepare for Judgment Day this week, as we survey our standing with God, don’t worry about your

connections, affiliations, or memberships. Pay attention to your sin and then take refuge that your sin is forgiven in Christ, your Savior and your Judge. Noah, Daniel, and Job could not save Jerusalem. It was a city whose time for destruction had come. But there is a man who can save, and He does save, and He has saved you. Cling to this Savior who has taken a personal interest in you, by the personal means of Word and Sacrament. As I have mentioned many times, the most important words in Scripture are “for you.” Human connections count for nothing before God. He could care less who you know, unless you know Him, God made man, God crucified, and God risen from the dead.

11/11/04 – Matthew 25:31-46

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

Notice that the trial at Judgment Day is not like trials in our society. In our courts we follow this order: 1. evidence 2. verdict 3. sentence. In Christ's courtroom the order is as follows: 1. verdict 2. sentence 3. evidence. Is there significance in that? Most definitely. In Christ's courtroom the evidence is given to support the verdict, but the verdict is not based solely on the evidence. Yes, the damned are indeed damned for their sins, but the blessed also have sins that are not mentioned. Why are then not damned as well?

We have talked a lot lately about theological words, to make sure we all understand them. A couple of sermons ago, and in several Christian education classes, we have talked about the word "justification." To justify means to declare not guilty. That we are justified means that God has declared us not guilty. Why? Is He a crooked Judge? No, He is an honest Judge, and He knows that two people cannot be convicted for the same crime, and since HE HIMSELF has already paid the penalty for our sins, we cannot then be held accountable for them. We are declared not guilty for the Judge's own sake, because the Judge is Christ. Sure, we deserved the same punishment as the unbelievers. Our outward worthiness is not what separates the sheep and the goats. What separates the sheep and the goats is faith. The goats, those on the left, have

rejected Christ's sacrifice and spurned His Means of Grace, the gospel. They alone are responsible for their eternal doom. God created hell for "the devil and his evil angels," not for human beings, but the unbeliever has insisted on this eternal residence. In the sheep, however, the Holy Spirit has created, strengthened, and preserved a faith that clings to Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Christ Himself now dwells in us through His sacramental presence in Baptism and His Holy Supper. We deserve no credit for this miraculous truth, but rather freely acknowledge that we have been saved by grace. While the unbeliever alone is responsible for his damnation, Christ alone is responsible for our salvation. And God's grace has done more than save us. It has moved us to works of kindness and service to others and, ultimately, to our Lord. Thus, Christ can present evidence of our faith on the Last Day, showing that what the Spirit has planted has produced fruit. Showing the Christ in us (sanctification) has served Christ around us (the least of these...) as a result of what Christ has done for us (justification). And that, that is a reality that it takes an eternity to wrap your head around. Thank God He has given us just that!

11/12/04 – Daniel 5:1-30

Since this is a long lesson, permit me to break with the routine and make a few introductory comments instead of commenting after the lesson. As you read the lesson, consider that your days also are numbered. Each day could be our last, and, as Christians, we are called to live it as if it were. Don't wait to get ready to stand before your Maker, but dress yourselves for His banquet now. Wear your Savior's righteousness, placed on you in Baptism, in all you do. Speak with your mouth in a manner worthy of the Body and Blood of our Lord that has been placed into it. Learn the language of heaven by listening to God Himself speak to you in His Word. Bear your burdens with contentment, and even joy, knowing that what tastes bitter here will be the sweetest of delights in heaven and that what appears most dreadful in this life will be a most stunning crown and jewel in the next. Do not revel and trust in your own power and possessions as Belshazzar did, but rather look to Christ's power and the grace-giving gifts he has left us, to prepare us for His marriage feast above.

King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them. While Belshazzar was drinking his wine, he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. So they brought in the gold goblets that had been taken from the temple of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone. Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way.

The king called out for the enchanters, astrologers and diviners to be brought and said to these wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing and tells me what it means will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around his neck, and he will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom." Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant. So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more pale. His nobles were baffled.

The queen, hearing the voices of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet hall. "O king, live forever!" she said. "Don't be alarmed! Don't look so pale! There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father he was

found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. King Nebuchadnezzar your father-- your father the king, I say-- appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. This man Daniel, whom the king called Belshazzar, was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding, and also the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve difficult problems. Call for Daniel, and he will tell you what the writing means."

So Daniel was brought before the king, and the king said to him, "Are you Daniel, one of the exiles my father the king brought from Judah? I have heard that the spirit of the gods is in you and that you have insight, intelligence and outstanding wisdom. The wise men and enchanters were brought before me to read this writing and tell me what it means, but they could not explain it. Now I have heard that you are able to give interpretations and to solve difficult problems. If you can read this writing and tell me what it means, you will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around your neck, and you will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom."

