

REFLECTIONS

The Baptism of Our Lord -
Saturday the Week of Transfiguration
January 7, 2024 - February 17, 2024



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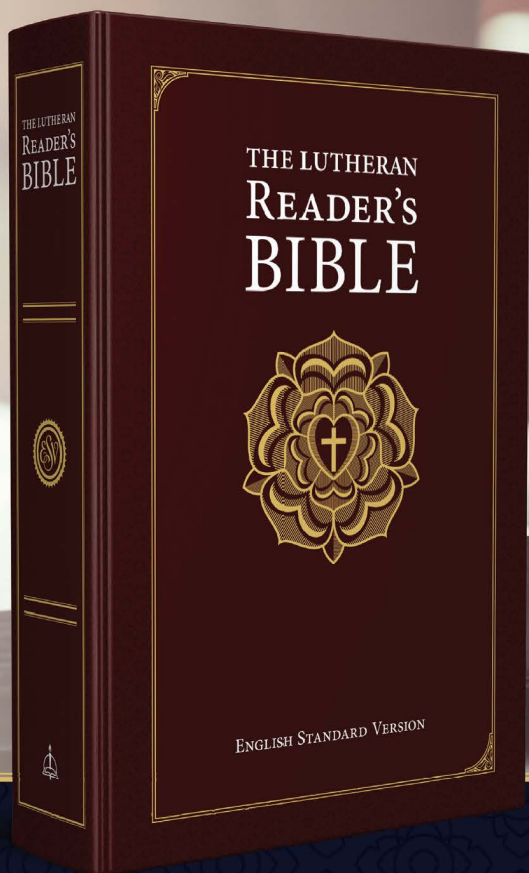
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A Short Form for Daily Reflection

ADAPTED FROM LUTHERAN SERVICE BOOK

Make the sign of the Holy Cross and say:

In the name of the Father, † Son, and Holy Spirit. 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 You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil 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 You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have graciously kept me this day; and I pray that You would forgive me all my sins where I have done wrong, and graciously keep me this night. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me.

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

The Baptism of Our Lord

JANUARY 7, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 1:4-11

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

Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when He came up out of the water, immediately He saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on Him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:6-11)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. It is all about Jesus. Crazy John knew this in the wilderness, and made sure people knew it! "After me comes he who is mightier than I... I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." The people at the Jordan at the time probably knew this too! After all, the voice of God proclaimed Jesus as His beloved son. But many today have forgotten. We live in a world that is all about me and what I want. And this mentality has even trickled into how some Christians talk about Baptism. For some Christians, Baptism is a choice. It is a confession of my faith to prove that I love God and have accepted Him into my heart. This sort of thinking about Baptism is more about the act of Baptism and what it symbolizes, rather than being about the promises and salvation granted to us through it.

But, while your Baptism brings you into the family of God, your Baptism is not really about you. It is about Jesus. It is about your Lord binding you to Himself through water and Word, washing you clean of your sins and placing His name upon you. In Baptism, Christ secures His children for Himself. Baptism is all about Jesus, and so you can be certain that it is for you! In Christ, we have hope that the Word and water does what it says it will, regardless of how we feel in our own heart and experience our life as baptized Christians. Christ does not change, and neither does your Baptism. Thanks be to God that it's not about us, and all about Jesus. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Blessed Lord, You wonderfully foreshadowed the promise of Baptism in the rescue of Noah from the flood, in the passing of Your people through the Red Sea, and in the ceremonial washings of Your law. In Christ and by His Baptism, You have kept Your Word and made Baptism to be the water of new life. Give us Your Holy Spirit, that we may become the new and holy people You have declared us to be. Amen. (Collect from LCMS Series C)

Monday the First Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 8, 2024

Today's Reading: Genesis 1:1-5

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

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. (Genesis 1:1-5)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Word and Light. These are the first things to be present in all of Creation. God utters these words: "Let there be light," and then there is. With just a few words and a couple days, all things in the universe, every last atom, rock, plant, animal, planet, and element, came into being, and this light showers over it all from day one. And even here, in the very beginning, before humanity is even created, we see our Lord Jesus present. The evangelist John shows us this plainly as he begins his Gospel in this very same way, with Word and Light. John says that this Word, through which all things were made, is the Christ, and that He is the light of the world. Christ scatters the darkness, so that in the light, there is no darkness at all.

At the very foundations of this world, our Lord Jesus is already delivering His gifts to you: His undying light and love-filled Word. All good things come to you through the Word of God that spoke all that we know into existence. This Word guides and sustains you, bringing the gifts of forgiveness, faith, life, and salvation to you. The light of Christ dispels the darkness. In this light, we see Christ more clearly. In this Word, God's promises are delivered directly to our ears. Even in our suffering on earth, where we may feel blind, as if we cannot see the light of Christ, or feel deaf to the words God speaks to us, the Word and Light of God remain present with you. This same Lord, who created all things in the beginning, comes to you today through Word and Sacrament, providing you through His love that has been present since even before He uttered the words: "Let there be light." In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Of the Father's Love Begotten, ere the worlds began to be, He is Alpha and Omega, He the source, the ending He, of the things that are, that have been, and that future years shall see, evermore and evermore. (LSB 384:1)

Tuesday the First Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 9, 2024

Today's Reading: Romans 6:1-11

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

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:1-5)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Jesus is not a 'get out of jail free card.' Though He brought all of your sins to the cross, and paid for them completely, once and for all, you are not free to let your sinful nature go free! Though your record has been wiped clean through our baptism, you are not supposed to fill the list of your offenses over again! You have been made NEW! You are a different thing entirely than you were before!

You were once in sin, from the very moment you entered this world. Yet, God, in His overwhelming mercy, placed His name upon you in your baptism, in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. You were marked differently at that moment until the end of time. You are not like the world. You are Christ's: a new creation, set apart from the sinful world around you.

In your Baptism, your Old Adam has been drowned. He dies. Every single day. The waters of your Baptism have bound you completely to the work of Christ on the cross and His resurrection from the dead. You are not to live in our sin, because Christ has declared you His own, purchased and won through His death on the cross, delivered new life through Christ's resurrection.

Of course, temptations will still come. You will fall into it. Sin is still in this world, and the devil is looking for every opportunity to strike. Yet, in our new identity, we are to live differently. We are to guard against temptation and not seek sin out. We are not free to sin, or even free of sin, but free from sin. Through the gift of Baptism, we remain vigilant against sin through the grace of God, certain of the forgiveness of the sins we still continue to do. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Wednesday the First Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 10, 2024

Today's Reading: Ezekiel 18:25-29

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

Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? When a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it; for the injustice that he has done he shall die. Again, when a wicked person turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he shall save his life. Because he considered and turned away from all the transgressions that he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die. Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' O house of Israel, are my ways not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? (Ezekiel 18:25-29)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. If you've been listening to the world around you, it's easy to see that the world does not like the things that Our Lord has to say. To many, the Bible is just an outdated book full of ancient, prejudicial rules that have been used throughout history to subjugate people. Even some Christian churches are embarrassed of what God's Word says, and will change the message so as to not offend others. The way of the Lord, as it is delivered to us in the Scriptures, is not fair in the eyes of modern society. They may ask questions like "Why would a God who loves me not want me to love and marry whoever I want to?" "If God wants me to be happy, why shouldn't I be able to change my body?" The world does not think the way of the Lord is just.

