



REFLECTIONS

Epiphany - Transfiguration

January 6th - February 25th, 2023



Epiphany - Transfiguration

JANUARY 6TH - FEBRUARY 25TH, 2023

*This season's Reflections were written by
Rev. Peter Ill, pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, Milstadt, IL*

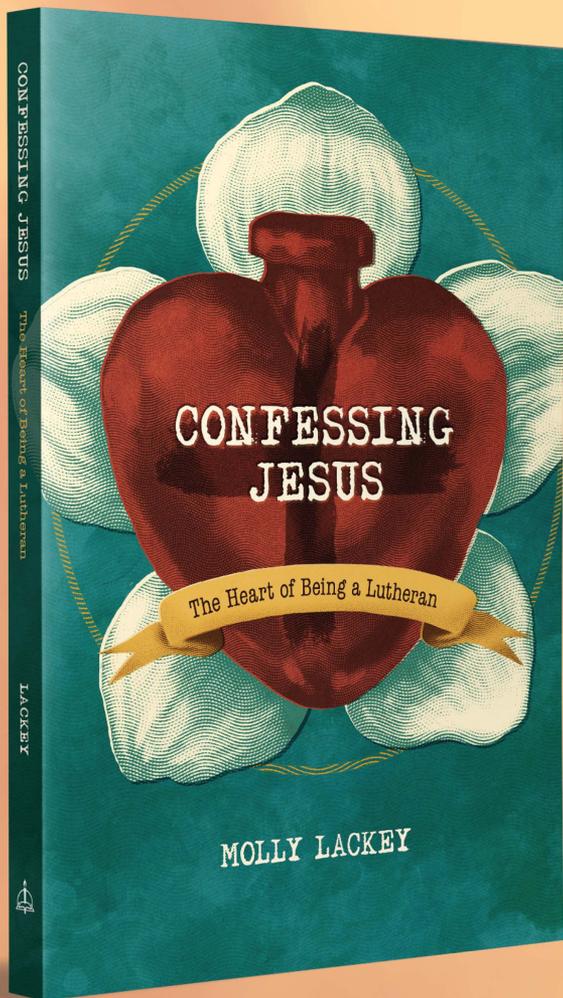
2022 Reflections Staff:

Karrie Jacoby (Reflections Editor)

©2022 Higher Things, Inc., Lisbon, IA

Know Jesus. Know your identity.

Your identity in the world can be confusing.
Your identity in Jesus Christ is certain and complete.



Knowing and confessing Jesus remains at the heart of Christian faith, defining not just what you believe but who you are. Claim your identity in Jesus, trust His promises, and find joy in His salvation.

Learn more at cph.org



1.800.325.3040

© 2022 Concordia Publishing House

A Short Form for Daily Reflection

ADAPTED FROM LUTHER'S SMALL CATECHISM

Make the sign of the Holy Cross and say:

In the name of the Father, † Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Read the Psalm for the Day (A table of daily psalms can be found in Lutheran Service Book, page 304).

Read "Today's Reading" if there is one listed.

Read the Daily Lectionary selections.

Read the Reflection for the Day.

Say the Apostles' Creed.

Pray the Lord's Prayer.

Pray one of these little prayers:

(In the Morning)

I thank Thee, my Heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Thy dear Son, that Thou hast kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray Thee to keep me this day also from sin and all evil, that all my doings and life may please Thee. For into Thy hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Thy holy angel be with me, that the Wicked Foe may have no power over me. Amen.

In the morning go to your work with joy, singing a hymn, such as the Ten Commandments, or what your devotion may suggest.

(In the Evening)

I thank Thee, my Heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Thy dear Son, that Thou hast graciously kept me this day, and I pray Thee to forgive me all my sins, where I have done wrong, and graciously keep me this night. For into Thy hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Thy holy angel be with me, that the Wicked Foe may have no power over me. Amen.

If it is evening, then go to sleep promptly and cheerfully.

The Epiphany of Our Lord

JANUARY 6, 2023

Today's Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 66:1-20; Luke 3:21-38

When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary, his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. (Matthew 2:10-11)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. If you've ever been on a long trip, you've asked the question, "Are we there yet?" The anticipation of finishing the trip and stretching your legs makes you really excited when you realize that you are almost to the destination. When you see the final highway exit sign or when you hear the pilot lowering the landing gear, you get excited. The Magi on their way to see the Messiah were excited when the star they had been following stopped. They rejoiced! But they hadn't even gotten to their destination yet. They still had to finish the last little bit of their journey and meet the Christ-Child.

The journey of God's people through the Old Testament was also drawing nearer and nearer to its fulfillment. There is a reason for joy as that star stopped. All the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament were about to meet their fulfillment. The Magi aren't the only ones who should have excitement. You should be filled with joy too because Jesus is about to be seen by people that He has come to save.

It's striking that Jesus comes to save these star-gazing Gentiles. Their very livelihood centered on telling the future by reading the stars, a breaking of God's second commandment. No matter their sin, Jesus came for them. Not only was He born, not only was a star set in the sky so they would come see Him, but He also took up His cross to suffer and die for these non-Jewish sinners. For you, a sinner, it is right for you to be filled with joy. Christ the Lord has been born for you, and He reveals Himself to you. You don't see Him in a house or cradled in Mary's arms, but you see Him in the words of Scripture and in sermons preached to your ears, you see Him in the waters of Holy Baptism, and you see His body and blood given for you at Holy Communion. Rejoice with the Magi as you see the same Jesus! In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

O God, by the leading of a star You made known Your only-begotten Son to the Gentiles. Lead us, who know You by faith, to enjoy in heaven the fullness of Your divine presence; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Saturday of the Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 7, 2023

Today's Reading: Introit for the Baptism of Our Lord

Daily Lectionary: Ezekiel 1:1-14, 22-28; Romans 1:1-17

I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him. (Psalm 2:7-11, 12c)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. The Apostle Paul wrote 13 letters in the New Testament, directed mainly to churches. One such letter was to the Church at Rome. This church was in a rather unique situation. Rome was a great city of commerce. This brought with it a large amount of foot traffic. While this could be an advantage to the Church, this also proved to be a disadvantage as well, for this brought with it an influx of pagan non-believers.

With this pagan influence, it was very easy for the Romans to forget who they were, blood-bought and redeemed children of God. They needed a gentle reminder of who they were, much like we need the same reminder today. And so Paul reminds them to return to their roots, that is, return to God's Word and what it means for them. There in God's Word, they would be reminded of the promise God made to them and what it meant for their daily life, for there they would find their hope.

What was written in former days was God's promise of salvation, not just for His people in the Old Testament, not just for the Church at Rome, but for all people everywhere. God's instruction was for them to remain faithful to Him, just as He promised He would remain faithful to them.

Ultimately, what was written in former days was the promise of the Messiah. This is what God intended for His people, then and now. He intended to be with them forever. Due to sin, that was no longer a possibility. That is why He made the promise of a Savior, so that the relationship between God and man would be restored to what it should be.

It is through that Word of God, the promise He made so long ago and recorded in Holy Scripture, that we find our hope. Our hope isn't found in ourselves or in the things of this world but in Jesus. At times, the Romans forgot where their hope was to be found. We too can forget that as well. That is why this season of Advent is so important for us, to help us prepare to receive Jesus as our salvation, for it is in Jesus do we have our hope, both now and forevermore. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and take them to heart that, by the patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (Collect for the Word)

The Baptism of Our Lord

JANUARY 8, 2023

Today's Reading: Matthew 3:13-17

Daily Lectionary: Ezekiel 2:1-3:11; Romans 1:18-32

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15 But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. 16 And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; 17 and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:13-17)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. John the Baptist was right. According to human reason and understanding, Jesus didn't need to be baptized. He was perfect, being that He is God in the flesh. On the other hand, John the Baptist, as a sinner, did need the waters of baptism and the grace that it gives. The reality is that sinners need baptism. According to what sinners know and understand, God's Law condemns them as breaking the words and commandments of God. Or, more specifically, God's Word of Law convicts YOU of breaking His commands. You are a poor, miserable sinner. When you look at Jesus, it is right for sinners like John the Baptist and you to recognize that you have nothing to offer Jesus but that He has everything to offer you.

According to human logic, that might be true that Jesus doesn't need to be baptized. Thanks be to God that He doesn't let you do His thinking for Him! According to His divine wisdom, He does need to be baptized. It is there, in those baptismal waters, that your Lord Jesus is united with you in those muddy waters. Better yet, it is in the waters of baptism that He is washed into and that you are washed into that you and Jesus, God in the flesh, are united. In your baptismal unification, you receive the unification with His cross and with His empty tomb. When you are united with Jesus, His perfection and His righteousness and His peace become true of you as well. From your perspective, He doesn't need those baptismal waters. On the other hand, you need those baptismal waters, and from His abundant grace, your Savior gives them to you.

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Father in heaven, at the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River, You proclaimed Him Your beloved Son and anointed Him with the Holy Spirit. Make all who are baptized in His name faithful in their calling as Your children and inheritors with Him of everlasting life; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Monday - First Week after the Epiphany

JANUARY 9, 2023

Today's Reading: Isaiah 42:1-9

Daily Lectionary: Ezekiel 3:12-27; Romans 2:1-16

"I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, 7 to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. 8 I am the Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols. 9 Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them." (Isaiah 42:6-9)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord spoke about the One that He would send into the flesh to save humanity, to save you. The Lord said that He called His Son in righteousness, to make the blind see and to free the prisoners. He would fulfill everything that He had promised. The Lord's word never refers to Him empty or void. The Lord keeps His promises, so we shouldn't be surprised that the words of the Lord through the prophet Isaiah and the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism are so similar, even though about 600 years separate the two sets of words.

The fact that the words are similar isn't enough to change your life, though. What is enough to change your life is what the words say. These words that describe Jesus are life-givingly important to you. The Lord Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, has come to free the captives and to make the blind see. The old things have passed away and new things are coming. He is the Lord enfleshed. That changes everything for you, because it is you that He forgives. It is you that He loves. It is you that receives the promise of eternal life. You don't need to hope or wish that Jesus likes you. Instead, He makes you confident that you are someone He has forgiven. You are someone that He has baptized. You are someone that He calls by His own name. It's certainly not fair, but it is gracious, and your Lord is nothing if He is not gracious to you. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Go, My children, sins forgiven, At peace and pure. Here you learned how much I love you, What I can cure. Here you heard My dear Son's story; Here you touched Him, saw His glory. Go, My children, sins forgiven, At peace and pure. (Lutheran Service Book 922, Stanza 2)

Tuesday - First Week after the Epiphany

JANUARY 10, 2023

Today's Reading: Romans 6:1-11

Daily Lectionary: Ezekiel 18:1-4, 19-32; Romans 2:17-29

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Romans 6:5)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. It seems pretty normal to think about your baptism in the past tense, like it's something from which you've moved on. But no Christian ever moves past their baptism. Baptism into Christ Jesus isn't something that you move on from. It's not something that you grow out of, like a set of clothes you wore when you were younger. Your baptism into Jesus is something that you grow into. It is the very truth of eternal life, and you will live forever in your baptismal grace. Jesus says so! Since you are connected with Him, you will live with Him forever.

The eternal life that you have with Jesus makes you free from sin. Now, you are a holy saint of God, not suffering from the curses of sin or death or your sinful nature anymore. Those problems have been answered through the baptismal waters that Jesus has washed you into. But it wasn't the water that did such great things, it's the blood of Jesus shed on the cross for you that did it. Jesus delivers His shed blood and His own death and His glorious resurrection for you in that baptism. While it didn't look like much other than some splashes of water from a font of water, it is there that Jesus made you His own. That's what makes the gift of baptism so great – it is the work of Jesus for you. Just like His death on the cross and just like His resurrection from the dead, He did it for you and delivers you from all your sins, now and forever. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

God's own child, I gladly say it: I am baptized into Christ! He, because I could not pay it, Gave my full redemption price. Do I need earth's treasures many? I have one worth more than any That brought me salvation free. Lasting to eternity! (Lutheran Service Book 594, Stanza 1)

Wednesday - First Week after the Epiphany

JANUARY 11, 2023

Today's Reading: Table of Duties: To Wives

Daily Lectionary: Ezekiel 33:1-20; Romans 3:1-18

"And you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, Thus have you said: 'Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we rot away because of them. How then can we live?' Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel? (Ezekiel 33:10-11)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. The Lord hates sin. Scripture is clear about this. The Lord judges sin, and the unrepentant, unbelieving souls are judged too. But the Lord isn't like a schoolyard bully, sneaking around waiting to beat up sinners with judgment. He Himself warns sinners to watch out, to turn, to repent. Sometimes, when people are warned about a terrible thing that might happen, they get hopeless. If you've heard about that algebra test, you might just think, "Well, what's the point of studying, since I can study for days and I'll still fail?" That's what the people that Ezekiel was prophesying to said. "How can we live?" The Lord spoke through Ezekiel to call them to repentance. God wanted them to leave behind their wicked ways and live.