Then Daniel answered the king, "You may keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to someone else. Nevertheless, I will read the writing for the king and tell him what it means. O king, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor. Because of the high position he gave him, all the peoples and nations and men of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled. But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like cattle; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone he wishes. But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways. Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription. This is the inscription that was written: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN. This is what these words mean: Mene: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end. Tekel: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. Peres: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians." Then at Belshazzar's command, Daniel was clothed in purple, a gold chain was placed around his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom. That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two.

11/15/04 – 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but

let us be alert and self-controlled. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Are you awake? What do I mean? Are your eyes open and ready? Are you looking? Are you looking for the coming of your Savior and King? Are you living like He may return at any moment? Does the question, “What if He returned now, what would He think of what I am doing?” cross your mind, or is it the furthest thing from it? Are you awake or are you asleep? If you have been sleeping, wake up! Come out of the night and into the light, and bring all those ugly sins of your slumber with you. Bring them into the daylight, so Christ can take them away. Give them to Him, because He will erase what you can only increase apart from His grace. Be ready for His coming. Don’t be caught like a deer in headlights when the trumpets sound. You do not belong to the night, so stop living like it. Be sons and daughters of the Day.

Our Lord Jesus Christ did not come to condemn you, but to save you. He did not come to pour out His wrath, but to give you salvation. He died that we may live, and not only live, but live together with Him. Live with Him. Live with Him where He has promised to be, and exude the life He gives You in Word and Sacrament in prayer with Him and His Father. Encourage one another by faithful attendance at God’s service, not only for your own benefit, but for the benefit of all who draw strength from seeing their brothers and sisters in the faith huddled together around their Life. Do all this, because while our physical eyes may require rest, the eyes of faith are always open and always looking for one thing: the coming of their Redeeming hero, the object of their faith. He came to give His life that we may live. He still comes in God’s service for the same reason. And He will come again to bring us to live with Him forever as we have now only lived with Him by faith. Are you awake?

11/16/04 – Hebrews 11:8-16

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

Notice how the things we do “by faith” are often the very things that run contrary to our instincts, our experience, and our comfort. I have many times heard people say, “But why would

God want me to do that. Doesn't He want me to be happy?" The answer: God wants you to do that "by faith," because that is the route by which He has chosen to bring you to happiness. The happiness we concoct for ourselves is often not happiness at all, but mere distraction and amusement. God has something better planned—a heavenly country—and He has unique ways of taking us to it. Read the seven verses preceding our lesson today and contemplate the routes God led these "heroes of faith" down. Notice that oftentimes the routes were not the easiest, but, wow, is the destination ever worth it. Abraham could have gone home whenever he wanted, but he was but a stranger here on earth, and heaven was his real home. And in the process of his walk of faith, Abraham was blessed beyond many of his time. He had a small village of servants of family. He had livestock and other goods. He had numerous other earthly, material blessings. The main thing he lacked that most had was a home. Yes, he had places he lived, but he never had a home. He was on his way home, so he simply had rest stops along the way. He was a man living by a promise: a promise of heaven, a promise of descendants, and, most importantly, the promise of a Savior.

God fulfilled all of those promises. In fact, we were reminded in our Holy Gospel last Sunday that God is still the God of Abraham, because He is the God of the living, and Abraham is still alive; and Abraham is home. In fact, in the account of the rich man and Lazarus, Abraham is not only at home, but he is the spokesman for his eternal homeland. See how that route Abraham traveled by faith, with all its uncertainties, trials, and unnerving twists, brought Abraham home, which no other path could have done? You are on that path too. You know all too well the uncertainties, trials, and unnerving twists I mentioned. You know also, however, that that route leads to a destination well worth the trip. It is a destination prepared for us through the suffering and death of the Savior. It is a destination oftentimes found at the end of our own path of suffering and death as well. But it is a destination filled with thousands and thousands of saints who walked the very same path we now walk before us, of family and friends, and it is a destination we can truly call home forever. Who wouldn't want to get there, no matter how long or hard the trip may be? May God give us faith for the journey!

11/17/04 – 2 Timothy 1:6-12

For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.