And maybe they are right. Maybe God isn't just, at least, not according to our terms. After all, it isn't very fair that one man should have to die for the sins of the whole world. It isn't very fair to let people who break laws for their whole life to be allowed to go free after they eat some bread, drink some wine, and splash some water on their head, and to forgive them when they say they're "sorry," even when you know they're going to do it again. The LORD is not particularly fair, but He is the judge. What is "just" is not up to us to decide. Our own idea of judgment is based on what benefits us most. We seek out revenge and recompense for the sins done against us, but wish for mercy shown only to ourselves. Thanks be to God that His justice is not like ours. Our Father in heaven is a righteous judge, but He also has mercy on His children, rescuing them from the judgment that they truly deserve. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Lord, keep us steadfast in Your Word; curb those who by deceit or sword would wrest the kingdom from Your Son and bring to naught all He has done. (LSB 655:1)

Thursday the First Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 11, 2024

Today's Reading: 10 Commandments, 4th Commandment

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

Honor your father and your mother. What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not despise or anger our parents and other authorities, but honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them.
(Luther's Small Catechism: The Fourth Commandment)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Most of the commandments are fairly easy for us to wrap our brains around. We should love God, honor His name, and gladly hear God's word. Don't kill people, don't be sexually immoral, don't steal, don't lie, and don't covet. We don't follow them of course, but we generally agree with their sentiments for the most part.

The Fourth Commandment can be a little different. It's not always easy to honor our parents. Even for those with great relationships with their own parents, following their rules and cherishing them can be difficult. In most cases, we spend most of our early lives with our parents. We know them better than we know anyone else in our lives, and with all the things we love and cherish about them, we know about their sins as well. We know our parents aren't perfect, and sometimes, we might believe their decisions or rules are unfair, illogical, or just plain annoying.

But your parents, and other authorities in our lives, are the people that God has chosen to guard, protect, lead, and teach us in our lives. Our parents are in authority over us because God gave them that vocation. It is their role to love and care for you, just as it is yours to love and obey them. Both parents and children fail one another in their vocations. Because of the Fall, we all are unable to uphold our vocations perfectly. Just as much as this commandment is about loving, cherishing, honoring, serving, and obeying your parents, it is also about forgiving them. Just as parents are supposed to show love to their children as God showed His love to His children, we are to show that same love to our parents. Christ died for your parents, and Christ died for you. One blessing of the family that we may sometimes forget is that we are given a close, tight knit community in which we can bring the promises of Christ to one another. Children and parents alike may bring the love of Christ to one another in love, through communicating God's forgiveness to one another, reminding each other of our baptismal identities, and continually driving one another back to Christ. When you fail as a son or daughter, repent in love and honor; and when your parents fail, show them Christ's love in return.

"You are to honor and obey your father, mother, ev'ry day, serve them each way that comes to hand; You'll then live long in the land." Have mercy, Lord!
(LSB 581:5)

Friday the First Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 12, 2024

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

For thus says the Lord God, "Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness." (Ezekiel 34:11-12)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Contrary to popular belief, sheep aren't stupid. Sheep are actually rather intelligent creatures. They have individual personalities, needs, and learn things very quickly. While sheep are often used in scripture as a metaphor for human beings under God's care, we are not compared to sheep because they're dumb animals who are too stupid to do anything on their own. On the contrary, we're compared to sheep because we are a lot like them. Sheep wander for specific purposes! As prey animals, they're fearful creatures, and as a result, they're always searching for ways to avoid danger. If something seems dangerous, it's better for them in their own minds to run away before they wait long enough to find out what the danger is. Sheep will follow one another, even wandering away from their shepherd, because they find strength in numbers.

We do not stray from God because we're too stupid to follow Him, we stray because we want to, because we think we know what's best. We get ourselves in danger trying to be our own shepherds and finding our own way. While we might convince ourselves that we have "good intentions," if we lead ourselves, we will only end up marching to one place: directly into the clutches of the evil one. Sheep who stray from their shepherd may think they are thoughtfully avoiding danger, but without their protector, they find themselves in an entirely more dangerous position, defenseless against the uncertainties of the wilderness. But it does not please the Lord to give us over to our own sinful desires or to our own selfish intuitions, to leave us to this untimely fate. The Lord seeks us out, one by one, and brings us back into His fold. He is willing to go to the ends of the earth, even into the jaws of death itself, in order to carry us home into His care. Thanks be to God that our Good Shepherd seeks out His scattered sheep, and that we may be numbered among His flock. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

We are Yours; in love befriend us, Be the guardian of our way; Keep Your flock, from sin defend us, Seek us when we go astray. Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, Hear us children when we pray. Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, hear us children when we pray. (LSB 711:2)

Saturday the First Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 13, 2024

Today's Reading: Introit for Epiphany 2

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

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Words matter. Our universe was created with words. Words are the building blocks of our communication with one another, they're how we build relationships. Words are the way through which we come to know our Lord through preaching and teaching. Words matter.

In this sinful world we are prone to using words for evil. We lie, we gossip, we hurt one another, we manipulate, we curse, and so much more against our neighbor. With our words, we can also blaspheme and misuse the name of our God. Even when we do not speak words, we can carry them in our hearts, holding grudges, animosity, and prejudices against our neighbor. We carry anger towards God for not answering our prayers, for not preventing the bad things in our lives, for feeling that He was not there in the time we needed Him most. On our own, our words are sinful and wretched. Our words falter and fail to share love and mercy.

But the Word that does not fail, that does not falter, is our LORD Jesus. In this Psalm we pray to God with the Psalmist that our rock and redeemer would change our hearts and change our words to be righteous and acceptable in the eyes of God. We pray that our hearts would be graciously changed, purified, and forgiven of the sin that dwells within us. This psalm is a prayer to our righteous Lord for mercy.

Pastors will often pray this part of the Psalm before they preach. Of course, for those who are delivering the Word of God from the pulpit, it is of great importance for them to handle their words with care. They are speaking the truth, and it is to be received by the people as the Word of God! God promises to be in the Word when it is preached, but pastors pray these words for strength and confidence as they bring this gift to their congregations. But this prayer is not just for pastors. We pray it too, that we may live lives sanctified in Him. Without God, all of the words of our mouth and heart would bring nothing but ruin. But through God's own Word, we may be purified and forgiven, and our the meditations of our hearts made acceptable in His sight. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

To Jesus we for refuge flee, Who from the curse has set us free, and humbly worship at His throne, Saved by His grace through faith alone. (LSB 579:6)

Sunday the Second Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 14, 2024

Today's Reading: John 1:43-51

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

Jesus answered him, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." (John 1:50-51)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Nathaniel is easily amused by this "magic man Jesus" from backwater Nazareth. Jesus pulls a cool party trick by revealing where Nathaniel was when Philip told him the news of the Messiah and Nathaniel believes Jesus is the Son of God because of this. His belief is based on a moment of amazement, a neat trick, but hardly anything substantial. Nathaniel falls into the same trap we do. Magic Man Jesus is cool and exciting and captivating. He heals people, raises the dead, turns water into delicious wine. He satisfies the immediate desires of those around Him. He puts on a great show. This is the kind of Messiah our sinful nature wants. A God who works wonders for our will and benefit. A God that dazzles and amazes, showing how powerful He is in ways sinful creatures understand and adore. This kind of God is here for our amusement and pleasure. This is not the God we have, nor is it the God of Nathaniel. Jesus calls out Nathaniel's shallow belief and tells him he will witness something far greater than showy displays of power.

Christ is pointing towards His greatest miracle: His death and resurrection. This is not a simple party trick, or a neat gimmick to gain followers. This would be the great work of the Messiah. Christ's work on the cross gives us the gifts that cannot decay and do not lose their ability to satisfy. They are not flashes in the pan. They are the eternal rewards of this great work of God. Christ's body and blood, offered up on the cross as the perfect sacrifice, now sustain us at the Lord's Table. The water that flowed from our Savior's riven side washes us clean and makes us new in Holy Baptism. Jesus offers Nathaniel a front seat to this great miracle and He offers that same invitation to us. What we witness as we receive God's gifts may not seem as grand as walking on water but they are the greater thing. In these means of grace we find forgiveness of sins, freely given and life eternal with our Lord. So come, dear Christian, and see what God has done for 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 peace through all our days; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, on God, now and forever.