1 Peter 3:1-6 speaks in a similar way. Go check it out, then come back. Peter writes to wives that even if they are married to a nonbeliever, they prophesied in their actions to the truth of God's mercy. Peter writes to women who were married and then became Christians. They weren't to divorce their husbands, but to continue being married to them, submitting to them in love even though the men weren't Christians. These faithful wives, adorned with a gentle and quiet spirit, might win their husbands to the Christian faith. But these words apply to you if you're not married, and even if you're not a woman. The quiet and gentle spirit of faith testifies as a watchman, giving the hope of Jesus Christ to believers and unbelievers alike.

You are full of hope because Jesus Christ has died and risen for you. He submitted in quietness and gentleness to death so that you won't die. Because He lives, you also will live. He has won you to faith in Him. You are part of the Church, the bride of Christ. There is no hopelessness for you. The Lord has turned you from the wickedness of unbelief so that you have everlasting life with Him. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Come, join in Cana's feast, Where Christ is honored guest. He welcomes all who come to taste, The wine His hands have blessed. (Lutheran Service Book 408, stanza 1)

Thursday - First Week after the Epiphany

JANUARY 12, 2023

Daily Lectionary: Ezekiel 34:1-24; Romans 3:19-31

For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:22b-24)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. All have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. That's a stark word of judgment. God's Law tells you this. You haven't kept the Ten Commandments. You haven't loved the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind. You haven't loved your neighbor as yourself. But that's not the end of this passage, or even the end of the sentence. The same "all" that have sinned is also the "all" that are justified by God's grace as a gift. Jesus died for all sinners. Everyone is covered by Jesus' shed blood. Not everyone believes, but Jesus has come in the flesh to die and to rise for all sinners.

That matters to you because you can never say, "I'm such a terrible sinner that Jesus shouldn't care about me." It isn't true to think, "My sin is so great that Jesus won't forgive me." Certainly, the devil, the world, and your sinful nature might try to convince you that Jesus doesn't forgive you, but consider the source! Christ declares that He has shed His blood for you. Your guilt is covered over by Christ. You are justified by the One who is just. God brings justice, not on your terms but on His terms. Is God's grace fair? You might not think so. You might not think it's fair for someone who has hurt you or who has lived a certain way to be forgiven. But God acts in His justice and mercy, not just for you, but for everyone. He brings His justice through faith and by faith to all people. There is no distinction, and that means that you aren't beyond God's desire or ability to forgive. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Lord, I believe Thy precious blood, Which at the mercy seat of God Pleads for the captives' liberty, Was also shed in love for me. (Lutheran Service Book 563, stanza 3) Text: Public domain

Friday - First Week after the Epiphany

JANUARY 13, 2023

Daily Lectionary: Ezekiel 36:13-28; Romans 4:1-25

No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.” (Romans 4:20-22)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. Abraham was a man of faith. God gave Abraham a promise, and Abraham believed God. God counted that faith as righteousness. But sometimes, reading the New Testament (like Romans) about people who lived in the days of the Old Testament (like Abraham in Genesis) makes us think, “There was a lot of time between Abraham and Paul. How does Paul know that Abraham didn’t waver?” After all, today we face all manner of challenges to our faith. The world condemns us as outdated, the devil tells us that we misunderstand God, and our own sin-fallen flesh and mind says that we’re irrational. That makes us sound very different from Abraham who didn’t waver concerning the promise of God. Is Abraham our Father? Do we have the same faith that Abraham did?

Stop! Thinking like that takes your eyes off Jesus. Abraham isn’t saved because he was so good at believing. Abraham is saved because Jesus died and rose for him. When you worry that your faith is weak or that you might waver or that you might not be able to withstand the devil who prowls around you like a roaring lion, your concerns are all about yourself – are you strong enough, good enough, faithful enough? You’re not. If you hope to be righteous because you are good enough, you have no chance. You aren’t saved by the quality of your faith, but by Jesus whom your faith rests in. The Holy Spirit calls you to believe the promises of Jesus. Your faith might waver. You might doubt. Certainly, you will not be able to commit to perfect faith. Your Lord, the Holy One, makes you holy.

Abraham isn’t saved because He was so good at believing. Abraham is saved because God took on flesh to die and rise for him. You aren’t saved because your faith is so good, or because you have done such a good job of being faithful, or anything like that. You are saved because Jesus died and rose for you and because the Holy Spirit has called you by the Gospel, enlightened you with the light of Christ, gathered you with the Church, and sanctified you in God’s holiness. Your faith isn’t about you, but in Jesus who is the resurrection and the life for you. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

The God of Abr’ham praise, Whose all-sufficient grace Shall guide me all my pilgrim day, In all my ways. He deigns to call me friend; He calls Himself my God. And He shall save me to the end Through Jesus’ blood. (Lutheran Service Book 798, stanza 3)

Saturday - First Week after the Epiphany

JANUARY 14, 2023

Today's Reading: Introit for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Daily Lectionary: Ezekiel 36:33-37:14; Romans 5:1-21

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. (The Introit for the Second Sunday of Epiphany, Psalm 19:1-4, 14)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. In Psalm 19, David and the Church pray that God would let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in the sight of God. That's in Psalm 19:14, but earlier in the same psalm, all the talking isn't done by you or by David. The heavens declare God's glory. In the daytime, speech pours out. All creation does the talking, from the sky and the sun. After that comes God's law and testimony and precepts. There is nothing in all creation that isn't made by God.

That includes you. You have been made in the image of God, not merely because God breathed the breath of life into Adam's nostrils, but because the crucified and risen Jesus breathed the breath of the new life of forgiveness into His disciples and into you. The words of your mouth and the meditation of your heart are acceptable to God, not because you're alive but because you have been recreated and restored from sinfulness. The image of God was lost when Adam and Eve fell, but you are in the image of God because Jesus has restored the image of God for you. When you were an enemy of God, Christ Jesus died for you. Jesus' act of righteousness in death and resurrection rescues you from death and condemnation and makes you alive again.

Now, your mouth opens and your lips declare the praises of God who has called you from darkness into His marvelous light. You join all creation, not because you want to, but because Jesus has died and risen for you and you have eternal life in Christ Jesus your Lord. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

From all that dwell below the skies Let the Creator's praise arise; Alleluia, alleluia Let the Redeemer's name be sung Through ev'ry land by ev'ry tongue. Alleluia, alleluia! Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia! (Lutheran Service Book 816, stanza 1)

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany

JANUARY 15, 2023

Today's Reading: John 1:29-42a

Daily Lectionary: Ezekiel 37:15-28; Romans 6:1-23

And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.” (John 1:34)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. Who is Jesus? The answer to this question changes everything. In the reading today, it changes everything for Simon and Andrew, just like it changes everything for John the Baptist. If Jesus is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world, He is worth following and worth believing. That means that He is not just another teacher, or just someone with wisdom and insights. If Jesus is the Son of God, like John the Baptist declares, then everything is different. Jesus has come to change everything. The One who was baptized by John when John saw the Holy Spirit descend on Him is the same One who calls Simon and Andrew to follow Him.

Why should Simon and Andrew follow Jesus? Because He is the Son of God who takes away the sin of the world! If He was anything less than that, following Jesus might lead to a better life or a path of wisdom. But that's not worth following Jesus completely and totally. Jesus doesn't call you to a project or a side-project. Jesus calls you to a life of devotion, because Jesus has devoted Himself to you. He is the One who unites Himself with you in the waters of baptism. You have a death like His, and you have a resurrection like His because you are baptized into Him.

Jesus is certainly the Lamb of God who has taken away the sin of the world, but never, ever lose sight of the fact that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away your sins. Jesus isn't a Savior "in general" but He is a Savior for you. Jesus is the Messiah who invites you to "come and see" all His goodness. Is He your Savior? Come and see! Does He forgive your sins? Come and see! Does He love you? Come and see! He came for real people with real names, like Simon and Andrew and you. He has called you His own when He claimed you in the waters of Holy Baptism. There, He placed you in His name, and He will never give up on you. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Almighty and everlasting God, who governs all things in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the prayers of Your people and grant us Your peace through all our days; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Monday - Second Week after the Epiphany

JANUARY 16, 2023

Today's Reading: Isaiah 49:1-7

Daily Lectionary: Ezekiel 38:1-23; Romans 7:1-20

he says: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (Isaiah 49:6)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. In the second "servant song" in Isaiah, the Lord speaks about His servant to come. In verse 3, the Lord says, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." It is impressive to be the Lord's servant, and it is a big deal that God will be glorified in this servant. But this servant isn't just a run of the mill hero or world leader. The servant is ultimately fulfilled not in any human governor nor in the people of Israel but in Jesus. Jesus doesn't just lift up the tribes of Jacob and the people of Israel. Jesus, God in the flesh, brings salvation not only for the people of Israel but for all people. He is the light of the nations and brings salvation to the end of the earth. This is the same Jesus who declared, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12) It is Jesus who was called forth from His mother and worshiped by Gentile Magi because He is their Savior, too.

Jesus has come so all people, Jewish and Gentile alike, know the salvation of God. God isn't the Creator of only some, nor is He the Redeemer of only a few. The Lord loves all people, just as Jesus died for all people. He calls all people to repent and confess the holy name of Jesus. Those who repent and believe are those who will be saved. When in Luke 13, someone asked Jesus if those who would be saved were few. Instead of answering with a simple, "No," Jesus calls His disciples to focus on their own faith and on His work for them. Jesus is the Savior of all, yes, but He is your Savior. Not only is He the glory of Israel and the Light of the Gentiles, but He is your Lord as well. He came to shed His precious blood for you and to rescue you from sin, death, and the devil. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

This is the Savior of the world, The Gentiles' promised light, God's glory dwelling in our midst, The joy of Israel. (Lutheran Service Book 937, stanza 2)

Tuesday - Second Week after the Epiphany

JANUARY 17, 2023

Today's Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Daily Lectionary: Ezekiel 39:1-10, 17-29; Romans 7:21-8:17

God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:9)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. During His earthly ministry, Jesus called disciples including Simon and Andrew. John tells us how Jesus called himself and his brother James from fishing with their Father to follow Jesus. Matthew tells us how Jesus called him from his tax booth to follow Jesus. But the calling of those disciples is not an exception. Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth that God called even them into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. The call to follow Jesus isn't something that was reserved for special Christians or Christians a long time ago. In Luther's Small Catechism about the Third Article of the Creed, we confess, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith." Notice that we confess the Holy Spirit has called me. This isn't a call to someone else or people who are disconnected from you. No, this is personal!

The call to follow Jesus is personal. The water of baptism and the word of God for you in your baptism is personal. The certain words of the Absolution declaring your forgiveness are personal. The body and blood of Jesus given and shed for you are personal. These aren't given only for the salvation of the world, but for the salvation of you, a sinner in need of God's grace. The devil, the world, and your sinful flesh all try to convince you that you are alone and isolated. "See," they tell you, "you're like a lost lamb that nobody cares about. No one else is like you, and nobody understands the problems you have." That is what the voices of temptation say. But Jesus, along with the Holy Spirit, shout in response, "That's not true!" Your God has taken on flesh for you. The Holy Spirit has called you. You are not alone. Jesus has promised to be with you always, even to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:20) In all things, you are not alone.

You are not lacking in any gift. The Lord Jesus Christ will sustain you to the day of His return. (1 Corinthians 1:7-8) These are personal promises for forgiven sinners that Jesus dearly loves. You aren't missing anything because you have the grace of Jesus, and that grace will last forever. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen

Let us also live with Jesus. He has risen from the dead, That to life we may awaken. Jesus, You are now our head. We are Your own living members; Where You live, there we shall be In Your presence constantly, Living there with You forever. Jesus, let me faithful be, Life eternal grant to me. (Lutheran Service Book 685, stanza 4)

The Confession of St. Peter

JANUARY 18, 2023

Today's Reading: Mark 8:27-9:1

Daily Lectionary: Ezekiel 40:1-4; 43:1-12; Romans 8:18-39

And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." (Mark 8:29)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. Text of the Reflection. "Who is Jesus?" is the question that runs through all the readings this week, starting with John the Baptist's identification of Jesus as the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world and continuing with Isaiah identifying Jesus as the Lord's Servant and Paul mentioning that we have fellowship with our Lord Jesus. Today, as we celebrate the Confession of St. Peter, Jesus bluntly asks the question. He starts by asking "Who do people say that I am?" That's a question that you would hesitate to ask even of a friend, in case they would tell you something that people are saying behind your back about you that you don't want to know. But after the disciples answer that question, Jesus asks them who they, the disciples, say He is. Peter answers that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. You would expect a recognition that Peter was right or some kind words from Jesus. Instead, Jesus tells the disciples not to talk about His identity as the Christ.

Then, He goes on to say that it's necessary for Him to suffer and die and after three days, rise from the dead. That doesn't seem very Messiah-like, does it? Messiahs don't die, Christs don't suffer, and the Lord's servant shouldn't go through these things that Jesus said He would go through. This seems absurd to the point that the Christ-confessing Peter pulls Jesus aside to ask, "Are you sure?" What a difference between "You are the Christ" and "I'm not sure you've thought this through."