Elsewhere in Scripture, St. Paul tells us that he was an ambassador for God. Here he claims to be a herald and an apostle and a teacher. A herald speaks on behalf of someone else. He speaks words that are not his own. He speaks of a glory that he himself does not give. He points to a destination that is not yet in view. This message, this glory, this destination was worth whatever suffering declaring it would bring. St. Paul passed down this work as a herald and an ambassador to Timothy and others, who served as pastors. With that came a similar

responsibility to suffer, if need be, for the message, destination, and glory Timothy too would then publicly proclaim as a called worker. For Timothy, as for Paul, such suffering would be well worth it in light of the life and immortality Christ Jesus has brought to life through the gospel. That was a treasure no persecutor or court could take away. This week we celebrate that life and immortality the gospel brings, as we remembered those who have gone before us and now enjoy it in all its fullness. Know that we too will one day share in that same joy, which St. Paul and St. Timothy were called to proclaim, and that these days of suffering and uncertainty will seem like the blink of an eye in light of the eternity of joy we will then know firsthand. Thanks be to God, “who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace.”

11/18/04 – Matthew 22:23-33

That same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. "Teacher," they said, "Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and have children for him. Now there were seven brothers among us. The first one married and died, and since he had no children, he left his wife to his brother. The same thing happened to the second and third brother, right on down to the seventh. Finally, the woman died. Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?" Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. But about the resurrection of the dead— have you not read what God said to you, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living." When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching.

“He is not the God of the dead but of the living.” Sometimes we forget what it is all about, don’t we? We get caught up in the hypothetical and in the miniscule details of life that we face and lose sight of the big picture. “He is not the God of the dead but of the living.” So live. Inhale from His Word and exhale in prayer. Live. Treasure the time of grace you have and the blessings you have in it. Live. Take and eat. Take and drink. And then go and live, knowing that what has begun in you through this meal will be brought to fruition. Live, not only for today, and all the worries it brings, but for tomorrow, and the tomorrow. Now we marry and are given in marriage. Now we are involved in all kinds of contracts, arrangements, and agreements. We are enveloped in details and concerns. Live. Start to live now like you will live then. Know that if Christ has taken care of the biggest detail—the sin that separated us from God—the little details will be taken care of as well, and taken care of forever. He is your God, and He is the God of the living. Live.

11/29/04 – Habakkuk 2:1-4

I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint. Then the LORD replied: "Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it. For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay. ‘See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright—but the righteous will live by his faith.’”

Christ is coming! He is coming indeed! We can say this with confidence throughout the church year, but we say it with special vigor and vigilance during the Advent season. Christ is coming. So how shall we live? If He is coming, we will want to look impressive when He arrives, will we not? How will we do that? What will impress and persuade our Lord of our value? What works can we devise? What plans can we make? How best can we please Him?

These are natural questions, aren't they? When an important guest comes to visit during the holidays, we pull out all the stops to make an impression on them. We cook the turkey so it looks golden on the outside and is full of delight on the inside? We guess what our guest will want and try to provide it. We come up with plans and get provisions. Should we not do the same when dealing with the coming of our Savior God?

The LORD, the God who saves, has left no doubt about what He wants to find when He comes to us, whether in Word and Sacrament, or on Judgment Day. "The righteous will live by his faith." Intricate plans and carefully chosen works may indeed be crafted with the best of intentions, but they are meaningless to our Lord. "The righteous will live by his faith." Our faith will receive eternal life. Our faith will cry, "Come, Lord Jesus!" Our faith will receive our Lord at His coming with joy, as He will receive our faith with the same. Faith needs no contriving. Faith has no concern with flattering and wooing the Almighty God. Faith is a gift from God, and knows God intimately, because its object is Jesus Christ, God Himself, who alone gives faith its value. Because faith is these things, it does what is of God without thinking and without coercion. "The righteous will live by his faith." At the Judgment, our Lord will present evidence of such faith as He recalls its fruit. And our sins? They will be remembered no more, because God has declared us righteous in Christ. We are forgiven. We are products of faith, and producers of its fruits. May we give thanks for that faith this week! May we increase it through Word and Sacrament! May we express it in prayer! May we speak it with the words, "Come, Lord Jesus! Come!" In short, may we live the faith we've been gifted!

12/1/04 – *Jeremiah 23:5,6*

"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness."

What a name, *the LORD our righteousness*. There is so much packed into those four words: *the LORD our righteousness*. Today, as we celebrate our first midweek Advent service, let us meditate on those four Spirit-saturated words: *the LORD our righteousness*.

The, He is *the* LORD. He is not "a" LORD. He is *the* LORD, and there is no other. This prophecy is not generic, vague, or confused. *The* LORD speaks clearly and He says *the* LORD will come. The One who comes and the One who declares are the same. They are *the* LORD.