Monday the Second Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 15, 2024

Today's Reading: 1 Samuel 3:1-20

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

*And Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. And he said, "It is the LORD. Let him do what seems good to him."
(1 Samuel 3:17-18)*

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Eli was a priest of the Lord with worthless sons which was a problem because his sons were supposed to become priests of God. Previously, God has already spoken judgment unto Eli's sons, declaring they will die. And yet, when a new message from God comes, Eli still seeks it out. This new message is likely more judgment from God upon Eli's house and yet he demands that Samuel tell him. Eli, in faithfulness, declares, "It is the Lord. Let him do what seems good to him." He does not shy away from the death sentence for his sons and his family. It is still the Word of God. Eli does not joyfully receive this news from Samuel, but he faithfully receives the word and responds in trust, "Thy will be done, O Lord."

It is a more natural response to say, "Thy will be done," when things are going well for us. It seems, in that moment, that God's will aligns with our will. Everything is okay. It is a different experience to say "Thy will be done," when things are going poorly for us. God's will is not aligning with our will, our plan, our view of how things should go. It does not feel good to see loved ones suffer and die and still pray, "Thy will be done." Eli gives us an image to ponder. His children will die at the hands of God and yet, this man does not flee God's word. Eli knows his sons would make sorry examples of priests for God; he knows they deserve this punishment, but what father would punctuate the death of his son with, "Let God do what seems good to him"?

Eli is faithful. He submits to the Lord in all things, even in the death of his sons. This is not out of Eli's own ability but out of faith. This faith is given to him by God. This faith is given to you by God. Faith in the promises of God preserves us and enables us to trust that our Lord's will is done out of love. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

From me this is not hidden, yet I am not afraid; I leave my cares, as bidden, to whom my vows are paid. Though life from me be taken and everything I own, I trust in You unshaken and cleave to You alone. (LSB 724:7)

Tuesday the Second Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 16, 2024

Today's Reading: 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

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

Flee sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside of the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1 Corinthians 6:18-20)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. What you do with your body matters. At a base level, this makes sense. If I eat well, sleep enough, bathe, brush my teeth, and so on, my body should continue to work well enough. Take care of your body and your body will take care of you. But St. Paul is getting at something a little deeper here. He has been warning the Corinthians (and all of us) about the dangers of misusing our bodies sexually. His comment about sinning against our own bodies means that while murder and theft directly hurt people outside of ourselves, sexual immorality defiles our body. The intimate gift of sexuality is corrupted, as is the body and mind of those who commit sexual immorality. But why does that matter? What I do with my body surely doesn't affect others that much, does it?

St. Paul argues rightly that our actions towards and with our own bodies have drastic effects. He gives a few layers of proof here. Paul begins with this: your body, dear Christian, is a temple of the Holy Spirit. In Baptism, the Holy Spirit enters in and grants you faith then and sustains your faith going forward. Second, you have been made part of the Body of Christ, the Church. If one part of the body is hurt, sick, or broken, how well will the rest of the body fare? Not well. As part of the body of Christ, the church, we take care of ourselves in order to better care for others. Finally, Paul hints at the Incarnation. Bodies are so important that the Son of Man took on human flesh to enact the world's salvation. Jesus redeemed living in a human body. Jesus then suffered and died. The blood He shed, the death He died, was the price paid to buy us out from under the power of sin, death, and the devil. After His death, Jesus rose from the dead, in the same body He had before His death, with the nail marks and spear wound still in His flesh. Christ's resurrection is the precursor to our own resurrection. And like our Lord, we will be resurrected with the same bodies we have now. The gift of the body that God gives upon our conception will remain with us in eternity. So glorify God in your body, knowing that sins are forgiven in Christ and we are no longer bound to sin but to Christ Jesus! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

But all of that was washed away- immersed and drowned forever. The water of your Baptism day restored whatever old Adam and his sin destroyed and all our sinful selves employed according to our nature. (LSB 596:3)

Wednesday the Second Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 17, 2024

Today's Reading: Romans 7:21-8:17

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

Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.
(Romans 7:24-25)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Your life, dear Christian, is lived in tension. Tension is uncomfortable. It means we are pulled in two opposing directions. It puts so much strain on us that we seek to resolve the tension. While this feels good for a moment, we quickly understand that pulling too strongly one way or another can break the strand, or in this case, us.

St. Paul describes the tension between our relationship to the law of God and the law of sin. Christians, having been made to walk in Christ, seek to do what pleases God. Sinners, however, seek after sinful desires. And we find ourselves caught in the middle of these opposing ideals, unable to relieve this tension. We cannot keep the Law of God perfectly because of the inherited sin within us, so we stray towards the way of sin, death, and the devil. However, having been baptized into Christ, we strive to do what God wills, even though we know we will ultimately fail. Our life is lived in the middle, wanting to serve God with all our body, mind, and soul, while also still living in "this body of death," as St. Paul writes, unable and often unwilling to serve perfectly.

There is a Latin phrase that encapsulates this tension: *simul justus et peccator*. This phrase translates to "simultaneously saint and sinner." We are, as Christians, both saints and sinners. We belong fully to God through our Baptism but original sin still resides in us, meaning we cannot live according to the Law of God, as much as we'd like to. We cannot relieve this tension, it is impossible. "Thanks be to God through Christ our Lord!" God, while we were still sinners, sent His Son to die for us. God, while we were dead in our trespasses and sins, reached into our watery grave and pulled us out into new life in Baptism. God, while we still sin much, send His Holy Spirit to strengthen us as we go about our lives, seeking to do the will of God. Go forth, dear Christian, knowing that the tension is tight and tough, but that it cannot break you. Thanks be to God! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

O grant that nighting in my soul may dwell, but Thy pure love alone; Oh, may Thy love possess me whole, my joy, my treasure, and my crown! All coldness from my heart remove; my ev'ry act, word, thought be love. (LSB 683:2)

The Confession of Saint Peter

JANUARY 18, 2024

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

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

And [Jesus] asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him. (Mark 8:29-30)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Peter gets the answer right. Jesus asks the big question and Peter aces the quiz. Who is Jesus? The Christ. Today we remember St. Peter and his bold confession of faith. But on a day like today, it can be just as easy to remember Peter's many less-than-correct answers to big questions. Just after Peter's great confession, Jesus calls him Satan because Peter refuses to accept Jesus must die. On the night Jesus is betrayed, Peter denies His Lord three times, insisting he does not know Jesus, even when asked repeatedly. But in this moment, He says the right thing at the right time. How did this lowly fisherman get this answer right when he so often missed the mark?

In Matthew's account of this same event, we are given the answer. Jesus says, "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." This great confession is given to Peter. It is not his own, invented in his mind to impress his Teacher of the other apostles. God the Father revealed this confession to Peter, gave it to him freely, and enabled this sinner to boldly confess, "You are the Christ."

This is why we remember St. Peter the Apostle and his confession. This great confession of faith doesn't belong just to Peter but to you. Jesus is the Christ, Who takes away the sin of the world. He does so out of love and not because we have earned it. Because we continually fail that Christ came for us sinners. Join in the confession of St. Peter because it belongs to you too. Who do we say Jesus is? The Christ, the Son of God, born in human flesh to save the world from sin, death, and the devil. This Christ died a sinner's death and rose from the dead that we may also have eternal life. This Christ calls you His own in the waters of Baptism. This Christ offers Himself freely in His Body and Blood at the Lord's Table. This Christ, this Jesus, is yours, given freely. We thank God for St. Peter and his confession because this is our confession too. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Here stands the font before our eyes, telling how God has received us. The altar recalls Christ's sacrifice and what His Supper here gives us. Here sounds the Scriptures that proclaim Christ yesterday, today, the same, and evermore, our Redeemer. (LSB 645:4)

Friday the Second Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 19, 2024

Today's Reading: 10 Commandments, 5th Commandment

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

You shall not murder.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God so that we may not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body but help and befriend him in every bodily need.