How often do we look at the actions of God and think, "It doesn't seem like God is doing what He should." You struggle with God's actions seeming ridiculous to you, or to anyone else. That's why it's so important that Jesus is the Christ. What you think of God's actions isn't nearly as important as who Jesus is. He is the Messiah, the Christ who has come to save you from your sin, even your sin of thinking that Jesus is being God wrong. Your Lord is the Christ who saves you with His great love. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Heavenly Father, You revealed to the apostle Peter the blessed truth that Your Son Jesus is the Christ. Strengthen us by the proclamation of this truth that we too may joyfully confess that there is salvation in no one else; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Thursday - Second Week after the Epiphany

JANUARY 19, 2023

Today's Reading: Table of Duties: To Parents

Daily Lectionary: Ezekiel 44:1-16, 23-29; Romans 9:1-18

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:4)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. When Holy Scripture addresses parents, this is not just parenting advice. If you want a book to make you a better parent, there are whole shelves of parenting books at the local bookstore, and blogs and podcasts all over the place online. Scripture's goal isn't to make you a better parent, but Scripture is concerned about making you a better Christian. For those who are called to be parents, that includes making them Christian parents. Therefore, this command isn't about consequences or discipline or routines or consistency. This is about parents providing their children discipline and instruction in the Lord. Parents are called to teach their children faith in Jesus.

This is important, even for people that haven't been called to be parents now. Whatever callings you have are callings to do what you do as a Christian. You are called not only to be a high school student, but to be a Christian high school student. You aren't only an employee, but a Christian employee. You aren't just a friend, but a Christian friend. You aren't only a son or a daughter, but a Christian son or daughter. In all things, Jesus is the focus. This isn't merely to say that you are called to make other people Christian by any means necessary, but to live out your faith in Jesus Christ in a way that bears witness to the fact that Jesus is the Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

As your parents serve you in Christ, providing instruction and discipline in the Lord, listen to them. Receive their discipline and encouragement as from the Lord, since He is the One who commanded it. Where you have opportunities to serve others in Christ, do that. Life as a Christian student and friend, son or daughter, employee and everything else you do is service to Jesus. Apart from Jesus, you would be just like everyone else. By His precious blood, Jesus has made you in His image and covered you with His blood. That makes all the difference. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

*In what You give us, Lord, to do, Together or alone, In old routines or ventures new,
May we not cease to look to You, The cross You hung upon— All You endeavored done.
(Lutheran Service Book 853, stanza 4)*

Friday - Second Week after the Epiphany

JANUARY 20, 2023

Daily Lectionary: Ezekiel 47:1-14, 21-23; Romans 9:19-33

As I went back, I saw on the bank of the river very many trees on the one side and on the other. And he said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, and enters the sea; when the water flows into the sea, the water will become fresh. And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish. For this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh; so everything will live where the river goes. (Ezekiel 47:7-9)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. The prophet Ezekiel had a vision, but many things in Ezekiel's visions can be difficult for us. A river flowing from the Lord's temple in Jerusalem downhill into a lake seems a little odd, but not too difficult to understand. Around that lake there are trees and animals and fish. In fact, where the river goes, everything will live. The wrinkle is that the lake where the river flows is called "the Arabah" – what we know as "The Dead Sea." The Dead Sea is so salty that nothing can live there. There aren't any trees alongside it, there aren't fish in it, and nothing really lives there. Common sense says that if fresh water flows into saltwater, the fresh water becomes salty.

But Ezekiel's vision stands everything on its head. This fresh water flows from the Lord's temple in Jerusalem and it transforms the salty Dead Sea into the Sea of Life. That's backwards! There will be trees and fish and life around the sea because what comes from the temple transforms everything. So it is with the work of Jesus. When Jesus takes on flesh, His divinity is not corrupted by humanity. Instead, when He takes on flesh, His divinity transforms His humanity. The Athanasian Creed confesses, "Although He is God and man, He is not two, but one Christ: one, however, not by the conversion of the divinity into flesh, but by the assumption of the humanity into God." In other words, Jesus being God in the flesh pulls His humanity into righteous perfection. The fact that humanity is pulled into the Godhead is good news for you. The same Jesus who is God and man also calls you His brother. He has formed you in His own image because of His great love for you. This isn't like human relationships, where people can be criticized for their friends. Instead, He transforms you because of His loving and gracious relationship with you. The Lord who led Ezekiel to see a salt sea transformed to a place of life sees poor, miserable sinners transformed into forgiven, righteous children of God. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

He lives and grants me daily breath; He lives, and I shall conquer death; He lives my mansion to prepare; He lives to bring me safely there. (Lutheran Service Book 461, stanza 7)

Saturday - Second Week after the Epiphany

JANUARY 21, 2023

Today's Reading: Introit for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Daily Lectionary: Joel 1:1-20; Romans 10:1-21

I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you. All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you. For kingship belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations. All the prosperous of the earth eat and worship; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, even the one who could not keep himself alive. Posterity shall serve him; it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation; they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it. (Psalm 22:22, 27-31 – The Introit for the Third Sunday after Epiphany)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. Text of the Reflection. Who's in charge here? That's a question a parent or a teacher might ask when things are getting out of hand. Psalm 22 sees a world where things seem to be getting out of hand. The Messiah cries out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" He is surrounded by those who mock Him and shake their heads at him. It certainly looks like things have gotten out of hand. Yet, near the end of Psalm 22, it becomes clear that things are not out of hand at all. All the earth will remember the work of the Lord because kingship belongs to the Lord.

No matter how it was intended, Jesus hanging on the cross under a sign that declared Him "The King of the Jews" seems out of control. But the work of God is never out of control. Instead, the Lord rules over the nations and over all creation from the cross. How out of control and backwards looking is that? But no matter what it looks like, the reality of the Lord ruling over all things in death and in resurrected life is exactly the way things are. The Lord's righteousness for you is seen in His death and resurrection. From His cross flows mercy and grace for you. You don't have all things under control. You might feel like you don't have anything in control. Kingship belongs to the Lord who loves you, and that is the best news for you. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Christ Jesus lay in death's strong bands, For our offenses given, But now at God's right hand He stands, And brings us life from heaven. Therefore let us joyful be, And sing to God right thankfully, Loud songs of alleluia! Alleluia! (Lutheran Service Book 458, stanza 1)

The Third Sunday of Epiphany

JANUARY 22, 2023

Today's Reading: Matthew 4:12-25

Daily Lectionary: Joel 2:1-17, Romans 11:1-24

"Follow me, and I will mak you fishers of men." (Matthew 4:19)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. During the season of Epiphany, we rejoice that the light of Christ shines to people who are in darkness. When Jesus began His earthly ministry, He went about Galilee preaching, teaching, and healing. The people who heard Him were called to repent of their sins and they found forgiveness and life from Jesus, the King who had come to save.

As Jesus did this work, He was not alone. He first found Peter and Andrew, James and John, and He called them to follow Him. Each time Jesus entered a village, they were with Him. They heard each sermon, listened to people ask questions, and learned from Jesus' answers. They watched Him have compassion on the sick and oppressed and saw His power to save. And each sermon, each answer, each miracle strengthened their faith in Jesus.

After Jesus ascended, the light of Christ continued to shine through the ministry of the apostles as they witnessed the resurrection of Christ to all the people they encountered. They preached what Jesus preached, taught as He taught, and had mercy like He did. They brought Jesus to people. But the light of Christ needed to continue to shine even after the Apostles died — so the Holy Spirit inspired the apostles and evangelists to write down what Jesus had done and how they had carried His light wherever they preached.

The light of Christ continues to shine forth in the Gospels and Epistles in the New Testament to all who hear them preached and to all who read them. As you read how Jesus called the people of Galilee to repent of their sins and believe in Him, you know that Jesus is also calling you to repent and believe. When Jesus teaches in the synagogues of that region, you know He is in your church on Sunday, teaching you through the preaching of the Word of God and blessing you in the sacraments. When Jesus has compassion on people in need, you know He invites you to come to Him in prayer with your needs.

Jesus is not far away. He came near to the people of His day in His daily work and life. He stays near to you today through the blessings of life and forgiveness that He gives you in the Word and Sacraments. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities and stretch forth the hand of Your majesty to heal and defend us; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Monday, The Third Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 23, 2023

Today's Reading: Isaiah 9:1-4

Daily Lectionary: Joel 2:18-32, Romans 11:25-12:13

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwell in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. (Isaiah 9:2b)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. When Isaiah wrote this, the Northern Kingdom of Israel had been invaded. God punished Israel for their sin and rebellion against Him by raising up the mighty armies of Assyria against them. The Assyrians were extremely cruel and violent — so much so that God later punished them for their cruelty.

The first attacks took place in the lands of the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. The suffering these people endured was legendary — when Isaiah mentioned these territories, everyone remembered and shuddered.

Isaiah speaks a prophecy of hope to the people of these burned and shattered communities. These regions which had endured such darkness and desolation would be a place where the greatest light that has ever shined would beam forth -- God would send the Messiah, Jesus, who is the Light of the world. (You can read about this in Matthew 4:12-25, the reading for yesterday's devotion.)

Jesus lived and ministered in Galilee, in Naphtali. He journeyed around this region preaching, teaching, healing, and calling people to repent and find forgiveness of sins in Him. People who had been lost in the darkness of sin and death saw the light of eternal salvation when they heard Jesus and believed in Him.

The darkness the people had suffered under the Assyrians was terrible. But the light that they were comforted with by Jesus was so pure and true that it still shines today and will shine forever. The light of Christ shines for you.

Jesus did not just come to save the people of Israel. He lived to show all people in every place and time the love and mercy of God. He died on the cross to pay for the sins of the whole world. He rose from the dead to give eternal life to all who believe in Him.

Jesus brings light that shines forever. He brings light that shines into all darkness, even the darkness which you endure in your life. Fear not the darkness of sin, death, and suffering. Jesus has brought you light, forgiveness and peace. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Almighty God, grant us a steadfast faith in Jesus Christ, a cheerful hope in Your mercy, and a sincere love for You and one another; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

The Feast of St. Timothy

JANUARY 24, 2023

Today's Reading: Matthew 24:42-47

Daily Lectionary: Joel 3:1-21, Romans 12:14-13:14

“Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes.” (Matthew 24:45,46)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. After Jesus rose from the dead, the apostles went out into the world – faithfully preaching, teaching, baptizing, and witnessing to His resurrection. But because they would not be here on earth forever, they wrote down their witness about Christ, which we have in the New Testament. They also took up the work of training pastors so they could continue to preach Christ, baptize, and teach the Scriptures to those in their care.

It's likely that all the apostles participated in training up pastors in whatever places Christ sent them, but they didn't write about how they did it – except for St. Paul. His letters to Timothy and Titus are known as the Pastoral Epistles because he writes to them about how they should serve as pastors and how they should train up new pastors. These letters continue to shape how new pastors are trained to this day.

On January 24, 25, and 26 the Church celebrates how Christ established and sustains the office of the Holy Ministry by remembering St Timothy, St Paul and then St Titus. The day for St Paul stands between those of the two early pastors to remind us how Paul faithfully trained them to serve. These three days remind us that it is dear to Jesus Himself that new generations of pastors and servants in the Church are trained to bring the Gospel and Sacraments to all nations until the Last Day.

Jesus calls you to help with this work too: Consider whether you have the gifts to train to serve as a pastor, teacher, or deaconess. Encourage your friends or family members who might have these gifts to pray about faithfully serving. Support the work of our Concordia universities and seminaries with your prayers and offerings. Share encouragement and pray for those who are already serving as pastors, teachers, deaconesses, and lay leaders in your congregation.

We give thanks to God that He sent Timothy to serve as a faithful pastor and confessor of Christ and that He has continued to provide shepherds to serve His flock through the ages. Pray God to raise up more men to serve as pastors and for dedicated men and women to serve as teachers and deaconesses and lay leaders in the Church, here and around the world. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

“God of the prophets, bless the prophets' sons; Elijah's mantle o'er Elisha cast. Each age its solemn task may claim but once; Make each one nobler, stronger than the last.” (LSB 682 vs 1)

The Conversion of St. Paul

JANUARY 25, 2023

Today's Reading: Acts 9:1-22

Daily Lectionary: Zech. 1:1-21, Romans 14:1-23

Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:3,4)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. During Epiphany we celebrate that the light of Christ shines to people who are in darkness. Saul was immersed in that darkness. Blind to the truth, Saul "ravaged the church, entering house after house and dragging off men and women and putting them in prison (Acts 8:3)." Looking back at his behavior at this time, Paul told Timothy that he was "the chief of sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15).

But Jesus Christ is the Light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome. He could've struck Saul down to stop him —yet instead Jesus confronted Saul on the road to Damascus so that He could bring Saul into His light. He condemned Saul's actions with the simple words "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Saul realized he'd been fighting against God's Messiah. Christ's light had literally struck him blind.

Saul deserved punishment and damnation. But Jesus came to save sinners, including Saul. Jesus had died on the cross to take the punishment Saul had earned. When Saul regained his sight after 3 days, Ananias baptized him into Jesus. Instead of darkness, he now knew the light of the truth that Jesus is the Christ —he knew God forgave him of his crimes, and he had eternal life in Christ.