LORD, He is the *LORD*. Notice that this word is all in caps. This is Yahweh, Jehovah. This was the holiest of all God's names in the Old Testament. In fact, the Jews revered it so much that they stopped saying it, considering it blasphemy for such a powerful name to proceed from sinful lips. We call this name for God the *tetragrammaton*. It is the saving name of God. This is the God who delivered Abraham from every trial, who saved Israel from Egypt, who ransomed the exiles in Babylon, who was born in a manger to rescue a fallen human race from sin and death.

Our, we are the object of His attention and His benefits. This is personal. This is not some theoretical, irrelevant, impersonal message or speculation. This name is revealed to us and

revealed for us. What follows is applied to us and declared concerning us; He is the LORD *our* righteousness. Have no doubt about it: this is about us.

Righteousness, He is our *righteousness*. All too often we read or hear words in the Scripture and do not stop to ask and contemplate what they mean. What is *righteousness*? The word *righteousness* is a word that is crucial to the doctrine of justification. So, what is justification? Justification is a courtroom word. It is God's gracious declaration that the sinner is not guilty, not on account of the sinner's own virtue or merits, but on account of Christ's innocent death and glorious resurrection. The *righteousness* of God is nothing other than His goodness and mercy, whereby He absolves sin, confers grace, redeems from the devil, frees from death, and defends from every evil. The *righteousness* mentioned in this passage is the *righteousness* that is acceptable before God to merit eternal life. This *righteousness* is not our own by nature, but is Christ's and is imputed to us by God through Word and Sacrament. This *righteousness* is the free gift of God, received by faith. It is only by this *righteousness* that we can stand before God in the Judgment, and it is precisely because this righteousness is the LORD's that the LORD is satisfied with it.

"The days are coming." This *righteous Branch* that is our righteousness and imputes His righteousness to us is coming. He has come. He came in a manger to be born in human flesh to reconcile humanity to the divine. He comes. He comes in Word and Sacrament and renews and increases in us what He began in our Baptism. He will come again, and *the days are coming*.

His coming is what Advent is all about, and *righteousness*, God's *righteousness* made ours in Christ, is what His coming is all about. What grace! What mercy! What hope! *Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety*. God's people will be rescued and protected. So who is God's people? We are, by Holy Baptism. St. Paul writes, *"For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring"* (Romans 9:6-8). You are God's people, because you are children of the promise, because you are believers, and there is no faith without a promise. Christ is coming, and He is coming for you, just as He came on Christmas, to bring peace, to bring grace, and to bring *righteousness*. He is our *righteousness*. His very name says its so; He is *the LORD our righteousness*. Isn't that something? What a name! A name that tells us who He is; a name that tells us who we are. *The LORD our righteousness*.

12/2/04 – Genesis 49:8-10

"Judah, your brothers will praise you; your hand will be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons will bow down to you. You are a lion's cub, O Judah; you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down, like a lioness—who dares to rouse him? The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his."

Who does this sound like to you? I bet you would never guess. If you are really daring, get out your Bible and read chapter 49 and the blessings before you read any further. See if you can put two and two together. This prophecy is a prophecy about Christ. Yet this does not sound like the Christ our world often seems to know. Joseph, the most obedient son, would be blessed with numerous descendants and much land, but Judah got the Blessing of blessings. From Judah would come the Christ, the Messiah—Jesus.

How different is this Jesus from the Jesus of now. A conquering Christ? Would a conquering Christ have a church ridden with scandals, budget problems, and persecution worldwide? A conquering Christ? Wasn't He crucified and beaten like a dog? A conquering Christ? Aren't His followers the ones often mocked as uneducated, bigoted, unsophisticated, and antiquated. A conquering Christ? Please!

Yes, our Lord Jesus is the conquering Christ and at His name every knee will surely bow. Let not the apparent weakness of the Christ of grace and mercy lead you to lose sight of the unmitigated judgment and wrath of Christ the King, who is roused to anger by obstinate rejection of His selfless death on Calvary. Christ wants to condemn no one—He came to save—and for that reason is all the more livid when forced to do so by our denial of His Word and Sacrament, His life-giving Spirit.

Give obedience to this King, to whom the ultimate scepter belongs. Give Him obedience, because He is the King of Kings and He will come to rescue those that are His and to destroy those who are not—we are for Him or against Him, friends or enemies. How do we give obedience? St. Paul writes, *“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.”* Faith places one under Christ's rule. It submits to His gracious promise of life, protection, and mercy. And from this obedience that is faith, a new obedience in life follows.