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. At first, this commandment seems rather simple: don't kill people. For many centuries following God writing the Commandments and giving them to Moses to give them to God's people, you shall not murder, simply forbade taking another person's life. This simple law is good, for the benefit of our neighbor, but it can give the illusion that we have kept this commandment if we are never labeled a murderer. Our Lord, in His teachings from the Sermon on the Mount, takes this simple command and expands it. It is not enough to simply avoid being an ax-murderer. Christ tells His hearers, "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." So now the command is, "Don't kill anyone, but also, do not be angry with those around you, do not insult them, and do not think unkind things about them. Dr. Luther takes his explanation of the fifth commandment from Christ's direct teachings. Do not wish or enact harm against your neighbor. Now, when we look at this commandment, we are not as innocent as we would first assume. Sure, I haven't killed anyone but I have insulted those around me and I've definitely thought mean things towards family.

Christ's teachings on this commandment (and Luther's explanation centuries later), teach two things. The first is that we are to avoid harming our neighbors, no matter how small the offense may be. The second aspect of this teaching is the helping aspect, especially pointed out in Luther's explanation. We are to help and befriend our neighbors, seeking their best interests and striving to provide support and help when needed. We see this modeled in Jesus. We know that Christ perfectly kept the law, but He kept the law perfectly for us. Sinners cannot keep any of the commandments. Rather than leave us to the judgment of hellfire we deserve, Jesus Christ befriends and helps us in every need. His suffering for us means we are now strengthened by the Holy Spirit to serve and help our neighbor. We are shaped by Jesus to not seek the worst for our fellow sinners, but look on them in love - the same love shown to us first by our God. This love extends to us while we are still sinners, calls us from death into life, and grants us strength to persevere in a death-filled world. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Saturday the Second Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 20, 2024

Today's Reading: Psalm 66:1-5, 20, antiphon: Psalm 66:4, 92:1

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

Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds toward the children of man...Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me! (Psalm 66:5, 20)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Come and see what God has done! That is the invitation from the psalmist. Come to the place where God is and receive His gifts. At the end of this psalm, the writer proclaims, "Blessed be God because He has not rejected my prayer or removed His steadfast love from me!" This is his response after receiving God's gifts. This introit text, this psalm, gives a concise breakdown of what the Divine Service is and of what our relationship to God is. It is the pattern of a Christian's life: receiving what God gives and thanking Him for those gifts. Two verses can encapsulate all we do Sunday to Sunday (and all the days in between). How can this be?

Let's get into it. Come and see, this is our invitation to worship. It is not Go and do this! an authoritative and harsh command, but Come, I am already here and want you to be here too."Come and see what? All that God has done, His awesome deeds toward all mankind. What has God done toward the children of man? He sent His only begotten Son to live, die, and rise, that we might be granted eternal life. Rather than be separated from God forever because of our sinful nature, God sent Christ Jesus to suffer and die in our place and bestow the merits of His death and resurrection upon us. He does so through the Means of Grace, through the Word and Sacrament, which we hear and receive every Divine Service. None of this is earned by us. That is impossible. It is all a gift, and all given freely to scared, helpless sinners, by a good and gracious Lord. God has not rejected our prayer for mercy nor has He removed His love from us. It is because of His love that these gifts exist. It is because He is steadfast in His promises that week after week, year after year, century after century, the sins are forgiven, the Word is preached and the Sacraments are administered. And in response to all of this, we bless the Lord. And even this blessing is not of our own doing! It is the Holy Spirit at work within us. He who grants and sustains our faith enables us to then return thanks for these gifts, praising Him from whom all blessings flow. So, dear Christian, come and see what God has done for you. Receive these gifts and return to them constantly, that your faith may be sustained. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Sunday the Third Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 21, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 1:14-20

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

And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." (Mark 1:17)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. What does it mean to be a "fisher of men?" Certainly, Jesus doesn't call Simon (later called Peter) and Andrew to wrap people up in nets or to put hooks in anyone's mouth. This figure of speech shows that Jesus will turn ordinary fishermen into something else. Now, these fishermen will spend their time "catching" people. That sounds manipulative. Perhaps "catching" is better understood as teaching or confessing to people. Evangelizing (the Greek word for "Gospelizing") is another good understanding. No longer would fish be the focus of these men, but the faith delivered to God's saints.

It's easy to start thinking about how these men, and even you, would be fishers of men and how you might do it better. But the way that Jesus speaks to the disciples is really, really important. Jesus said, "I will make you become fishers of men." This work of teaching, confessing, and evangelizing isn't about your skills and abilities. This is not something that you develop in yourself. This way of life, being a fisher of men, is something that Jesus does for you. You don't need to worry about improving your skills as you fish for people, but you simply hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Jesus brings His gospel to you, speaking into your ears the forgiveness of sins. It's for you, today, as you attend the Divine Service. Jesus comes to you, probably not in a boat, but in a sanctuary. He calls you away from your sinfulness to the holiness that He provides. He gives you that holiness through His forgiveness when you hear it in the absolution and the sermon and when you receive His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. There, He develops you to be a fisher of men. When you confess the Creed with your fellow Christians, you are practicing the "fisher of men" skills that Jesus is developing in you.

Confessing your faith can be scary. Christians sometimes worry that their skills aren't good enough or that they won't know what to say or that someone won't be impressed with how they speak about Jesus. Those fears often focus on you and how you confess the faith. Instead of self-centeredness, focus on Jesus. He is the one who comes to you to make you a fisher of men. He is the one who has transformed you, not just from a fisherman to a fisher-of-men, but from a sinner to one of His beloved saints - and that makes all the difference! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Monday the Third Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 22, 2024

Today's Reading: Jonah 3:1-5 , 10

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

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it. (Jonah 3:10)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. "Is that a threat or a promise?" is an appropriate response to the message the Lord sent to Nineveh through His prophet Jonah. "Forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed!" For Jonah, this was a promise. The Ninevehites were the enemy of the Lord's people in Judah, and their demise would be good news for the Lord's people. On the other hand, the people of Nineveh took these words as a threat, and they repented of their great evil. From the greatest of the least of the people of Nineveh, they covered themselves and even their animals in sackcloth. They also fasted during this time of repentance. They took the Lord's word of judgment seriously. The Lord relented from the threat. The destruction that He threatened was canceled. The serious threat of God's judgment was not carried out. The Lord revealed His goodness by not destroying Nineveh.

What about you? When you hear the severity of the Lord's judgment against your sinfulness, do you take it seriously? You might try to rationalize your sin, arguing that it's not that bad and it's not really hurting anyone. You might protest that what Scripture calls sinful shouldn't really be sinful. After all, your logic might go, the Scriptures were written many years ago and the times have changed. No matter how you might protest against the Lord's judgment, you should fear His wrath. The holy God does not tolerate your sinfulness. Psalm 5:4-5 says, "For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you. The boastful shall not stand before Your eyes; You hate all evildoers." Those are harsh words that show the severity of the Lord's judgment against sin. There is no wiggle room in God's expectations. That's a threat indeed!