Such grace could not be held in silence. Saul went forth as Paul and preached Christ Jesus to Jews and Gentiles. He journeyed tirelessly to bring the light of Christ to those in darkness. He was a shining example of the grace of God: If God could save even him, the chief of sinners, God could save anyone -- no matter what they had done.

Christ comes to you, just as he came to Saul. He calls you to repent, He washes away your sins in Holy Baptism, and He gives you eternal life completely by His grace. He stays with you throughout this life until He takes you home to heaven. May the peace of Christ that comforted Paul also be with you. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Almighty God, You turned the heart of him who persecuted the Church and by his preaching caused the light of the Gospel to shine throughout the world. Grant us ever to rejoice in the saving light of Your Gospel and, following in the example of the apostle Paul, to spread it to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Feast of St. Titus

JANUARY 26, 2023

Today's Reading: Luke 10:1-9

Daily Lectionary: Zech. 2:1-3:10, Romans 15:1-13

*Go your way; behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves.
(Luke 10:3)*

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. Through these last three days, the Church gives thanks to God for the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We've already praised God for the work He did through St. Timothy. We praised God for bringing St. Paul to faith and sending him out as an apostle. Today we praise God for the work He accomplished through St. Titus, Pastor and Confessor.

Titus was a friend and co-worker with St. Paul, traveling with him on his third missionary journey. Paul had Titus remain on the island of Crete to serve as pastor. He was tasked with establishing good order in the congregations and to identify and train other men who could be faithful pastors. Paul wrote a letter to Titus, describing what qualifications and duties pastors should possess. This letter still instructs the church to this day.

Serving in Crete was not easy for Titus. Some people were teaching false things about Christ and how we are saved. Paul encouraged Titus to teach the truth of the Word against these adversaries. The new pastors who were being trained also had to be equipped to stand against these false teachings.

Pastors still need to protect the church against false teaching today. Satan and the world always bring new lies against the Gospel to try to deceive people away from Christ. Jesus and the Apostles specifically warned the church that these attacks would keep coming (see Luke 10:3 and Acts 20:28-31). So pastors not only proclaim the Gospel in love. They also need to recognize false teaching and counter it with the truth to protect Jesus' sheep in their care.

Always pray that God would raise up faithful pastors and equip them for the work. We thank God for our faithful seminaries at Ft. Wayne and St. Louis and all the programs that prepare the next generation of pastors to serve.

But God also calls each believer to learn the Word so they can be mature in faith, strong in love, and avoid false teaching. You grow in the Word by attending worship and Bible Study, reading your Bible, and faithfully studying Luther's Small Catechism. The Catechism contains simple explanations of the key teachings of Scripture. If you know it well, you will be well protected against those who lie about Christ.

As we thank God for St Titus, we also thank God for all who train new generations of pastors. May God equip them for faithful service to the Church. We also praise God for all faithful Christians serving in all the vocations that God has given them. May we all be mature in Christ, faithful to the Word, and ready to serve in love. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Friday, The Third Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 27, 2023

Today's Reading: Luther's Small Catechism - Table of Duties: To Children

Daily Lectionary: Zech. 4:1-5:11, Romans 15:14-33

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." (Ephesians 6:1-3)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. Today we hear from the Table of Duties in the Small Catechism about what God expects of children. St. Paul quotes the 4th Commandment teaching children that they should honor their parents. (BTW, one of the best places to read about what the 4th Commandment means for children and parents is in Luther's Large Catechism. It's only a few pages long, and if you have parents or children, it will help you.)

God sent His Son, Jesus, to die on the cross and rise again to be the propitiation for the sins of the world. He is the sacrifice that pays for our sins, so that by grace through faith in Christ, we are forgiven and declared just. From the moment people fell into sin, through to when Christ died and rose, and onward to the end of the world — God wants people to hear the Gospel and be saved. The 4th commandment is so important because in each generation, God has given parents the responsibility to bring their children to Christ and to teach His word to them (Deuteronomy 6:4-7).

Parents start by bringing their children to church to be baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Parents then are to bring their children to church to hear the Word, learn about Christ and His work, sing His praises in the liturgy and hymns, and partake of Holy Communion when they are ready.

Since God has given this role to parents, He also commands children to honor their parents. When children honor their parents, they are ready to receive the good teaching and wisdom that God wants parents to give them. So, children are to respect their parents, speak well to them, help them, learn from them, and regard them as those whom God Himself has sent to bless them.

Many children struggle to give the honor which parents deserve. Many parents struggle to raise their children to walk with God. But when parents and children repent of their sins, are forgiven in Christ, and walk with Him as He intends, the blessings that follow are rich. They are blessings that last all through life in this world and in Heaven. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Almighty God, heavenly Father, You have blessed us with the joy and care of children. Give us calm strength and patient wisdom that, as they grow in years, we may teach them to love whatever is just and true and good, following the example of our Savior, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Saturday, The Third Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 28, 2023

Today's Reading: Introit for Epiphany 4 Ps. 22:27-31; antiphon: Ps. 22:22

Daily Lectionary: Zech. 6:1-7:14, Romans 16:17-27

I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you... (Psalm 22:22)

Today, our reading is the last section of Psalm 22. It speaks of the power and glory of Christ Jesus. We glorify Him who conquered sin and death by His crucifixion and resurrection. We rejoice that the light of His Gospel shines forth to all nations and will continue to be proclaimed from generation to generation until He returns in glory. Amen.

The main part of this psalm has a very different feel however. It describes His crucifixion in graphic ways. It's a vivid description of how Jesus suffered when He was nailed to the cross. It's such an important prophecy of the crucifixion that Jesus Himself quoted the beginning of the psalm while He was on the cross: "And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46)

Read the rest of Psalm 22. Behold Christ on the cross. Think for a moment about what he endured. Realize that He suffered this for your sake. He died like this to bear your punishment. He shed His blood to wash you from your sins. The agony He endured was great, but He obeyed His Father and suffered it for you to save you from sin, death, and hell. He did this to rescue you because He loves you with an everlasting love.

Toward the end of the psalm the message shifts from describing the crucifixion to celebrating the resurrection. Verse 24 says, "For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, and he has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him." The Father raised Jesus from the dead. Christ did not stay in the tomb but rose again in glory! Alleluia, Christ is risen!

The Gospel of salvation —that Jesus died and rose to save people by grace —has been preached from generation to generation until it came to us today. In Baptism you were joined to the death and resurrection of Christ (Romans 6). This is such a wonderful thing that we cannot keep it inside! We praise God for rescuing us. And we join with our family at church, and with believers around the world speak of the glory of Jesus who triumphed to save us. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

O Jesus, light of all below, the fount of life and fire, surpassing all the joys we know, all that we can desire: May every heart confess Your name, forever You adore, and, seeking You, itself inflame to seek You more and more! (LSB 554 vs. 3,4)

The Fourth Sunday of Epiphany

JANUARY 29, 2023

Today's Reading: Matthew 5:1-12

Daily Lectionary: Zech. 8:1-23, 2 Timothy 1:1-18

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. During Epiphany we celebrate that the light of Christ shines forth to people in need of His grace and mercy. In our reading today, crowds of people were following Jesus to hear Him speak, so He led them to a mountainside and began to teach them. He starts by listing who is "blessed" in God's eyes: The poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted.

Those who have been wronged, who are grieving, and those who work for peace and righteousness often don't feel blessed. But God sees them, and He pulls them near. He blesses them and shines the light of the Gospel upon their hearts. He did on that mountainside 2000 years ago—and He blesses you today, as well.

Jesus blesses those who are in desperate need. The gifts He gives cannot be earned by any kind of good works. We're not worthy of receiving them—they are too great. Our Savior offers forgiveness for sins, eternal life, the blessings of salvation in this world and in heaven.

Only the Holy Spirit can cause you to know how profound your poverty is before God, and only the Spirit can bring you to know and believe that the blessings of Christ are truly yours. The Spirit brings you into those blessings in your Baptism. The Spirit comforts you in those blessings through the Word. The Spirit strengthens you in those blessings in the Lord's Supper. Through these gifts you find the blessings of Christ to help you through the hardships of this world.

So, when you go through life and mourn, face troubles that need peace, hunger for God's righteousness in these dark times, or must bear with meekness the vanity of the world—you face all these things in Christ. Even when you are persecuted for your faith in Him, He is with you and blesses you. He endured all these things for you on the cross. When you suffer, He knows how to comfort you with blessings rich and free. He gives you those blessings He proclaimed from the mountain, the blessings He won for you on the cross. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Almighty God, You know we live in the midst of so many dangers that in our frailty we cannot stand upright. Grant strength and protection to support us in all dangers and carry us through temptations; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Monday, The Fourth Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 30, 2023

Today's Reading: Micah 6:1-8

Daily Lectionary: Zech. 9:1-17, 2 Timothy 2:1-26

"Hear what the LORD says: ... "O my people, what have I done to you? How have I wearied you? Answer me!" (Micah 1a, 3)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. In Epiphany, we celebrate that the light of Christ shines forth into the world, proclaiming the truth of His word—that people are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. We celebrate that God has raised up people to serve in His church through the ages, from prophets and apostles, to pastors, teachers, parents, and every vocation.

God chose Micah to call Israel to repentance—to speak the truth in power to Israel (3:8). The princes in the government took bribes and oppressed the people with their injustice. The priests refused to perform sacrifices unless they were paid, and they practiced divination for money. The false-prophets proclaimed that the LORD would never bring trouble upon Israel in spite of their sins (See Micah 3:9-12).

Micah called Israel to repent (6:8) and to come to God for the forgiveness they desperately needed (7:18-20). But most importantly, Micah prophesied that one day the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem and would rule faithfully over the people.

We learn from Micah how important it is for everyone to repent—in every station and vocation in life. We all need to remember that God loves justice, kindness, and humility. His Law defines righteousness and makes it clear how we are to live. Repentance teaches us to take God's Law seriously. The Law shows how we are to live in love with all people. Repentance takes God's command seriously that we are to love God and our neighbor (Matthew 22:37-40).

But when we hear the Law, we learn that we have sinned against God and deserve punishment. So we run to Jesus for the forgiveness He won for us on the cross. He bestows his grace upon us in our Baptism, in the Supper, and in His Holy Word (That's why we call them the Means of Grace). We are saved by His grace through faith.

And having been forgiven, we strive to walk in love. The love we show does not earn forgiveness from God. We are forgiven freely by grace. But having been forgiven each day we strive for the justice, kindness and humility which God desires and our neighbor needs.

False messages about God permeated Israel in Micah's day. False messages about God bombard us in our day, too. Micah preached the truth to the people so they would be saved. We thank God that His truth is still available to us. He has never abandoned His Church. So let us gather faithfully around the right preaching of the Gospel and serve one another in Christ. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Tuesday, The Fourth Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 31, 2023

Today's Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Daily Lectionary: Zech. 10:1-11:3, 2 Timothy 3:1-17

For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Corinthians 1:22-24)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. In the season of Epiphany, we celebrate that the light of Christ shines forth into darkness. His light shines through the preaching of Christ crucified.

To preach Christ crucified, the pastor proclaims the Law; the Law shows us that we have sinned and deserve death and damnation. But the pastor doesn't leave us there. He proclaims the Gospel of Christ—that Jesus's death on the cross washes away our sin so we are free from death and damnation. Christ sacrificed himself for us. Finally, the pastor proclaims Christ's resurrection—Jesus rose from the dead to show that He paid for all sins, that death has no power over Him, and all who believe in Him will rise again and have eternal life.

There is no other to salvation other than the cross of Christ. Christ alone can save. He saves us by grace through faith alone. This is such a beautiful message, who could possibly find fault with it? Sadly, many reject it. Some hate it vehemently. (Lord, have mercy and draw them all to You!)

St. Paul tells us that some reject the gospel because they want sure proof of these mighty claims. They demand that God perform powerful acts to remove their doubt that Christ is the way to salvation. Others insist that God convince them into salvation with eloquent reason and human philosophy. They demand a salvation that the wisdom of man can discover, understand, and deserve.

When Christ crucified is preached, there are none of these false proofs. Jesus is known to be the Christ because He fulfilled the ancient prophecies, died on the cross in perfect obedience to the Father, and rose from the dead as no one else ever has. We know Christ through the testimony of the apostles and prophets in the Holy Scriptures. No human wisdom can save anyone. We bring nothing to God but our sin and death. Jesus alone saves. He saves the infant and the infirmed in the same way as He saves eminent doctors and philosophers – by grace through faith. This faith is worked by the Holy Spirit through the Word and Sacraments, so we cannot even claim that as our work. God saves us. He alone does it. And He does it through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Thanks be to God! In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Lamb of God, pure and holy, Who on the cross didst suffer, Ever patient and lowly, Thyself to scorn didst offer. All sins Thou borest for us, else had despair reigned over us: Have mercy on us, O Jesus! O Jesus! (LSB 434 vs 1)

Wednesday, The Fourth Week of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 1, 2023

Today's Reading: Luther's Small Catechism - To Workers of All Kinds
Daily Lectionary: Zech. 11:4-17, 2 Timothy 4:1-18

Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ... (Ephesians 6:5)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. In the season of Epiphany, we celebrate that the light of Christ shines forth into darkness. God uses our work, including our jobs, to let that light shine forth and bless others. Do you have a job? Then Ephesians 6 speaks to you. Paul tells us that when we are at work, we don't just work to please our earthly boss, but we are working for Jesus Himself.