My friends, rejoice in the One to whom the nations owe obedience. Give Him your obedience, not because you owe it to Him, but because you want to, because you have the obedience that is faith, a free gift from God. While Christ's rule may not seem so impressive now when we focus on the hardships and challenges of His Body, the Church, do not lose sight of the crown on His head. He is coming, and He is coming with power and grace; power for those who've opposed Him, and grace for those who've believed. Come, Lord Jesus, come!

12/3/04 – Zephaniah 3:14-17

Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away your punishment, He has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm. On that day they will say to Jerusalem, “Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. The LORD your God is with you, He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing.”

How can God's service ever be boring? Think of what we are doing: *“Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy.”* Can our deliverance from sin, death, and the devil ever be dull? Can Immanuel, God with us, be boring? Can God delighting us and quieting us with His love be too repetitive? Can the LORD, the God who saves, singing over us be tiresome or tedious? No, we can be boring, dull, repetitive, tiresome, and tedious, but not God's service, not Christ's coming, not God's quieting love distributed in Word and Sacrament. When we consider who we are, who it is that meets us, and what takes place, the line between heaven and earth is erased and we can truly sing with the angels and the saints of every age, “Holy, Holy, Holy,” and “O Christ, Lamb of God.” We can discern Christ's very voice reverberate through the reading of His Word and its proclamation in the sermon. We can feel the life come back into our hands as we fold them in prayer and extend them in the Sacrament. We get enough noise and racket during the week. Let the LORD quiet you with His love. We don't need any kitsch, contrived, emotionalized propaganda and schmaltz

to make our heart glad with rejoicing; we have Christ, who comes to us in His service and will come again in glory to take us to join the heavenly choir in Jerusalem the golden, God's city above. If you think that is boring, dull, repetitive, tiresome, and tedious, you need to open your eyes and ears, because you've been missing what's really going on. *"The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing."*

12/7/04 – 2 Peter 1:3-11

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins. Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

St. Peter here assumes that all receiving his letter are believers. He is writing to justified saints, that is, those declared not guilty for the sake of Christ, receiving the benefits of this verdict of God through faith. Since St. Peter is talking to baptized and catechized believers, he speaks to them about sanctification, that is, our growth and progress in Christian living. Justification is instantaneous. God says "not guilty" and the sinner becomes a forgiven saint. Sanctification is a process. It flows from our justification and is a product of the faith, which receives God's promises of grace. This process is always taking place, going either in one direction or the other. One is growing in sanctification or backsliding. How do we know which is the case? We look at our lives.

"For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love."

St. Peter here provides a progression of sanctification. Faith gives birth to all that follows, and all that follows flows from faith. Look at St. Peter's list. Do you recognize yourself in it? Are these virtues characteristic of your life, or occasional visitors? Is your life one exuding goodness, that is, virtue and moral energy that empowers courageous and selfless acts? Are you growing in knowledge, or are the truths of the Catechism and of Scripture long lost and replaced with useless facts and song lyrics? Are you self-controlled, or is your self controlled by others and the media? Do you persevere in the challenges life sends your way, or do you surrender and fold your family, church, or any other aspect of life too often and too easily without a fight fueled by prayer and conviction? Are you seeking God's will in your life through Bible study and prayer, or is piety simply something you feign every other Sunday (if that)? Is brotherly kindness predominant in our relationships with our fellow members, or do we prefer to gossip about each other's faults and assume the worst about them? In short, is our life characterized by a scriptural, faith-formed, Spirit-fed, honest and selfless love, or by the love of the world that winks at sin, lets others trod

the path to destruction without warning, and expresses itself in ways that run counter to the will of our God?

My brothers and sisters, you are forgiven. Christ has come to reconcile you to God. By your Baptism, you have become a partaker in the divine benefits of His death and resurrection. When He comes again, He will come to gather all who have remained in the faith the Holy Spirit created in them by water and the Word. Remain in that faith. Be faithful in Word and Sacrament, because if we are not growing in the virtues that spring from faith, we are backsliding, and that is a sign our faith is slowly fading. *Make your calling and election sure*, that is, make it evident by a life of Christian virtue. As the Greek says, “attest” to God’s calling by your outward life. Bear the fruit of faith, because such fruit is proof, not a cause, but proof, that your faith is alive and well; and when faith is alive and well, souls are eager and ready “*receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*”

12/9/04 - Revelation 1:4-8

John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen. Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."