Even your repentance is imperfect. Even when you repent from your sin, it's not perfect. Sometimes mistakes continue to happen and you return to your sin. You cannot live a perfect life, no matter how hard you try. It seems like the Lord's threat is still hanging over your head. That is why He sent His one and only Son into the flesh. Jesus Christ died for you, and all who believe in Him are saved. The Lord didn't cancel His threatening judgment, but Jesus, who knew no sin, became your sin so that you have the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

There, on the cross, you see the threat answered by the promise of God's mercy and love for you. You are forgiven by your gracious God in His care for you. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Tuesday the Third Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 23, 2024

Today's Reading: 1 Corinthians 7:29-35

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

This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. I want you to be free from anxieties. (1 Corinthians 7:29-32a)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. What are your priorities? What is most important to you? Is it your friends, or sports, or friends? Maybe it's good grades, peace and quiet, or being liked by others. There are lots of things that might compete for your attention as you have a variety of competing priorities. So, out of your priorities, which one or ones always rise to the top? Recognizing all these priorities, especially as it relates to if single people should get married or not, St. Paul writes to the Corinthians. He points out that anxieties betray priorities. Are you worried about your grades? If you're worried about it, that means it's important to you.

Paul writes that being married changes your priorities. Well, duh! Going back to school after Christmas break changes your priorities too. Any change in life changes what you prioritize. St. Paul points out that a Christian's priority should be about the things of the Lord. This reminds us of the first commandment: You shall have no other gods. As the Small Catechism helpfully explains, this means that we should fear, love, and trust in God above all things. That means that if something else takes priority over God, you have sinned. And it's obvious that you have broken this commandment. Repent. Turn from your sin. Receive the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. Set your attention on the Lord.

But what about getting married or doing anything else that would change your priorities? Set your attention on the Lord and His will. Live a life full of repentance and faith. Believe that the Lord's forgiveness for all your sins, including your divided attention, is enough. And it is, because God's grace is always enough. It is that grace that covers all your sins and sustains you every day. He is the author and perfecter of your faith, and He is faithful to forgive all your sins. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Christ be my Leader by night as by day; Safe through the darkness, for He is the way. Gladly I follow, my future His care, Darkness is daylight when Jesus is there. (LSB 861:1)

Saint Timothy

JANUARY 24, 2024

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. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions." (Matthew 24:45-47)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. In these passages, Jesus is teaching about the end times. Specifically, He is instructing Christians to care for one another and encourage one another in the faith. We can rejoice that we can do that for each other in our vocations. We can also be grateful for men whom God has called as pastors. St Timothy is a faithful and wise servant of our Lord, Jesus Christ. St Paul and the council of elders laid their hands on Timothy, ordaining him to serve in Christ's Church as a pastor. (1 Timothy 4:14) Paul's letters of 1 and 2 Timothy are addressed to this new pastor who was faithfully serving in the Lord's Church. These books are full of expectations for pastors, as well as expectations for all Christians in general, and divinely-inspired commands for how to live as a Christian in this world.

"But," you might say, "I'm not a pastor, and I'm never going to be a pastor! What does St Timothy and the books addressed to him have to do with me?" These words of God addressed to Timothy also apply to you. You are a servant of God, no matter what calling you have. When the Lord called you to faith in the waters of Baptism, He called you to take up your cross and follow Him, no matter what specific callings you have. The example of St Timothy and the words addressed to him in Scripture are insightful for you.

St Paul's words in 1 Timothy 4:12 certainly apply to Pastor Timothy, but they also apply to all who are called to faith, including you. These words, "Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity," call you to live as an example in how you speak, how you act, how you believe, how you love, and in your purity. Live as the child of God that He has made you through His Baptism.

St Paul's words to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 is also helpful for you to hear. It says, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." God has given you Scripture so that you read it, hear it, and take it to heart. It is through His inspired Word that the Lord forms you, making you complete for His work.

Today, as the Church remembers St. Timothy, rejoice that the Lord has called pastors in His Church. Rejoice also that the Lord has sent His Scriptures to train all Christians, including you, in His Word. Finally, thank God for the gift of salvation that you share with Timothy so that you and he are the Lord's blessed servants in His kingdom, now and forever. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

The Conversion of Saint Paul

JANUARY 25, 2024

Today's Reading: Acts 9:1-22

Daily Lectionary: Zechariah 1:1-21; Romans 14:1-23

And immediately [Paul] proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?" But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ. (Acts 9:20-22)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Things don't always go the way you planned. Sometimes, interruptions happen. Saul's life was interrupted, not by mere circumstances or a small change of plans. The Lord Jesus interrupted Saul's day, Saul's trip to Damascus, Saul's life, and Saul's eternity. This is no ordinary interruption, but the work of Jesus to convert Saul from a life of unbelief to a life of faith in Jesus. When Jesus appeared to Saul, He had a question, "Why do you persecute Me?" Saul's question, "Who are you, lord?" implied that he did not know or recognize Jesus. But Jesus changed that, calling Saul to faith and even using him as a chosen instrument to bring the Gospel to people all over the world.

Saul's conversion says something about how Christians are made, then and now. Christians become Christians when God interrupts their lives and calls them to faith. This is God's Divine action, not something that any person can do for themselves. Saul didn't ask Jesus to come visit him on the Damascus road. Saul didn't seek Jesus out. Saul didn't consider that Jesus might be an option in fixing his problems, so he would give this Christianity idea a try. No, the Lord came to Saul and called him from unbelief to faith.

That's the same thing that the Lord has done for you, calling you out of the darkness of unbelief into faith in Jesus, who is the Light of the World. God's conversion of you might not have the same kind of shocking story of Saul's conversion. However, comparing conversion stories and the transformation that God has worked for you compared to others isn't the measuring stick that the Lord reveals. Instead, it is the promise of eternal life by the grace of Jesus. That grace was applied to you the same way it was applied to Saul - in the water of Holy Baptism. There, with His Triune name, God called you His own and applied the death and resurrection of Jesus to you.

Martin Luther points this out clearly in the Small Catechism, saying, "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. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers. On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ." *This interruption and change of course for your eternal life is the work of God for your good! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.*

Saint Titus

JANUARY 26, 2024

Today's Reading: Luke 10:1-9

Daily Lectionary: Zechariah 2:1-3:10; Romans 15:1-13

And [Jesus] said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." (Luke 10:2)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Today is another festival. Much like Wednesday, this festival commemorates a pastor who was put in place by St. Paul. As we thank God for the faith and work of St. Titus, we hear about the realities of living in the CHurch. While many things change, the words of Jesus to His disciples are steadfast and true no matter the year printed on the calendar. Jesus calls His disciples and the whole Church to pray that God would send workers into His harvest field. This is most clearly seen as the Lord uses pastors in His Church, including St Titus. The Lord has established this pastoral office. Therefore, this is no human institution. The Lord sends pastors into His Church so that His Word is preached and the forgiveness of sins is made known.

That's really important because the Church lives as lambs in the middle of wolves. (Matthew 10:3) The other readings for the festival of St. Titus (Acts 20:28-35 and Titus 1:1-9) confess the reality that the Church lives in the middle of the world's attacks. Pastors serve in Christ's Church, even when the Church isn't popular or liked. These undershepherds of the Good Shepherd serve to lead the Church in the midst of wolves.

Pastors are also called to be an example to the Church in faith and in contentment. Jesus commanded His disciples to remain in the home where they were welcomed, not looking for a better meal or a more comfortable bed. They were to remain where they were, serving faithfully. The whole Church needs that reminder to be content with what the Lord provides. He is the One who is faithful and who provides all that we need to support this body and life. We don't chase more contentment, but enjoy the gifts of God, knowing that he gives what is needed. When Jesus tells His disciples not to go looking for better places to stay or better accommodations, He is commanding them not to covet. The Lord who provides daily bread for the righteous and the wicked is the One who cares for His disciples and who cares for you.