In Ephesians 6, Paul is speaking to people who were bondservants. They couldn't quit or leave their jobs until they fulfilled the terms of the bond. Paul was comforting them with the promise that Jesus was with them. Even in their bonds, they were free in Christ because of the salvation won for them on the cross. When they did their work, Christ went with them. They could work for Him, not just for their master on earth. If God could be with bondservants in their work even though they had no freedom, how much more can he be with you in your work when you are blessed with more rights today!

Serving God isn't limited to churchwork. Every job contributes something good for your neighbor, and you can do it with a sincere desire to serve Jesus. He's right there with you, sustaining you and blessing you. (There are some jobs that are sinful. They harm your neighbor and require breaking the 10 Commandments. A Christian should avoid these jobs. If a person who has a job like this converts and comes to Christ, they should figure out how to change jobs.)

When you work for Christ, you're reminded that your daily bread comes from God, not just a paycheck—so you have more peace about how you'll survive hard times. Working for Christ, and not just an earthly boss or company, also adds dignity to any job you have. Even jobs that seem unimportant have meaning when you frame it with "How does my work serve my neighbor?" These blessings help you find joy in your work as you go through life, which is no small thing.

Students should be dedicated to their studies as if learning from Christ. What you learn can help you serve your neighbor, now and in the future. Pray for wisdom to work well, for protection from danger, and for strength to grow in your abilities. If you want to learn more about this, read the Table of Duties in the Small Catechism. Luther has a lot to say on this topic in just a couple of pages. Jesus loves you. He is with you each day as your Savior and Shepherd—as you rest and as you work. Thanks be to God. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen

Heavenly Father, grant Your mercy and grace to Your people in their many and various callings. Give them patience, and strengthen them in their Christian vocation of witness to the world and of service to their neighbor in Christ's name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Purification of Mary and The Presentation of Our Lord

FEBRUARY 2, 2023

Today's Reading: Purification of Mary and Presentation of Our Lord Luke 2:22-32

Daily Lectionary: Zech. 12:1-13:9, Titus 1:1-2:6

"For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." (Romans 15:4)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. On this day, 40 days after Christmas, Mary and Joseph took baby Jesus from Bethlehem to the temple in Jerusalem to present Him before the LORD. There is a beautiful meaning behind this day. We can understand it better when we think of 5 sons.

The First son is Israel. Israel had been cruelly enslaved by the Egyptians. They cried to God for help and God sent Moses to deliver them. God's message to Pharaoh was that Israel was God's son, so Egypt should let Israel go. If not, Egypt would lose their firstborn son. (Exodus 4:22,23)

The Second son is the firstborn of Egypt. God sent 10 plagues against Egypt to convince them to let Israel go. The 10th plague happened in conjunction with the Passover (Exodus 13). On that night, God provided the blood of the Passover lamb so that death passed over the children of Israel. Where there was no blood on the doorposts, the angel of death took the firstborn son of the household. After this, Egypt let Israel go. Israel rejoiced to be free, but the grief in Egypt was unmeasurable.

The Third son is all the firstborn sons of Israel. Because God delivered Israel from Egypt at the cost of the death of the firstborn sons of Egypt, now all firstborn sons among the Israelites belonged to God. They would not be sacrificed but would be redeemed by an offering. Each firstborn son was a living reminder that one day God would send the Messiah to deliver the world from sin.

The Fourth Son is Jesus. Jesus is the only begotten Son of God from eternity. He is also the firstborn son of Mary, the son who opened her womb. As the firstborn, He was consecrated to the LORD. (Gal 4:4-5). God would redeem the world from slavery to sin, death, and hell. He gave His own Son to die on the cross as the sacrifice that gives peace. What incredible love that He would do that for us!

The Fifth son is all the baptized. You are washed in the blood of Christ in Baptism and God adopts you as His child in Christ (1 John 3:1). The victory Jesus won is given to you by grace through faith. You live in this world as one who is set free, as one who is walking with Jesus to the Promised Land of heaven. All the baptized are set apart to belong to God by the grace of Jesus the Holy Son of God. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Almighty and ever-living God, as Your only begotten Son was this day presented in the temple in the substance of our flesh, grant that we may be presented to You with pure and clean hearts; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Friday, The Fourth Week of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 3, 2023

Today's Reading: Luke 2:22-32

Daily Lectionary: Zech. 14:1-21, Titus 2:7-3:15

"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word... (Luke 2:29)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. Yesterday the Church celebrated the Presentation of Jesus (Luke 2:22-32). We heard about Simeon who came to the temple to see Jesus. The Holy Spirit had promised Simeon he would see the Messiah before he died, and Simeon had waited a long time for this day. He held baby Jesus in his arms and praised God. Simeon sang "Lord, now are letting your servant depart in peace, your word has been fulfilled." That should sound familiar. We regularly sing Simeon's words in the *Nunc Dimittis* (Latin for "Now let your servant leave") after Holy Communion.

We see the Holy Trinity working in this reading. All Christians confess faith in the Holy Trinity. There is only one God, but there are three distinct persons in God - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each is God, but they are not separate gods. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one God (The Athanasian Creed (LSB p. 319) and the Small Catechism section on the Apostle's Creed are good places to learn more about the Trinity.)

At Jesus' Presentation, the Holy Spirit sent Simeon to see the Messiah. The Son, Jesus, is present in the flesh. And the Father lovingly sent His Son to do this gracious work. Simeon is led by the Holy Spirit to take up the Son in his arms and speak praise to the Father for what Christ will do to save.

When we go to Holy Communion, we know that the Holy Trinity is active. The Spirit draws us to faith through the Word and Sacraments. He gives us faith that Jesus died and rose to forgive our sins. The Son, Jesus, is truly present in the Supper. We partake of His body and blood under the bread and wine, and He gives us forgiveness, life, and salvation. We thank and praise the Father for sending His Son to us, and together we pray to Him in the Lord's Prayer.

At the Supper, you're blessed in a similar way as Simeon was. You don't see Christ with your eyes or lift Him in your arms, but you truly have Him. The Holy Spirit gives you faith, Jesus gives you Himself, and the Father gives you His Son. So let us sing praise to God with the beautiful words Simeon spoke and remember the work of our triune God to save us. Amen. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Almighty and everlasting God, I thank and praise You for feeding me the life-giving body and blood of Your beloved son, Jesus Christ. Send Your Holy Spirit that, having with my mouth received the holy Sacrament, I may by faith obtain and eternally enjoy Your divine grace, the forgiveness of sins, unity with Christ and life eternal; through Jesus Christ, my Lord. Amen.

Saturday, The Fourth Week of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 4, 2023

Today's Reading: Introit for Epiphany 6 Ps. 119:9-16; antiphon: Ps. 119:12
Daily Lectionary: Job 1:1-22, John 1:1-18

Blessed are you, O LORD; teach me your statutes! (Psalm 119:12)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. During Epiphany, we celebrate that the light of Christ shines forth through the Holy Scriptures. Tomorrow we'll do this by praying Psalm 119:9-16 for our introit.

Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible. It's divided up into 22 sections of 8 verses--- each named after one of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. In each section, a believer prays to be strengthened in faith and love through the Word.

In this section, the psalmist cries out to God for help because he wants to walk in God's ways. The psalmist speaks for all believers in Christ, but his words are particularly helpful for young men and women who face unique challenges in this sin-broken world. How can they walk in a pure way in Christ when sin, temptation, and Satan are so strong? The answer is in verse 9: "How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word."

Guarding your way according to God's word begins at church. At church, you gather with other believers to hear the Word read, preached, and taught. You pray the Word, you sing the Word, you remember that in Baptism you were washed in the water and the word. You eat and drink the body and blood of Christ that are given you by the Word of Christ.

All these blessings come to you from Christ, and He also gives them to the others gathered with you. Our culture today is very individualistic, but throughout history believers in God have walked together in Christ. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and He watches over an entire flock. Walk with His flock and not alone.

It's important to find a church that faithfully teaches the Gospel of Christ and administers the Sacraments the way He commanded. As you study God's Word, you can also study your Small Catechism and the Book of Concord to better understand the Word faithfully.

It's good to study the Word on your own as well. Read it regularly, mark its meaning, and learn accurately what it says. (The Lutheran Study Bible is a great help for this.) Learn verses by heart and use them in prayer. Sacred art and music can bless you in the Word. Have devotions with your family at home. Jesus blesses you with forgiveness, wisdom, and peace through His Word. Thanks be to God. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

The Fifth Sunday of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 5, 2023

Today's Reading: Matthew 5:13-20

Daily Lectionary: Job 2:1, John 1:19-34

You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:13, 14)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. Anchovies. Love 'em or hate 'em, they give us a clue into what Jesus is saying: Salt is a preservative. It keeps meat from decaying into stench and worms. So, Jesus compares us to salt for the earth—a preservative against the stench that comes from the lawlessness that happens on earth.

In the Cold War, they had air raid drills. During them, everyone would either have to turn out their lights because, if they didn't, the enemy could see where to attack. Our Lord says we are the light of the world, a city set on a hill. That sure makes us stand out in the darkness of this world. St. Paul writes that the children of God "shine as lights in the world...in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation" (Phil. 2:15)

Christians have a unique calling from God toward the decaying stench and deep darkness of this world. It is why He makes us hang around. He doesn't want the world to be left to its own "flavor" or overrun by the darkness of the sinful heart. It is our task to pray for the world, as Abraham interceded for the wretched cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. We're placed where we are in 2023 in order to shine light upon those who dwell in darkness. Sometimes, we selfishly ask God to just give us some shelter from the world and rest from having uncomfortable conversations with trans friends. Our own salt loses its saltiness and it's easier to cover up our light.

Jesus came not only to expose the rot and blindness of humanity, but to save and shine the pure light of God upon us. His coming is not a divine "Just Kidding" about the wrath and death of sinners in the Old Testament. His birth and life, His suffering and death, and His glorious resurrection show both God's just wrath and His mercy toward our sinful race. His mercy toward you, and extending to every single human being. If we were to relax His Commandments, it may make things selfishly easier, but it's not the loving thing to do.

The loving thing is what God has done, to send His Son to rescue us from the mire and bring us into His marvelous light. In God's Son, we are the salt of the earth, the light of the world. He makes our lives testify that God's righteousness and salvation is found nowhere else than in Jesus Christ, the Light of the world. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

O Lord, keep Your family the Church continually in the true faith that, relying on the hope of Your heavenly grace, we may ever be defended by Your mighty power; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Monday, The Fifth Week of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 6, 2023

Today's Reading: Isaiah 58:3-9a

Daily Lectionary: Job 3:11, John 1:35-51

"Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'" (Isaiah 58:8-9a)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. What makes a person a "good Christian"? Is it because they don't swear? Is it because they don't listen to explicit songs and don't drink alcohol? Is it because they wear a purity ring and refuse even to kiss before marriage? Is it because they volunteer twice a week at the local food pantry?

For many people, it's a moral life that defines a "good Christian." But this is really all upside-down. It's not good morals that make a person a good Christian. The whole idea of a "good" Christian needs to be rethought. Isaiah was speaking to "good" Israelites, who pouted that God wasn't pleased with their dedication and obedience.

What's missing was the more important thing: Faith in the God who redeems poor, miserable sinners. As soon as we look for any good in us, we will be deceived into thinking we're really something. Jesus told us yesterday in Matthew 5, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." You and I need a righteousness that is nowhere found among the children of Adam and Eve.

Except One. There is One who perfectly kept the Law. His fasting was sincere. His humility was of one who is gentle and lowly in heart. By His affliction, He loosed the bonds of wickedness that held you, and let you who are harassed and helpless go free. With His pure garments of righteousness, He covers your shame and nakedness. And now that He has so served you, you are called righteous on His account, holy and acceptable, blameless before God. You have been given such wonderful promises as His healing, His righteousness, His glory to guard you, and His ear for your every prayer.

And from this faith come the new desires. Going to church isn't a chore, but something you long for because your Savior is there. You're respectful when you talk with others. You turn away from lewdness and discipline your body to not give into its lusts. You see someone in need and would gladly give them the shirt off your back. All this, not to assure yourself how "good" you are, but because God alone is good, and by that goodness, He has made you His child. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Faith clings to Jesus' cross alone And rests in Him unceasing; And by its fruits true faith is known, With love and hope increasing. For faith alone can justify; Works serve our neighbor and supply The proof that faith is living. Amen. (LSB 555:9)

Tuesday, The Fifth Week of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 7, 2023

Today's Reading: 1 Cor. 2:1-16

Daily Lectionary: Job 4:1-21, John 2:1-12

Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. (1 Cor. 2:6)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. Would you like to level up your Christianity? What would you say if I told you there was some "secret and hidden wisdom from God"? All you have to do is buy my book and I'll show you how to unlock this hidden potential! Maybe Simon Magus, who thought he could buy the Holy Spirit from the Apostles (Acts 8:18-24) had thoughts of writing a book like this. But the fact that books like this sell should tell us something.