Notice how the apostles almost always start their letters with what matters most: grace and peace. All of our Christian faith and life rests and flows from these two things: God's undeserved favor, and our reconciled relationship with Him. Notice how Christ is the firstborn from the dead, and take comfort that He was the first, but not the last to conquer it. Notice what Christ has done: loved and freed US from OUR sins by HIS blood. Ours became His and His became ours. Notice that we are now a kingdom of priests. We can go straight to our God in prayer, without any mediator or ambassador. We can offer Him our lives as living sacrifices. We can listen to Him speak without a go-between in His Word. Notice what He deserves as a result of these gracious deeds: glory and power for ever and ever. May our lives, words, and teachings bring Him just that! Yes, it is true and shall be so. Notice what is happening next. He is coming again. Think of what happened the first time He came. He brought us grace and peace. He took ours and gave us His. He made us a kingdom of priests. If He was so kind and concerned for us in His first coming, how can we not look to His coming again with eager expectation. All will see Him. Some will tremble in fear, sensing their coming condemnation for rejecting the benefits of His death and resurrection. Others will see Him with joy, for He is the one who is, who was, and who is to come. He is the Almighty. He is the Savior. He is Jesus. He is the one who loves us and has freed us from our sins. Will you be some, or will you be others. Be others, my friends, because that is what God has made you. Mourn Him, by turning from the sin that caused His piercing. Welcome Him, but knowing Him now as He has promised to be known: in Word and Sacrament. He is coming. May He come soon! Amen.

12/13/04 – Matthew 11:11-15

I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears, let him hear.

None are greater than John the Baptist, Jesus says. He had an amazing capacity for service to the Lord. He had the privilege, and the responsibility, of proclaiming the coming of the Christ. But he is also less, because his career ended before Christ's redemptive work culminated in Good Friday and Easter Sunday. We have a more blessed and complete view of our glorified Lord than this mighty prophet, this Elijah who was to come. We have seen Him enter into His glory, we are sons and daughters of the New Testament, looking back at Jesus' mighty work on our behalf. St. John the Baptist closed out the age of prophecy and ushered in the age of fulfillment. He closed out the age of the old covenant and ushered in the age of the new covenant in Christ's blood. He was a transition. He transitioned to us, the Holy Christian Church, Christ's very Body. The coming Messiah, foretold in John's sermons, has now been revealed in Christ. There is only one prophecy whose fulfillment we await: Christ's coming again, and its fulfillment is no less certain than the fulfillment of all the prophecies that preceded it. "He who has ears, let him hear." Rejoice that St. John the Baptist was greater, that he was a mighty prophet, foretelling the Christ. Rejoice that he was lesser, that we New Testament people have a revealed Christ, while John had a foretold One. Look at Christ in the way you have been blessed to look at Him, fixing your eyes on His accomplished work, accomplished all for you.

12/14/04 – Matthew 3:1-11

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

You may recall that years ago the predominant liturgical color for the Advent season was purple, the color of repentance. Advent is a season of repentance. As we prepare for the coming of our Lord, we examine ourselves and repent of our personal sins. We walk in the gospel, but always through the law. "Confessing their sins, they were baptized." The pattern has always been the same. Examine yourself this Advent season. How have you fallen short of the Lord's commands? Where have you particularly struggled? What things specifically have been the

biggest obstacles to your Christian life? In what ways has the sinful nature manifested itself most easily and most frequently? Know yourself, and then know Christ, who washes and renews you.

When men and women came to John, confessed their sins, and asked what they should do, he replied, "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance." Empowered in your Christian life and renewed in your thinking by the gospel, produce fruit in keeping with your confession of faith. Sorry is nice, but as forgiven Christians, we will also seek to fix what we have undone. Each and every one who can identify his or her sins can also then easily identify the appropriate fruits of repentance. Can we always repair what we have broken? No, but when we can, we will try, and when we can't, we will nevertheless strive to never do such harm again.

You are forgiven. The one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire has come and baptized you through the hands of His called servants. John brought repentance, but He also brings grace. Rejoice in His coming. Long for His coming again. And, while you wait, lay roots in Word and Sacrament and bear fruit in keeping what He's forgiven you. Blue is also the color for Advent. We live in constant hope, because our Lord provides constant mercy. Look to the skies, and speak with a redeemed tongue, "Come, Lord Jesus, come."

12/15/04

Included below are our Midweek Advent Sermons from the past two Vespers services:
SECOND MIDWEEK ADVENT SERMON

Micah 5:2-4

One Who Is to Be Ruler in Israel, Whose Origin Is from of Old, from Ancient Days

Did you hear the collision? Two huge and unfathomable realities just crashed into one divine and revealed Truth. Here God becomes Man and sin meets the Savior. Here the prophet confesses his faith with us according to the Nicene Creed: "*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father*" who "*for us and for our salvation, came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and became fully human.*"

In Hebrew, the word root *yatsah* is used twice here: "*out of [Bethlehem] will come forth*" and "*whose comings forth are from of old.*" This Ruler who is coming forth from Israel, that is, who will be born as a Child in Bethlehem, will also have come forth from of old. In other words, He will be true Man, born of the Virgin Mary in a real geographical place at a real historical time, and true God, eternally begotten of the Father.