On this day, it's easy to think about the calling that God gives to pastors. That is a wonderful calling, and it is for your benefit. However, if you aren't a pastor, this is also a day to rejoice in the promises of God for you. He is the One who cares for you by filling your daily needs. He brings His kingdom to you, and He even sends you a pastor to announce His grace for you. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Saturday the Third Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 27, 2024

Today's Reading: Introit for Epiphany 4

Daily Lectionary: Zechariah 4:1-5:11; Romans 15:14-33

Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the Lord. Blessèd is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessèd is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found; surely in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him. You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance. Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen. Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the Lord. (Introit for Epiphany 4, Psalm 32:1-2, 5-7, 10)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. You are blessed! Your blessedness isn't seen in your material possessions or your fantastic mood or even by your hashtags on social media. Your blessedness comes because your transgression is forgiven and your sin is covered. There is a lot of pressure on trying to impress people around you with showing how you are blessed and how wonderful your life is. The Lord doesn't care about those social norms. The Lord cares by bringing you His blessings, especially in the forgiveness of your sins.

The practice of confessing sins before God and other people seems backwards to our understanding of showing how blessed we are. Human wisdom says that you keep your mistakes, your errors, and your sins to yourself and show others only the very best things that you do. Psalm 32 encourages you to confess your sins before God and admit them as you receive His forgiveness. When you confess your sins, you aren't telling God anything new. The all-knowing Lord of all creation already knows your sins. Confess these sins of yours to your merciful Father who is faithful to forgive those sins.

To accomplish that forgiveness, He has sent His one and only Son into the world to die on the cross to save you from your sins. That is where your blessedness comes from - the forgiveness won by Jesus Christ. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

I lay my sins on Jesus, The spotless Lamb of God; He bears them all and frees us From the accursèd load. I bring my guilt to Jesus To wash my crimson stains Clean in His blood most precious Till not a spot remains. (LSB 606:1)

Sunday the Fourth Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 28, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 1:21-28

Daily Lectionary: Zechariah. 6:1-7:14; Romans 16:17-27

And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God." (Mark 1:23-24)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. The man possessed by an unclean spirit had an interesting greeting for Jesus. "What have you to do with us?" You might greet people like that sometimes too. When someone comes who seems to be interfering in your plans, you might say, "What are you doing here?" The unclean spirit wants to know why Jesus is interfering in this synagogue on this day. Apparently, the unclean spirit thought He could do whatever he wanted at the synagogue, but Jesus interrupted his plans.

So, what does Jesus have to do with unclean spirits? He throws them out! He interrupts their plans! Jesus sets the rules, and He casts out unclean spirits. Jesus comes to set this possessed man free with His power and authority. That's a shocking action for the people in that synagogue. Not everyone works with that kind of authority. Jesus has unique, powerful authority.

But the question of "What have you to do with us?" isn't just the question of a possessed man. It's our question, too. What does Jesus have to do with us, who gather and confess our sins? We admit that we are poor, miserable sinners. We deserve God's wrath and punishment for our sin. When Jesus draws near to us, we should be very afraid! The One with Divine authority has every right to judge us for our sinfulness. But Jesus doesn't come to bring His judgment against us. Instead, He sets us free from sin and death and the power of the devil. He comes with His grace and His forgiveness.

This work of Jesus interrupts our sinful lives and transforms us into His saints. He washes us clean in the water of Holy Baptism, He speaks our forgiveness in the words of Holy Absolution, He instructs us in the Holy Scriptures, and He feeds us His own body and blood in Holy Communion. He brings holiness to us. He Himself is the source of that holiness and He is the One who wants everything to do with us because of His great love. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Monday the Fourth Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 29, 2024

Today's Reading: Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Daily Lectionary: Zechariah 8:1-23; 2 Timothy 1:1-18

"The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen— just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.' (Deuteronomy 18:15-16)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. The Lord God has the authority of life and death. That was made clear in yesterday's reading when Jesus cast the unclean spirit out of the possessed man. But that incident was not the first time the Lord declared that He has that authority. When the Lord appeared to His people at Mount Horeb (that's the same as Mount Sinai), they were afraid and didn't want to speak directly with God so they wouldn't be judged and die. The people spoke to Moses and sent him to speak to God. There at Mount Horeb, he served as their representative before God, their intermediary. He stood between God and God's people.

Later, Moses gave the Lord's promise to His people that He would raise up another prophet like him. Another intermediary, another representative would come. But this representative is God Himself. He doesn't stand on the top of Mount Horeb, but was crucified on the top of Mount Calvary. There, at the place of death, the Lord Jesus takes that place of death and life. His death wasn't permanent, but it was still very real. In His suffering and death, Jesus ensured that you no longer need to fear the Lord's judgment because He submitted to judgment on your behalf. He delivers to you the forgiveness of your sins. Jesus stands in the midst of death and life because He has the authority to bring life to those who should die for their sins, including you.

St Paul teaches that Jesus is the fulfillment of this prophecy that one would arise like Moses in 1 Timothy 2:5-6, where he writes, "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time." Jesus is indeed that mediator, and He is also the ransom for your sins. The Lord has spoken to you. He calls you to repent of your sin, and He declares that He has forgiven you. Believe in that Lord, your one Mediator, Jesus Christ. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Christ, the way that leads unfailing To the Father's home on high, Christ, the truth that frees the captive, Christ, the life that cannot die. Mediator to the Father, Sacrifice and great High Priest: Lead us to Your heav'nly mansions, There to share Your wedding feast. (LSB 540:5)

Tuesday the Fourth Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 30, 2024

Today's Reading: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Daily Lectionary: Zechariah 9:1-17; 2 Timothy 2:1-26

But if anyone loves God, he is known by God. (1 Corinthians 8:3)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. When St Paul writes about food, his concern isn't about nutritional value or about a diet program or about balancing enough protein to build muscle. Paul's concern is spiritual. When he talks about eating, especially eating meat, he's referring to meat that has been offered as a sacrifice to an idol at a temple of a false god. Those temples would sell some of the meat from the animals that were killed in those sacrifices. If someone knew where the meat that a Christian was eating came from, they might think that Christian didn't have a problem with worshiping a false god.

Idols aren't anything more than wood or stone. Paul refers to them as "so-called gods." But what people didn't know - that these idols aren't real - could hurt them. Believing in those idols of wood and stone leads people away from faith in Jesus Christ, and God forbids idolatry. It's possible that someone might think that a Christian eating meat sacrificed to idols would be participating in worshiping that idol and that idolatry isn't a big deal.

That's why Paul instructs Christians to be careful not to cause offense by eating meat sacrificed by idols. This is an act of love for fellow Christians. But the meat that you eat doesn't separate you from God, just like the food that you eat won't commend you to God. Sinning against your brother by damaging their faith is a big deal.

This continues to be an issue in the Church today, even when the issue is no longer buying meat from the butcher shop of false gods. The music that you listen to, the TV you watch, the video games you play, the fashion sense you have and more are all similar to the meat sacrificed to idols. You are free in Christ, but do not abuse that freedom. Do not harm your fellow Christians with that freedom. Treat them in love, because they are people for whom Jesus died.

When you start to think about the ways that you have caused hurt by not being sensitive to your fellow Christians, remember that God loves you. "If anyone loves God, he is known by God." The One who knows you doesn't act against you in anger, but for you in love. Trust that the Lord is good, and He brings His love to you, even as He calls you to love those around you that He loves by being sensitive to their faith. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Wednesday the Fourth Week of Epiphany

JANUARY 31, 2024

Daily Lectionary: Zechariah 10:1-11:3; 2 Timothy 3:1-17

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. (2 Timothy 3:12-13)

In the Name ✙ of Jesus. Amen. The way the reading from 2 Timothy 3 starts sounds like a cross between mayhem and your daily scroll through social media. “For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people. For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.” (2 Timothy 3:2-7) That could be a description of the hallways in your high school, the crowd around the water cooler at your job, or almost any other collection of people today. It can be easy to say that behavior and society is getting worse and worse, but Scripture speaks like the sinful behavior we see today has always been around.