We crave to have power over our lives. Anxieties and manic behavior plague us, especially in our age which promises ultimate knowledge, ultimate mastery over disease and the body. This desire for some control also seeps into the spiritual realm, driving some to dabble in astrology or numerology, and perhaps even witchcraft.

But that is not the message which the servants of God, like St. Paul, preach. Contrast Paul to a peddler of spiritual 'truth': "I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom." So much for Paul selling them on his winning smile and charisma! No, the wisdom and power are of God.

The wisdom from God is given as a gift, not unlocked by the wise of this world. "These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit." There is real, ultimate power there! The power to know the mind of God! But what is God thinking about? How He condescends to us, lowly and sinful though we are. "What is man that you are mindful of him and the son of man that you care for him?" (Ps. 8:4)

God the Holy Spirit reveals what we could never find ourselves—what we would never even think to ask! That God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit would redeem His fallen creation through self-giving, suffering and that He would powerful call people back to Himself by lowly-appearing means: words, water, bread and wine. This truly is the "foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God [which] is stronger than men" (1 Cor. 1:25). Thanks be to God! In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Creator Spirit, by whose aid The world's foundations first were laid, Come, visit every humble mind; Come, pour Your joys on humankind; From sin and sorrow set us free; May we Your living temples be. Amen. (LSB 500:1)

Wednesday, The Fifth Week of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 8, 2023

Today's Reading: Luther's Small Catechism - Table of Duties: To Employers and Supervisors

Daily Lectionary: Job 5:1-27, John 2:13-25

"Do not threaten them, since you know that He who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with Him." (Eph. 6:9)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. "My boss is such a jerk!" This is a judgment we're quick to pronounce. It's socially acceptable. And what did he or she do to earn that label? Make you work Saturday when you'd rather sleep in? Deny your vacation request? Too often, we berate those in authority over us because they're calling the shots and not us.

But when's the last time you prayed for your supervisor? I mean, think about the tasks and responsibility God has given to them. Maybe they're a business owner. They might have their manager breathing down their neck. They are responsible for the schedules, productivity, and welfare of their staff. But above even their manager, is a Master who is in heaven. He is your Master, too, and there is no favoritism with Him.

When we remember who is the Master of us all, we realize how much trouble we all cause Him. If you don't believe me, just read the accounts of Israel in the wilderness! Yet, look at how our Master in heaven treats us! Worse than the gross-factor cleaning the public restroom, worse than the tedium of sorting the file room, harder than bearing a piano down five flights of stairs—is what the Son of God has done for us. He became sin for us, wearing our filth and shame on the cross. He agonized in Gethsemane and submitted to the Father's will to save humanity. He bore in His own body the sins which merited the eternal wrath of God. If this is how your Master in heaven acts, then maybe we can learn a thing or two from His example. St. Peter teaches, "Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust." (1 Pet. 2:18)

Those in the seat of responsibility can also learn that they, too are servants of God. They are given their management for the good of someone's business, for the good of those under them, and for how we all together are used by God to provide and maintain order in His world. Remembering our heavenly Master who manages all for our good, we "commend ourselves, our body, soul, and all things" to Him. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

*Lord, help us walk Your servant way
Wherever love may lead
And, bending low,
forgetting self,
Each serve the other's need.
You bid us bend our human pride
Nor count ourselves above
The lowest place, the meanest task
That waits the gift of love. Amen.
(LSB 857:1, 4)*

Thursday, The Fifth Week of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 9, 2023

Today's Reading: Job 6:1-13

Daily Lectionary: Job 6:1-13, John 3:1-21

"Have I any help in me, when resource is driven from me?" (Job 6:13)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. Human suffering: It's universal. It's agonizing to bear, and heartbreaking to witness. It's caused by wickedness in the world. It's caused by our own foolishness. It's sent by God.

Wait! What did you just say? Surely God wants us to be happy! Surely, I haven't deserved to have my parents divorce, to lose my friend to lymphoma, to be laid off from my job that I worked hard at. What you're facing is the problem of suffering, and you're hardly the first person to be there. Not that you can think away suffering, but consider these three truths which we know: God is good. God is omnipotent. There is profound evil in the world.

When we suffer, we venture into the land of theodicy, which means "to justify God." There, we wrestle with these three truths. We know God is good and He can do all things. So, what does it mean that so much evil is in the world and on our doorstep? If we dwell in theodicy too long, our sinful reason starts with doubts: Maybe God isn't really good. Maybe He's not really omnipotent. Maybe His Baptismal promise to never leave or forsake me isn't so powerful after all. Suffering is a dark place to be. Theodicy is even darker.

Our refuge in suffering is not our own minds. It's not in being crushed, like Job prayed for. God's answer to our suffering is found in Jesus Christ alone. Listen to how St. Peter explains it, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed." (1 Pet. 4:12-13) This is not theodicy; it is theology of the cross.

Your Baptism is not an immunity potion against worldly trouble. It is a promise that you are joined to Jesus Christ—in His suffering now and in His exaltation at the last. "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23) So to answer Job's complaints, "What is my strength, that I should wait? And what is my end, that I should be patient?" It is to look to your crucified and risen Savior, who ascended into heaven and rules all things for your good...even the suffering which He wisely sends to you. You do not bear it on your own, but as His own. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Be gracious to me, O Lord! See my affliction from those who hate me, O you who lift me up from the gates of death, that I may recount all your praises, that in the gates of the daughter of Zion I may rejoice in your salvation. Amen. (Psalm 9:13-14)

Friday, The Fifth Week of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 10, 2023

Today's Reading: John 3:22-30 (Silas, fellow worker of St. Peter and St. Paul)

Daily Lectionary: Job 6:14-30, John 3:22-4:6

"He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3:30)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. Today the Church remembers Silas. "Who's that?" you might ask. Not much is said about him, except the book of Acts. He was a prophet (Acts 15:32). He was imprisoned with Paul and sang hymns before the earthquake and the conversion of the jailer and his family (Acts 16:19-29). Last we hear of him, Silas stayed behind to work with Timothy at Berea (Acts 17:14) and then met up with Paul again just in time to see him be fed up with the Jews in Corinth (Acts 18:5-6). Silas doesn't have any words recorded, and never seemed to do anything without someone else. So, why commemorate this "second rate" saint? Because it wasn't about him!

In movies and the stage, they have roles for actors like this. They complement the lead characters, even though the story is not about them. They're invaluable in what they do, but their place in the story is to magnify the lead. That's what John the Baptist was, in effect, for the Lord. When those who followed him were concerned that people were going to Jesus instead, he replied, "The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete." (John 3:29)

This is the role Silas played as well. His encouraging words are not memorialized for us. His unique contributions are unknown. Nonetheless, they were of invaluable service to the Lord's Church at that time. He served as a companion for Peter, Paul, and Timothy. The story wasn't about them, either; all of their words and works were about the Lord Jesus.

In that way, Silas is a wonderful model for us. Personally, as a pastor, it can seem like my labors are making little impact, that I am small and unfit for the task. I pale in comparison to other saints like the apostles, Martin Luther, or C.F.W. Walther. But if our focus is on these individual saints and their labors, we're looking in the wrong place. Rather, we should always see how great Christ is. How wise He is to set us where and when He has placed us in His Church! We do not labor alone, but with fellow Christians. We are not here to make a name for ourselves, but to magnify the Name that has been given to us: that of Christ. So, rejoice today in how small you are, and how great your God and Savior is. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

We sing for all the unsung saints, That countless, nameless throng, Who kept the faith and passed it on With hope steadfast and strong Through all the daily griefs and joys No chronicles record, Forgetful of their lack of fame, But mindful of their Lord. Amen. (LSB 678:1)

Saturday, The Fifth Week of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 11, 2023

Today's Reading: Introit for Epiphany 6, Ps. 98:7-9; antiphon: Ps. 98:2

Daily Lectionary: Job 7:1-21, John 4:7-27

"Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who dwell in it!" (Ps. 98:7)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. What do these two things have in common? A child tugging at his mother's sweater, each time saying louder, "Mama!" and the prophets of Baal limping around their altar and cutting themselves (1 Ki. 18:26)? Both are examples of times when our sinful flesh assumes that the authority—ultimately God—must not hear them. They make a noise; they heap up empty phrases [Matt. 6:7] in an effort to get God to listen to them. The squeaky wheel gets the grease, right?

But Psalm 98 says we have it all wrong, if that's how we've thought about God the Lord. Worship is not about trying to get God's attention. That is actually a feature of pagan, manmade gods. Rather, the True God acts first upon us, and we respond in loud shouts of praise! While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us [Rom. 5:8]. He's told us that His righteousness and our salvation have been since the foundation of the world (Matthew 25:34, Ephesians 1:4-5).

So, if God accomplished His work of saving us before any of us were even born, what should make us think that we need to shout into His ears to get His attention now? To put it another way, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32) He comes to deliver His salvation in Christ and His fatherly care. That means for us that His hearing our prayers, accepting our worship, and blessing our days is based on something more sure than our heart-felt effort. It's anchored in His promises spoken to us and His Holy Spirit, who gives and sustains our faith.

Since God is the One who has done such great things, then our response of praise is that much sweeter. Together, we sing the new song of the psalms in the Introit and Gradual. We are freed to sing hymns which proclaim His mighty works: "This is the feast of victory for our God." We joyfully sing spiritual songs which meditate on what our God has done. With the aftertaste of Christ's true Body and Blood on our tongues, our hearts ring out, "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace." Our own religious ideas can never bring such peace, but Christ can and does. As you prepare to go to the Divine Service, take a cue from creation: He has not only formed you in your mother's womb, but He has also redeemed and promised you eternal life. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns! Let men their songs employ, While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains Repeat the sounding joy, Repeat the sounding joy, Repeat, repeat the sounding joy. Amen. (LSB 387:2)

The Sixth Sunday of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 12, 2023

Today's Reading: Matt. 5:21-37

Daily Lectionary: Job 8:1-22, John 4:27-45

And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell. (Matthew 5:30)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. This is the Gospel of the Lord? Praise to you, O Christ! Today's Gospel gets us coming and going. If we came to church thinking we had it together, these words of our Lord are set to humble us deeply. Anger, lust, divorce, and taking the Lord's Name in vain. It's a good thing we have a week to recover before we hear him talk about retaliation, loving our enemies, and being perfect even as our Father in heaven is!

But there's a reason Jesus pulls out the hammer of the Law. Each section begins, "You have heard that it was said to those of old..." What had been taught among His audience was that being faithful to God was just a matter of following the rules. The stricter the better. The more self-denial you can muster, the more righteous you are. This is what the Old Adam thinks the Law and the Prophets teach. And this is what the people were hearing from the Pharisees. It's what people still hear from the Mennonites, the Wesleyans, and other holiness groups.

Yet, these words are on the lips of the Christ, and that is the difference between being damned eternally and being saved by the forgiveness of our sins. Do you remember the three uses of the Law? This is the second use of the Law big time: the mirror that shows us how we have sinned against God. It leaves no stone unturned. Our hatred toward others means we deserve to be hated by God. Our lusts that look for pleasure with someone not our spouse have us dangling over the hell of fire. Our lips are quick to aggrandize our cause and drag God into it, but this has the hiss of the Evil One.

For every one of these, your sins, the Christ has been sacrificed. His blood has answered the righteous wrath of God. He was forsaken, cut off, and conquered the Tempter—all for you. This is what makes you a Christian—not that you've kept God's standard of perfection, but that Christ has kept it in your place so that He could give you peace with God and eternal life. And only that can bring us to the third use of the Law: the guide which steers us away from sin and toward living as God's true children. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

O Lord, graciously hear the prayers of Your people that we who justly suffer the consequence of our sin may be mercifully delivered by Your goodness to the glory of Your name; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Monday, The Sixth Week of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 13, 2023

Today's Reading: Deut. 30:15-20

Daily Lectionary: Job 9:1-35, John 4:46-54

"Obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days" (Deuteronomy 30:20)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. If there were ever a passage that seems to support decision theology, it's this one. "I have set before you today life and good, death and evil...therefore choose life!" Martin Luther strongly debated a popular scholar of his day, Erasmus of Rotterdam, on this very passage. Erasmus that since God gave the command, "Choose," it must mean we're able to do it. Luther countered that just because God commanded it, doesn't mean we have the power to do it. Rather, this is how the Law humbles us and drives us to Christ; is giving a description of faith versus unbelief, manifested in how one reacts to God and His Word. Loving the Lord, walking in His ways, keeping His Word—only faith is able to do this. A heart turned away, refusing to hear, being drawn to other gods—this is our default because of sin.