I must admit that as I prepared to write this devotion, I was lost. I kept reading the text, but, apparently, I never really read it. Then I found a sermon Luther wrote on this text and felt like beating myself over the head. How blind I had been! I remembered Jesus words to the Pharisees: "*These are the Scriptures that testify about me.*" I had been reading the text, and I knew that the One prophesied was Jesus, but I did not see Jesus here as He appears: God made Man for us and for our salvation.

Last week we talked about Israel and how in New Testament times the Holy Christian Church has become the New Israel. The spiritual promises made to Israel in the Old Testament now apply to Christ's Church, which is composed of all believers. In our lesson today, the prophet writes about this coming Ruler over Israel: "*He will stand and shepherd His flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD His God. And they will live securely, for then His greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.*"

This promise is for and about us, because we are God's New Testament Israel. We are His people, made such by Holy Baptism. Christ has come into His kingdom, into your hearts by faith,

and now rules it as its Shepherd, leading souls to safety. As many of you learned in catechism class, the kingdom of God is His rule in our hearts by faith now and His rule in heaven forever; and our Advent King is coming again soon to make these kingdoms one.

Notice the interesting order in which the prophet places the comings forth of our Advent King. He first mentions His human origins, being born in Bethlehem, and then proceeds to His divine origins, being begotten of the Father from eternity. The prophet does not write carelessly here, but is divinely and purposefully guided by the Holy Spirit, who inspired every prophet and apostle who recorded His thoughts. The comings forth of our Lord Jesus Christ are included in this order, because this is how we are to approach Him.

St. Matthew quotes this prophecy in his Gospel, chapter two. When Herod asked where the Christ-child would be born, his scholars cited this passage of Scripture and told him Bethlehem. Micah's prophecy took flesh in the infant the Magi adored. This infant to whom they gave gifts was the greatest Gift of all, God from God made Man for man. Like the Magi, we too find and worship God only by finding and worshipping this Child. For this reason, the prophet records Christ's human birth first. Luther writes:

If you want to know this Child aright, go first to Bethlehem, that is, learn that this Child is born of the Virgin Mary, true man, flesh, blood, and bone like yours and mine, yet without sin, with a mission to fulfill and discharge in this world, namely, as Micah says, to be a Ruler who would redeem His people from sin and eternal death. Then, after these things are well learned and the Child is found, seen, and touched in the manger, the light will dawn, too, that this son of Mary is also the Son of God, born of God before time and from everlasting. He has two goings forth or births, and yet is only one person. Consequently, when you lay hold of this Man, Christ, you have laid hold of God. (Complete Sermons of Martin Luther, vol. 5, 213,4)

I missed Christ here at first, because I started in the wrong place. I simply sought the Ruler, coming forth from of old, and missed the Child, born in Bethlehem. I had the order wrong. Don't do the same today. Find Christ here in the manger, wrapped in Micah's prophecy. Hold Him, never letting go. Know that as you hold this little Child, unimpressive though He appears, you hold your very God, begotten from all eternity, now weak and helpless, that He might make you strong. Here is your Ruler, coming forth from Bethlehem, coming forth from of old, all for you and your eternal safety, Man because He must die for men, God because only God's death could pay for the sins of the world. In the quietness of this moment, hear that monumental collision, as God becomes Man and sin meets the Savior. Come, Lord Jesus, come! Amen.

THIRD MIDWEEK ADVENT SERVICE

Isaiah 7:10-15

Immanuel

Synod's last bulletin insert wasn't good. Most of Lutheranism is in shambles and isn't Lutheran at all. Half our congregation isn't here with any regularity. Attendance is up, but will likely drop as my honeymoon period ends. Many Wisconsin Synod churches are struggling to maintain what they have, let alone grow. Why delude ourselves with the hope of a better future?

Isaiah writes, "*The Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.*" Do you know what the future looked like at that time? Israel was up a bad stream without a paddle. Their destruction seemed inevitable. Only a remnant of believers remained. The leadership was weak and ineffectual. The prophet Isaiah

faced unrelenting resistance throughout his ministry, and, according to tradition, was sawed in half. That is hardly a grand indicator of hope, in fact, if one of the area pastors had recently been sawed in half, I highly doubt I would still be hanging around here. I like both my halves too much for that. There was little if any reason for hope.