That’s the reality that the Church lives in. That’s the reality that you live in, too. The deception and deceit and evil and opposition of the unbelieving world comes against you. So what do you do in the middle of such problematic surroundings? How do you proceed when the Church is persecuted and when evil people go on from bad to worse? Simply, you believe in Jesus. He came into this unbelieving world as the light that shines in the darkness, even when the darkness did not receive Him. The darkness of this world has not overcome Him. (John 1:5) Even on the cross, as Jesus was suspended between heaven and earth in the darkness, the Light of the World was not extinguished. Yes, He died, and He rose again on the third day revealing that evil does not win the day. Only Jesus wins the day, and He brings that victory to you. In the Name ✙ of Jesus. Amen.

Lord, keep us steadfast in Your Word; Curb those who by deceit or sword Would wrest the kingdom from Your Son And bring to naught all He has done. (LSB 655:1)

Thursday the Fourth Week of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 1, 2024

Today's Reading: 10 Commandments, 6th Commandment

Daily Lectionary: Zechariah 11:4-17; 2 Timothy 4:1-18

You shall not commit adultery. (The Sixth Commandment)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. "Adultery" is such a rare word that it can be hard to understand. One dictionary defines "adultery" like this: "voluntary sexual intercourse between a married person and someone other than that person's current spouse or partner." That's fine for the English language, but God's definition of adultery goes beyond that. God condemns any kind of sexual relationship outside of marriage. While the English definition would say that you can't commit adultery if you and your partner aren't married, God declares that a sexual relationship or encounter outside of marriage is sinful.

God doesn't stop there, either. Jesus went on to say, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Matthew 5:27-28) The Lord doesn't only judge the sin of adultery, but He includes every kind of unchastity, including lust. This is not only a sin for the married or the young, but a sin that plagues every sinner with a pulse.

The Catechism helpfully points out the opposite of adultery, and that is chastity manifested in a sexually pure and decent life. Living in holiness includes sex and sexuality. Scripture calls Christians to flee from lust and to abstain from sex outside of marriage. Scripture also teaches that marriage is a gift and God has established it for good.

What does that mean in the midst of a world full of temptation? Live as a Christian, striving to live in God's holiness and keeping yourself from engaging in sexual sin, including lust. When you find that you have fallen into sin (sexual or otherwise), flee to Jesus Christ. His precious death brings forgiveness for your sin. You don't sin so that God's grace can abound, but you receive His forgiveness for all your sin.

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Be faithful to your marriage vow; No lust or impure thoughts allow. Keep all your conduct free from sin, By self-controlled discipline. Have mercy, Lord! (LSB 581:7)

The Purification of Mary and the Presentation of Our Lord

FEBRUARY 2, 2024

Today's Reading: Luke:2:22-40

Daily Lectionary: Zechariah 12:1-13:9; Titus 1:1-2:6

Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel." (Luke 2:29-32)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. A number of things happened that day in the temple. Mary came into the temple to keep the Old Testament law with two different sacrifices. The instructions for these sacrifices are in Leviticus 12. After the birth of a firstborn son, that son was redeemed by the sacrifice of a lamb. That's a confession that the Lord possessed all the firstborn of Israel since the Passover. A mother was also expected to make a sacrifice 40 days after the birth of a baby boy to purify her. (The same sacrifice was to be made 80 days after the birth of a girl, but the Bible doesn't say why it's 40 days for a boy and 80 days for a girl.) That's why we celebrate this festival 40 days after Christmas.

There was still more going on in the temple that day. Old Simeon took the child, Jesus, in his arms and prophesied. He had been promised that he would not die until he saw the Lord's Messiah. Now that he held the Messiah in his arms, he could die. Because the Lord had kept His promise of sending the Messiah, Simeon could die in peace.

There is a reason that the Church prays along with Simeon each week in the Divine Service after receiving the Lord's Supper. The same Messiah that Simeon held in His arms comes in, with, and under bread and wine, truly present in His body and blood. There, He forgives sins and strengthens faith. Christians now pray that, since the Lord Jesus has come to them, they can die in peace. We have seen the Lord's salvation in Christ.

When we come to the Divine Service, we don't bring any animals with us to sacrifice there, like Mary did in the temple. The sacrifice has already come, and this is no mere lamb born in a sheep-pen, but this is the Lamb of God, born for you and your salvation. 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.

Saturday the Fourth Week of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 3, 2024

Today's Reading: Introit for Epiphany 5

Daily Lectionary: Job 2:1-3:10; John 1:19-34:38

I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me. Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him," lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken. But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me. (Psalm 13:3-5, antiphon Psalm 13:6)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. In the midst of death, the Lord brings life. Just yesterday, we prayed with Simeon that we could die in peace because we have seen the Lord's Christ. Today, we pray with David that God would "light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death." This psalm resonates with the song of Simeon. A Christian's heart rejoices in God's salvation. In the middle of all the struggles and trials that exist in the world around us, and even as our own flesh tries to lead us back into sin, the gift of God's salvation is what we need. He has provided this gift, and we have His steadfast love.

This is the hope of your life. Jesus Christ is your Savior. He has come, bringing your salvation. He is the One that you trust in. No matter how difficult the world's attacks against the Church are, no matter how wracked with guilt and shame you might be, the Lord has dealt bountifully with you. He has given you what you need, and that is the forgiveness of your sins and the promise of eternal life. He has lit up your eyes with His grace. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

*Lord, let at last Thine angels come, To Abr'ham's bosom bear me home,
That I may die unfearing; And in its narrow chamber keep My body
safe in peaceful sleep Until Thy reappearing. And then from death
awaken me That these mine eyes with joy may see, O Son of God, Thy
glorious face, My Savior and my fount of grace. Lord Jesus Christ, my
prayer attend, my prayer attend, And I will praise Thee without end.
(LSB 708:3)*

Sunday the Fifth Week of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 4, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 1:29-39

Daily Lectionary: Job 1:1-22; John 1:1-18

"[Jesus] cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him." (Mark 1:29-39)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. The demons knew Jesus? Of course they did. Satan heard the first promise, the promise that Eve's greater descendant would crush Satan's head, giving salvation to the sinner. (See Gen. 3:15) The demons have seen it all—the promise given Abraham for the justification of the sinner (Gen. 15), the promise to David that a greater Son would rule an everlasting kingdom (1 Chron. 17:11-15), and more. Maybe you can even think of other promises the Lord gave for the sinner. Satan and demons have seen much, they demons know a lot!

They know about you, too, and me. They know sins I have committed even from my childhood. My history, my pride, my vanity, my shame. All the stuff I do not want known. Finally, they know how to slither into my thoughts, striking with the Law's accusation. They strike you, too, as a snake striking a person's heel. They know a lot.

The demons knew Jesus. So why would Jesus not let them speak? What would the demons want the sinner to know of Jesus? That Jesus is true God in human flesh? That doesn't yet save the sinner. That He has power to heal? That doesn't yet justify before the face of God.

You can know a lot about Jesus—a lot which is, indeed, true!—but it is not yet good news as Satan is poisoning your conscience with the venom of guilt and shame, striking you with the accusation.

What do the demons not want you to know of Jesus? That He is not just God who became flesh, but that He became flesh in order to then be humiliated and die ... for you. That what Jesus accomplished on the cross is not just a historical fact, but that He brings this historical accomplishment to you in Baptism. That the blood once shed on the cross is now delivered to you as you hear Jesus say, "Take and drink, this is my Blood for the forgiveness of our sins."