You can think of it like a magnet. Unbelief reacts to God's Word the way that same poles on a magnet repel. "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him." (1 Corinthians 2:14) Our sinful flesh pushes away the Word of God. On the other hand, faith is attracted to and clings to the Word of God. It says, "Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day...I hold back my feet from every evil way, in order to keep your word." (Psalm 119:97, 101)

But how did we come to believe and gladly be reading a Higher Things Reflection? This is the work of the Lord your God. The One who called Israel out of Egypt and brought them with a mighty hand, has also come to you with His life-giving Spirit. the Word of God reached you—in the waters of your Baptism, shared by your family, perhaps later in life by a Christian friend—and He powerfully raised you from spiritual death.

God has created this faith in you, achieving the polar opposite of sin. As His Spirit works in you, you do love the Lord, delight to walk in His ways, and keeping His Word sacred with a glad heart. It's far from perfect or constant this side of the resurrection. Nevertheless, God promises to be continually at work in you, His child. He will bring you at last to Himself, victorious over sin, the devil, and death itself! In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Oh, what blessing to be near You And to listen to Your voice; Let me ever love and hear You, Let Your Word be now my choice! Many hardened sinners, Lord, Flee in terror at Your Word; But to all who feel sin's burden You give words of peace and pardon. Amen. (LSB 589:2)

Tuesday, The Sixth Week of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 14, 2023

Today's Reading: John 5:1-18 (Valentine, Martyr)

Daily Lectionary: Job 10:1-22, John 5:1-18

"Jesus said to him, 'Get up, take up your bed, and walk.' And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked." (John 5:8-9)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. Valentine has been remembered as a martyr since the early centuries of the Church. A priest and physician from Rome, he and his family ministered to those being persecuted by Emperor Claudius II. Soon Valentine also was arrested and martyred on February 14, 270. He was soon remembered for his acts of mercy, in spite of the bodily danger it would bring him.

The association with romance actually comes from an observation in England in the Middle Ages that birds began choosing mates around St. Valentine's Day. People took that as a cue to do the same by choosing eligible suitors for their children. It wasn't until the 19th century that the Roman god, Cupid, came on the scene, and we know what the people of today do "in the name of love."

Today, we're told, "Love is love." Yet, what they mean is a strong feeling. Love is actually much more than butterflies in our stomach or devotion to another person. "God is love," St. John tells us, and he follows that up by saying, "the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only-begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him... Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." (see 1 John 4:7-12)

This is the purest expression of love, called in Greek, agape. Jesus exhibited that love to the lame man in John 5 by calling him to faith and healing his body. Valentine reflected that love by ministering to his brothers and sisters in Christ as they were martyred by the authorities, eventually suffering the same cruelty.

Agape love is what we have from God. All other kinds of love grow out of it: Philos, friendly affection; storge, a natural, familial love; and eros, desirous love. Too often, we are told that love is merely the eros kind of birds and other creatures "pairing up." But today, when the unbelievers tell you, "Love is love," show them how God is love, and what that love did: God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him may not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16). In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Love divine, all loves excelling, Joy of heav'n, to earth come down! Fix in us Thy humble dwelling, All Thy faithful mercies crown. Jesus, Thou art all compassion, Pure, unbounded love Thou art; Visit us with Thy salvation, Enter ev'ry trembling heart. Amen. (LSB 700:1)

Wednesday, The Sixth Week of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 15, 2023

Today's Reading: Luther's Small Catechism - Table of Duties To: Youth (1 Peter 5:5-6)

Daily Lectionary: Job 11:1-20, John 5:19-29

"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time." (1 Peter 5:6)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. It's hard being a teenager. You've come so far, and yet there's still so much you aren't allowed to do. Don't you sometimes feel like it isn't right? If you could be honest, you might say, "I can handle it! Leave me alone so I can shine!" It's true that experience has shown we do grow from having greater responsibility, even if it means we fail sometimes.

But what we need at every age is for God to keep our hearts humble. We have a bent in our hearts toward thinking too much of ourselves. Our self-appraisal is often more flawless than the reality. Yes, even if you suffer from depression and sometimes tell yourself that you're a worthless failure, that's your broken mind thinking too much of your personal problems, magnifying your flaws and problems so they seem mightier than God.

When God humbles us, He teaches us once again to be receptive to learning. Most of all, we learn from Him through His Word, where He teaches us that, "His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the legs of a man, but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love." (Ps. 147:10-11)

He also places His humbled children in the communion of saints, the Church. In this community, it is good for the young to learn from those more experienced. "Listen to your elders!" isn't just something your grandma says because she's cranky; it's godly wisdom. In Titus 2, St. Paul shows how it is good for older men to be mentors, older women to be examples to the young. Even pastors learn from those more seasoned in the ministry.

With God's gift of being humbled, we see that it's not a bad thing to be a youth or inexperienced. It can be frustrating at times, and not everyone is automatically a good example. Yet, God does bless His children at every stage to receive His Word and grow in grace and holy lives in His Son. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Make ye straight what long was crooked; Make the rougher places plain. Let your hearts be true and humble, As befits His holy reign. For the glory of the Lord Now o'er earth is shed abroad, And all flesh shall see the token That His Word is never broken. Amen. (LSB 347:4)

Thursday, The Sixth Week of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 16, 2023

Today's Reading: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Daily Lectionary: Job 12:1-6, 12-25, John 5:30-47

"So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." (1 Cor. 3:7)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. You might really like your pastor. You might think your pastor is out to lunch. Maybe your church has more than one pastor, but there's one you'd rather go to. What Paul is warning us of here is "behaving only in a human way." (v. 3) when it comes to pastors. The Church at Corinth was having a big problem with this. Earlier in chapter 1:12, it was reported that people drew lines between following Paul, Apollos, Cephas (Peter), or Christ. Imagine that! Pitting the servants of Christ against the Lord Himself! The "human way" places the worthiness and power on the individual.

I've been told, "Pastor, you've done so much for us" and "I want you to preach my funeral." It's high praise, to be sure. But, the "human way" wants to say there's something indispensable about me. You can probably imagine what praise Peter or Paul had gotten because of their personal history with the Lord. It's only natural (not in a good way) to want to put all your eggs in your chosen basket. It's really kind of funny that we do this, because when Jesus came to His hometown to preach, the congregation was so enraged by His preaching that they were set to throw him off a cliff (Luke 4:16-30). To be honest, some congregations have done that to their pastors, too.

We need to repent of our "human way" of looking at pastors, and be on guard against this kind of jealousy and strife. While every pastor has individual strengths and weaknesses, that's not where our faith should be. What are we pastors? "Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each." Pastors are fellow sinners who have a special place in the church, but their labors are only ever in service to the Lord.

Pastoral vacancies can put this to the test. Although it hurts to lose a beloved pastor, it also chastises us for how we make too much of the man. In the vacancy, the congregation asks, "What are we looking for in a pastor?" blind to who that man may be. That's because for a servant of Christ, the essential thing will be the same no matter who it is. He will be the man through whom the Good Shepherd ministers to His flock. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

O Gracious Father, You led Your holy apostles to ordain ministers for the proclamation of Your Word and the faithful administration of the Sacraments of Christ. Grant to each congregation the guidance of the Holy Spirit to choose a suitable pastor according to Your will for the blessing of Your Church in every place; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Friday, The Sixth Week of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 17, 2023

Today's Reading: Job 13:1-12

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 24:14-25:12; 1 John 2:15-29

*"But I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to argue my case with God."
(Job 13:3)*

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. Martin Luther said, "Oh, faith is a living, busy, active, mighty thing" But can faith be active even in arguing with God? It would seem so. Job is ready to speak and argue with the Almighty, but he's not the only one. Remember the patriarch Jacob? He wrestled with God (Genesis 32:22-32) and insisted that God bless him. How could he be so presumptuous? It's because God had already promised him, "I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea" (v. 12). Jacob was on his way to meet his bloodthirsty brother, and insisted that God's blessing was essential for that trip.

Arguing with God is a proper exercise of faith, when that argumentation is built on the foundation of confidence in what God has promised. Job's friends were arguing for a god who is incredibly shallow: obey and I will do good for you; disobey and I will make your life miserable. This sounds a lot more like the Muslim Allah than the true God in Whom we believe. The true God speaks and, by the Holy Spirit, faith worked in us clings to that Word. So, when it looks like that Word is being trampled, or that God isn't living up to His revealed character, it's time to argue with Him (think also of the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15).

The Psalms give us wonderful examples of arguing your case with God (see Psalm 56 and 79 for example). Not that we ourselves have a leg to stand on (and that's where Job began to err), but we hold fast to the covenant God made with us in Baptism, and that He made with His Church by the shedding of His blood. On the ground of His promises, we hold Him to it. We know Him as He has revealed His heart to us. This is a true exercise of faith because it holds to God, even when our eyes and experience seem to show the opposite.

This faith-filled arguing is more than complaining, "What's happening to me isn't fair." Taking an honest look at our situation and the state of God's people in this shattered world, we go where God tells us. You, Lord, promise to come to our aid—"Call on me in the day of trouble. I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me." (Psalm 50:15). We rest in the assurance, that such prayer—such argumentation—is pleasing in His sight, "because He has commanded us to pray and promised to hear us." In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

O God, save me by your name, and vindicate me by your might. O God, hear my prayer; give ear to the words of my mouth. (Psalm 54:1-2)

Saturday, The Sixth Week of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 18, 2023

Today's Reading: Introit for Transfiguration, Ps. 99:1-5; antiphon: Ps. 99:9

Daily Lectionary: Job 13:13-28, John 6:22-40

"Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at His holy mountain; for the Lord our God is holy!" (Psalm 99:9)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. Scripture tells us, "The Lord is great in Zion." Christopher Hitchens, renowned atheist, tells us, "god is Not Great." His book is a #1 New York Bestseller, so many people have been listening to him. Many of your friends and people you meet have been listening to him, also. In his book, Hitchens makes several supposedly rational cases against world religions, but it quickly becomes clear that he does not know the Lord. He knows sinful people, and offers atheism as a substitute religion which claims "Man is great."

But the claim that man is great instead of the Lord only brings more problems. History and our own experience shows that human beings are tragically flawed. Or, as St. Paul put it, "If righteousness were through the Law, then Christ died to no purpose" (Gal. 2:21). Man is not great; man needs a great Savior, who is the Lord! "The Lord is great in Zion; He is exalted over all the peoples." He alone does what no man could do. He alone is holy, set apart from fallen mankind. He alone is to be adored by all the sinful race.

Yet, though the Lord is holy, and He could stay far away from mankind and all our failings, He doesn't. Holy as He is, He embraced our miserable condition and was born of the Virgin Mary. Even as man, He was still holy because He was "made like His brothers in every respect...yet without sin" (Hebrews 2:17, 4:15). The Holy Lord in human flesh did for all what we could never achieve ourselves: perfect righteousness, just retribution for all sins, and rescue from death itself.

Atheism and all man-made religions cannot offer what the Lord Himself gives as a gift to the fallen world. No tower of Babel project can unite all people the way God can (Genesis 11). No earthly utopia of Karl Marx which promises to eliminate class divisions can remove the poison of sin in our hearts; only our Lord can. Therefore, we exalt the Lord alone, for He is holy.

May the Lord increase our joy at worshiping at His footstool, and bring those without such hope eternal peace and hope through Jesus Christ. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Thou camest to our hall of death, O Christ, to breathe our poisoned air, To drink for us the dark despair That strangled our reluctant breath. How beautiful the feet that trod The road that leads us back to God! How beautiful the feet that ran To bring the great good news to man! Amen. (LSB 834:3)

The Transfiguration of Our Lord

FEBRUARY 19, 2023

Today's Reading: Matt. 17:1-9

Daily Lectionary: Job 14:1-22, John 6:41-59

*"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."
(Matthew 17:5)*

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. It's important for us to ponder the eyewitness testimony of Jesus' transfiguration before we ponder His suffering. There is plenty of human suffering around us. We wake up with it. We see it in the lives of those around us—our family and friends, the ambulance rushing by, the people sleeping in makeshift shelters. We hear about it in the news. But Jesus is not merely one more victim of the injustice and cruelty of this world.

Peter, James, and John were given front-row seats so that they would know the whole of Jesus—truly God and truly Man. This is who Jesus is. Unlike Moses, whose glow would fade after he left the mountain, in Jesus, "the fulness of deity dwells bodily" (Colossians 2:9). The fully-divine, fully-human Jesus goes down from the mountain with His disciples. This is who He is, whether we can see it in Him or not. This is true, even as He is betrayed, condemned, carrying His cross, dying, and breathing His last. Hold this image in your faith as you behold Jesus. Hold onto this during the Lenten journey to the tomb. He is not just another suffering victim under the cruel reign of human wrath, the devil's oppression, and the prison of death. He came to conquer them!

Today, we hear one of those eyewitnesses, Peter, tell us, "we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place." (2 Peter 1:19). We don't see this victory with our eyes very much, if at all. So like the disciples watching Jesus being condemned, carried away, and crucified, we have to believe the Word that is spoken of Him. "This is Jesus, King of the Jews" is what hung above His cross. This is Jesus, Savior of the World, King of Kings, and final Judge.