We talked last Monday in Bible class about how times have changed, but not people and their predisposition to sin. Yes we can sin more effectively and more extensively now than ever before, but sin is still sin. Now we shoot missiles rather than beating each other over the head with clubs. We steal identities instead of breaking into houses. We click onto websites instead of hiding magazines. We fly planes into buildings instead of burning crosses. My how we have progressed! Even worse, when we reap the harvest of disobedience that we have sown, we grumble against God, as if He were responsible for our poor decisions. We are just like Old Testament Israel. Our self-imposed situation all too often seems hopeless; but, alas, there is still blue on the altar.

Ahaz just wanted deliverance from Syria; that was what he was concerned with. He'd ignored the Lord for years, but the Lord nevertheless answered, and, as is usual, addressed a lot bigger need than deliverance from Syria. Yes, God would deliver Israel from Syria, but that was small potatoes. God was going to deliver them from something even bigger, something even more deadly. God was going to deliver them from sin and from death itself. God could've given Ahaz any sign, but He chose to prophesy a virgin giving birth to a child named Immanuel, God with us.

We too have specific situations from which we want God to deliver us, yet God, as He did with Ahaz, desires to get to the heart of the matter, to the root of our problems. He still points us to Immanuel, born of a virgin. What is wrong in your life right now? How insurmountable do your problems seem? Look to Immanuel; look to the virgin's Son, God with us. No matter what is wrong, God always looks to the source, and the source is always sin, which has gotten in the way of our relationship with Him. Turn to Immanuel. Rejoice in Immanuel. Live with Immanuel, and let those lesser troubles fall into place. Left to our own devices, we often lose perspective in spiritual matters, but when we look into the manger, big problems become small, and the Solution, wrapped in swaddling clothes, becomes apparent.

God is with us. He is with us in His Word and in the Sacraments. He dwells in us by faith. I do not know what your Syria may be today, throwing your life into confusion, but I do know that God's answer is always bigger than our problems, because God's answer is Immanuel, God with us, now and forever. Put your God to the test. Ask Him for a sign, and find it, wrapped and set out for you to discover on Christmas Day. Come, Lord Jesus, come. Be God with us that we may be with God. Amen.

12/16/04 - 2 Timothy 4:5-8

But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day--and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

"But you, keep your head in all situations." Well, I can only read that far before I feel a little ill-equipped for the ministry. But I guess when you consider what follows, that is an understandable prerequisite. *"Endure hardship,"* which means there will be hardship. *"Do the*

work of an evangelist,” which means that there will be uncomfortable conversations with those who do not understand or even oppose the gospel. *“Discharge all the duties of your ministry.”* Um, how many hours are there in a week? *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”* Now there are some words it would be great to end my ministry with some day, but I would say any chance of that is already slim to none. *“Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for His appearing.”* There you go Paul. Why didn’t you just say that right away? This is what Advent is all about and, really, this is what our entire Christian life, and the ministry of the Word in specific, is all about: longing for that crown the righteous Judge will reward to me and all who long for His appearing on that day.

Keep in mind that the man writing all this is the same *“wretched man”* and *“chief of sinners”* that wrote Romans 7:24 and 1 Timothy 1:15. But he writes in Christ, and so, washed and renewed, he can properly write, *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”* Notice what St. Paul does not say. He does not say he never took a punch or stumbled in the ring. He does not say that he finished in first. He does not say he kept the faith unwaveringly and on his own. Rather, he has fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith.

I fight that fight as a minister of the Word. I take a lot of punches, but I fight, not because of my own strength or stamina, but because I have Christ and His gospel in Word and Sacrament in my corner. You fight the fight in your vocations as well. I am sure you’ve taken your share of shots to the chin, but you keep your head up, longing for His appearing, and keep swinging, or in hard times, simply manage to keep your guard up. We are all running the race. Sometimes we sprint with sanctified joy. Sometimes we struggle to put one foot in front of the other. But we keep moving, or rather, Christ keeps moving us. We have kept the faith. At times, we have not done much to further the faith, and sometimes the faith seemed lost in a sea of despair, but we have kept it, or rather, have been kept by it as the seed Christ planted in our heart in Baptism refused to die, as the Spirit obstinately refused to leave us to our own devices.

“But you, keep your head in all situations.” We never should have made it this far, but we have, and we may be bruised and tired, but we are still in the ring, we are still in the race, and we are still holding to that faith that brought us this far in the first place. As St. Paul concludes his letter to St. Timothy at the end of this chapter, I think it is fitting I end this message to you *“The Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Grace be with you. Amen.”*