In this Transfiguration vision, we also see (by faith) our future. Who is with Him? Moses and Elijah in glory. Can you see your future life with the Lord? Not with your eyes. But it will be there. This Jesus will also command your lowly body—even if it's decayed in the ground—to be transformed to be like His glorious body (Phil. 3:21). Behold Him by faith, and even now hear His voice! In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

O God, in the glorious transfiguration of Your beloved Son You confirmed the mysteries of the faith by the testimony of Moses and Elijah. In the voice that came from the bright cloud You wonderfully foreshowed our adoption by grace. Mercifully make us co-heirs with the King in His glory and bring us to the fullness of our inheritance in heaven; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Monday of the week of Transfiguration

FEBRUARY 20, 2023

Today's Reading: Ex. 24:8-18

Daily Lectionary: Job 15:1-23, 30-35, John 6:60-71

"Moses went up into the mountain of God." (Exodus 24:13)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. When God gave the Law to the people at Mount Sinai, there were three distinctions for how close one got to the Lord: The blood-sprinkled people; Moses, with the priests and the 70 elders; Moses in the mountain of God. The people worshiped from afar; the elders ate and drank in the Lord's presence; and only Moses entered the cloud. The closer you got to God, the closer you were to the holiness, and the more risk to sinful humans. This was all meant to prepare us for what God would ultimately do.

When the fulfillment of all of this came, it was not about man ascending to God, but holy God descending to sinners. He did not come in bright glory which made people tremble, but the fulness of deity was veiled in mortal human flesh (Colossians 2:9). An Infant weak and suckling grew into a Man seized by Moses' disciples, the elders, and crucified as a criminal. On the mount of Calvary, Jesus Christ did what the Law could not do—bring sinners to God.

Now all of those divisions have been removed in Jesus Christ: His is the blood which sprinkles you (Hebrews 12:22-24). He is the great High Priest who intercedes for you (Heb. 6:19-20). He is the holy and true Son who can ascend the hill of the Lord (Psalm 24:3-5)

The Lord has come down to you in order to raise you up into His presence. With a holiness which surpasses that of Moses, you are covered in Christ. You are a beloved child through God's Son. You have been given boldness and access that surpasses even the Levite high priest standing in the Holy of Holies (Ephesians 3:12).

So what can we do with such access to God? We come to Him as Father, bringing the needs of the world and those of the people we know. We live as pilgrims in this world in the confidence which our Baptism gives, that we have an advocate whose blood speaks on our account and who has put His authoritative forgiveness on human lips (Matthew 18, John 20). We have peace when this world is raging and trembling in Him "who makes wars cease to the end of the earth" (Ps. 46:9). And when everything in creation has been shaken and crumbles away, He has promised us a new heavens and new earth in which righteousness dwells. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Hope of the world, God's gift from highest heaven, Bringing to hungry souls the bread of life, Still let Thy Spirit unto us be given To heal earth's wounds and end our bitter strife. Amen. (LSB 690:2)

Tuesday of the week of Transfiguration

FEBRUARY 21, 2023

Today's Reading: 2 Peter 1:16-21

Daily Lectionary: Job 16:1-22, John 7:1-13

“Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation” (2 Pet. 1:20 NKJV)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. One of the major tenets of the Reformation is Sola Scriptura, Scripture Alone. But what does that look like in practice? Originally, it was said against the papacy, who claimed that popes and councils had the authority to add doctrines over and above Scripture. What happened in practice is that many people became their own “pope” in a sense, and offered their own interpretation from isolated Bible verses, and then claimed, “Scripture alone!”

This still plagues the Church, especially in the age of YouTube prophets and dispensationalism. The Bible for these is simply sacred source material to mine, in order to shore up their own ideas. We still desperately need to hold to the tenet of Scripture alone. If we let go of it, we will “turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (2 Timothy 4:4) and we’re liable to listen to visions of an angel who proclaims a different Christ and a different gospel [Galatians 1:8-10].

We believe ‘Scripture Alone’ because of what it is: God’s Word. God’s Word that does what it says, from making creation to working faith in the souls who hear it. “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). God’s Word is that lamp in the darkness which shines against the darkness of this world and that of our own hearts. “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). God’s Word is our source of life. Mary models this for us: When the angel announced her conception and said, “For nothing will be impossible with God,” she replies, “Let it be to me according to your word.” (Luke 1:37-38).

The Bible is not a matter of private interpretation, and it doesn’t need someone’s clever explanation to have it stick. God sends His Word with the Holy Spirit who interprets. “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). The Holy Spirit also protects us against false interpretations. John writes, “I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you. But the anointing that you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as His anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie—just as it has taught you, abide in Him” (1 John 2:26-27). In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Ash Wednesday

FEBRUARY 22, 2023

Today's Reading: Matt. 6:1-6, 16-21

Daily Lectionary: Job 16:1-22, John 7:1-13

And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matt. 6:4)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." [Genesis 3:19] This is a spiritual truth, which we need as Christians living out of our faith. Without this reminder, our "practice" of Christianity can become like so many other world religions. It can become a matter of what we're doing or not doing. I'm a Christian, so I pray. I'm a Christian, so I don't watch lewd movies. But our life before God is not simply a matter of what we do.

Charity, prayer, and fasting are spiritual disciplines. No matter how they may seem like sanctified works, we can never bring ourselves closer to God by them. The Lord comes first to us, as He has from the beginning. He breathes into our dust the breath of life so that we live (Genesis 2:7) The Holy Spirit breathes eternal life into us by the Gospel (John 20:22-23). If it were not for this, we would not exist and not have faith. It's only with these gifts to us that we can even think about everything that belongs to the daily walk of a Christian.

In Psalm 103, we're taught, "As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust" (vv. 13-14). Even though you are of the dust, you have a God who is your heavenly Father.

Charity, prayer, and fasting are all the lived experiences of such children. You put your offering in the plate at church for the ministry of the Gospel, and you are generous toward people in need because you know your Father's generosity. You pray because the Ruler of All has opened His door and promised to answer. You fast because it reminds you of your dust, especially at times when your Father is chastising you with hard times.

Your life as a child of God is so much more than what you do. It's who you are in your Baptism. According to your natural birth, you are dust bound to return to the earth. But in Jesus Christ, you are bound to be raised on the Last Day (see 1 Corinthians 15:49).

So take heart this Ash Wednesday, and gladly receive the ashen cross on your forehead. Even though you are dust, your Father has shown compassion to you, and when everything else has passed away, He has made you His forever. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Almighty and everlasting God, You despise nothing You have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Create in us new and contrite hearts that lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness we may receive from You full pardon and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Thursday of the week of Transfiguration

FEBRUARY 23, 2023

Today's Reading: Joel 2:12-19

Daily Lectionary: Job 18:1-21, John 7:32-53

Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God? (Joel 2:14)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. When do you go to the doctor? Of course, it's when you're sick. Nobody in their right mind goes through the trouble of scheduling an appointment, answering a bunch of diagnostic questions, and maybe even ordering labs just for the fun of it. You want to feel better.

It's similar to confession and absolution. In today's reading, the Lord calls His people to return to Him. Returning is not pleasant, especially because it brings up all the ways that we have been distant from him. Confessing our sins is painful.

The rite of Individual Confession guides us through it: "I have lived as if God did not matter and as if I mattered most. My Lord's name I have not honored as I should; my worship and prayers have faltered. I have not let His love have its way with me, and so my love for others has failed. There are those whom I have heart, and those whom I have failed to help. My thoughts and desires have been soiled with sin." (LSB 292)

But we don't just go to confession to feel bad about ourselves. We're not about self-flagellation and perpetual frustration at our failure to act better. The purpose of confession is the holy Absolution: "In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

"Who knows whether He will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind Him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God?" (v. 13, 14) The blessing of having peace with God is what our penitent hearts look forward to. And here is the picture of how the Lord makes that peace even more tangible! His Body and His Blood (grain and wine) are given to us after confession to strengthen and preserve us.

Sin is ugly. But God would not have that sickness crush us. He lifts the burden and places it on His Son. The crucifix is ugly because of your sin that of the whole world. Once sin is on the cross of Jesus, however, it has been removed from you and it becomes beautiful. Your sins are forgiven. Take eat; take drink. This is the very Body and Blood of Christ given and shed for you. Go in peace. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Almighty God, You know we live in the midst of so many dangers that in our frailty we cannot stand upright. Grant strength and protection to support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Feast of St. Matthias

FEBRUARY 24, 2023

Today's Reading: Job 19:1-12, 21-27, John 8:1-20

Daily Lectionary: Job 19:1-12, 21-27, John 8:1-20

*"Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."
(Matthew 11:28)*

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. Sometimes older congregations will compile a history book, which will include the unique contributions of each of their pastors. Maybe one started a school outreach. Another oversaw a building project. Still another had a radio ministry.

What did Matthias do for the Church? We have absolutely no record of it. He was the first man to receive a divine call which the Church extended after the Ascension of Jesus. But that is the very last we hear about him, or any sermons he preached, or unique things he did.

And after all, that's better for the Church, because the Church doesn't belong to any particular pastor. She belongs to Jesus. The Church lives by the gifts Jesus gives: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." In Jesus our souls have rest, a true Sabbath that refreshes our innermost being. In Him we are built up and grow as disciples.

Whenever the Church falls in love with an individual, she forgets her true love, her true source of rest and life. Rest is replaced by excitement about what's happening next. A charismatic leader can lay his yoke on the congregation and get them to do a lot of things and seem very active in their faith. Meanwhile, sadly, the souls of those who labor and are heavy laden go unhealed.

The commemoration of St. Matthias puts a silhouette of a pastor before us, which any faithful shepherd of the Lord can stand in. The Lord puts him there to proclaim His living Word, to effect the Father's mysterious election, to bind up the broken hearted and crush the proud. Will each man have unique gifts, and accomplish different things during his time with a congregation? Certainly, and we thank God for His wisdom in arranging for that! But each faithful pastor is simply a servant of the Lord Jesus. It is the Lord's ministry, the Lord's compassion, the Lord's absolution, and the Lord's resurrection that give His Church reason to rejoice. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

*God of the prophets, bless the prophets' sons; Elijah's mantle o'er Elisha cast. Each age its solemn task may claim but once; Make each one nobler, stronger than the last. Make them apostles, heralds of Your cross; Forth let them go to tell the world of grace. Inspired by You, may they count all but loss And stand at last with joy before Your face. Amen.
(LSB 682:1, 5)*

Saturday of the week of Transfiguration

FEBRUARY 25, 2023

Today's Reading: Introit for Lent 1, Ps. 91:9-13; antiphon: Ps. 91:15-16

Daily Lectionary: Job 20:1-23, 29, John 8:21-38

You will tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot. (Ps. 91:13)

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. If I were to ask you to list five words that come to mind when you hear "Lent," I doubt that 'victory' would be one of them. Usually we look forward to the victory of the resurrection, and sing, "This is the feast of victory for our God!" Yet, even without the alleluias, this psalm tells us that the resurrection isn't the only place we have victory. There is victory even in the middle of bearing the cross.

It doesn't look or feel like victory! It seems like the devil wins so often when he keeps unbelievers in blindness and steals away our weaker brothers. It doesn't look like victory when we're told we have to "celebrate" people's carnal lusts or we'll be canceled. It doesn't feel like victory when we struggle against persistent weakness in our flesh, giving into temptation yet again.

Yet, we do have victory over sin, over death, and over the devil, because God has won it. We aren't going to see it in this evil world or in the sinful human heart. Remember Jesus tomorrow in the Gospel, who calmly rebukes each accusation and temptation of the devil with His Word. His Word is what we cling to when we bear that enmity from the ancient serpent, who is the devil. In His good timing, God will show His victory to be true. Unbelievers will be turned to fervent faith. The world and its desires will pass away. As you abide in His Word and prayer, you will grow in holy living. Finally your fallen flesh will return to the dust, but you will have eternal rest and resurrection.

God gives His Word to strengthen us in this victory. James encourages, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you." (James 4:7-8) John brings us back to our baptismal identity saying, "Everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith." (1 John 5:4)

It's not foolish optimism to say we have victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. And with such faith, we cling to the rich promises at the end of Psalm 91: "Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name. When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation." In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Lord, be our light when worldly darkness veils us; Lord, be our shield when earthly armor fails us; And in the day when hell itself assails us, Grant us Your peace, Lord. (LSB 659:3)

*Martin Luther's Morning and Evening Prayers taken from
the Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther.*

Unless otherwise noted, Biblical quotations are from the ESV.

*Higher Things Reflections are free, like the Gospel! They may be reproduced
for congregational, personal, and other non-commercial use. Please use the
following attribution: "Daily Reflections are provided by Higher Things.
www.higherthings.org. Used with permission."*

*Higher Things exists and grows on the basis of donations and free-will
offerings from congregations and individuals. All donations are tax-
deductible. If you wish to contribute to the work of Higher Things, please send
your donation to:*

*Higher Things, Inc.
P.O. Box 175
Lisbon, IA 52253*

*(Donations are also accepted at www.higherthings.org via credit card
or PayPal.)*

*Visit our website at www.higherthings.org to read, listen to, or subscribe to
Reflections each day.*