The demons want you to know none of this. They want you to know only the accusation. Jesus does indeed want you to know the Law's accusation. He wants you to hear it so that you are then ready to hear His Gospel. Jesus has His Gospel proclaimed for you, for every sinner! To forgive guilt, to give a clean heart, to remove shame and clothe in honor—Jesus has His cross preached to you! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Monday the Fifth Week of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 5, 2024

Today's Reading: Isaiah 40:21-31

Daily Lectionary: Job 2:1-3:10; John 1:19-34

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. (Isaiah 40:28-31)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Isaiah, the Prophet of comfort! Hear the comfort!

The chapter had started with, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins" (Isaiah 40:1).

You live in a world of no comfort, among a people of no comfort. People trying to make sure they say the right things the right ways in order not to be canceled for wrong-speak by the mob; the false confidence at people pointing to others and calling them "haters," hoping to not be accused of the same themselves; people trying to project legitimacy by the digital life they can display on social media—where's the comfort, where's the true confidence in living?

Isaiah proclaims comfort: Iniquities pardoned, sins forgiven, a people made holy for the Lord.

But what of our life in this world? Do you feel comforted? Feel pardoned of all sin? Like you belong to the Lord?

This is why our Lord has Isaiah preach His Word. Even as the Lord has your pastor preach His Word. Because we live in a world of no comfort, and because we live in lives of our own sin, we constantly need to hear the good news. The good news is that the Lord is the Creator, He upholds all things by the word of His power, and He does not grow weary of saving the sinner who is faint, weary, and exhausted.

"Wait for the Lord" is Isaiah's call to have faith, to hold tight to the promise, to daily hear the Good News of sins-forgiven, and to remember that it is the Lord before whom you stand and who gives you comfort. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

My Maker, hold me in Your hand; O Christ, forgiven let me stand; Blest Comforter, do not depart; With faith and love enrich my heart. Lord, bless and keep me as Your own; Lord, look in kindness from Your throne; Lord, shine unfailing peace on me By grace surrounded; set me free. Amen.

Tuesday the Fifth Week of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 6, 2024

Today's Reading: 1 Corinthians 9:16-27

Daily Lectionary: Job 3:11-26; John 1:35-51

For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! ...I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. (1 Cor. 9:16,23)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. The Apostle Paul wants to preach the Gospel. He's clear on that. But what, specifically, is the Gospel? It has many blessings, for Paul says that in preaching the Gospel he is sharing with other sinners its blessings.

In the Large Catechism, Luther Now, if you are asked, 'What do you believe in the Second Article [of the Apostles' Creed] about Jesus Christ?' answers briefly, 'I believe that Jesus Christ, God's true Son, has become my Lord.' But what does it mean to become Lord? 'It is this. He has redeemed me from my sin, from the devil, from death, and from all evil.'"

The Gospel is Jesus Christ crucified for the sinner. The Gospel is that by His blood, Jesus has redeemed you from your sin, from the devil, from death, and from all evil. The Gospel is the forgiveness of all sin and the gift of life everlasting.

Paul knew what it meant to be without the Gospel. He had been a Pharisee, a teacher of the Law. To the sinner, the Law is enticing. It teaches what must be done to be holy; it gives you the way to justify yourself. But it is a false path. For by the Law, no one will be made righteous, since we are, after all, sinful. So the Law brings only guilt and shame, even as we try more and more to keep it.

Paul knew this. He had been one of the most accomplished teachers of the Law. No more. Jesus gave Paul the Gospel. He forgave Paul his sin. He called Paul to be His servant to bring sinners into life and salvation not by the Law, but by the Gospel.

This is the Gospel we need to hear every day. As long as we are in sinful flesh, as long as the Law rightly finds us in our guilt, we need to hear the Gospel. The Gospel of Jesus Christ crucified, of the sinner redeemed from sin, from the devil, from death, and from all evil.

The Gospel is Jesus saying to you, "I forgive you all your sin." In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Your Gospel, O Lord, brings me your righteousness, It robes my soul in royal dress; From all my guilt it brings release, And gives my troubled conscience peace. May I in faith your Gospel confess, And praise you Lord, my righteousness. Amen. (paraphrased from "The Gospel shows the Father's Grace," LSB 580)

Wednesday the Fifth Week of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 7, 2024

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

There was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." (John 2:1-4)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Mary wanted her son, Jesus, to fix a problem. A big problem—the wedding feast ran dry of wine, and that is humiliation for the groom.

Of this much we are sure: the groom supplies the wine. So Mary reports the problem to her son: "They have no wine." Will Jesus fix the problem? Jesus does not want to be known as a problem fixer. "Woman, what does this have to do with me?", He says. Jesus is right, of course. The problem belongs to the groom. The groom supplies the wine, and everyone at those weddings knows it.

Then Jesus, in the first of His miracles, brings forth wine from water. Is He just impressing with His power? No. It's much more than that. He is announcing Himself as the Groom, the one who supplies the wine. He's not the groom of this wedding, of course. That man is already spoken for, and he already has his bride. And everyone is rightfully celebrating what God joins together—this man and this wife.

But Jesus is announcing Himself as The Groom. For the rest of the Gospel of John we can watch Jesus gathering His Bride. His bride is the Church. The Apostle Paul later tells us that (see Ephesians 5:25-32). The Church, Jesus' Bride, is all those the Groom brings to Himself and binds together in fellowship with one another by His Gospel.

Prior to this wedding, John the Baptist had baptized Jesus and then publicly announced Him as "the Lamb of God who is bearing the sins of the world." Now Jesus, publicly in the office of bearing all sins, is about the business of announcing Himself as the Groom who saves His Bride, the Church. In making the wine from Heaven (for it was created not with earthly grapes, but with a creative Word spoken by God-in-the-flesh), Jesus is announcing Himself as the Groom whose time has come. He is now on His way to the cross for His Bride, for you. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Lord Jesus, you have prepared the wedding feast, you have gathered your Bride the Church, and now, until you come again on the Last Day, you daily sanctify your Bride, sanctifying her, cleansing her by the washing of water with the Word. Bless me and all my fellow members of the Church, that we may look to you for every good gift, as a bride looking to her husband who loves and cherishes her. In your holy Name, Amen.

Thursday the Fifth Week of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 8, 2024

Today's Reading: Luther's Small Catechism, 7th Commandment

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

As the head of the family should teach them in a simple way to his household.

Commandment 7: You shall not steal.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God so that we do not take our neighbor's money or possessions, or get them in any dishonest way, but help him to improve and protect his possessions and income.

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. God wants your property, your possessions, your wealth protected. He wants the same for your neighbor.

To uphold and protect our neighbor's possessions, wealth, and income is nothing other than to recognize that all things come as gifts from God. The fertile land able to bring forth crops, property on which to build a home or a store or a factory, the ability to build and sustain a business, the talent to produce things needed by neighbors and society—all is given by God the Creator. He gives in the measure He chooses.

To steal from our neighbor, then, whether by outright theft or by clever design and deceit, is not just to harm our neighbor, but is to deny God as the giver of gifts. And even if our neighbor acted dishonestly in his gathering of his own wealth—perhaps by overcharging or by fraud or dishonest contract—our temptation to even-the-score is an attack on God. God is the judge. He will deal with the deceitfully gained wealth according to His own ways, which in this temporal life include His earthly instruments of police officers, judges, etc. (see James 4:12).

Now we can see why a breaking of the Seventh Commandment is a breaking of the First Commandment. To steal from our neighbor is to act as judge ("that possession of my neighbor's should be mine!"), and to act as judge is to set ourselves as our own god. On the other hand, to rejoice in our neighbor's property and wealth, to help him improve and protect his possessions and income is to recognize God as the giver of gifts; it is to "fear, love, and trust in God above all things" (see 1st Commandment in your Catechism).

By these gifts of possessions and property, of wealth and income, God is setting us to serve our neighbor here on Earth. As we pray that our neighbor hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ and be given the gift of repentance and faith, we also pray that our neighbor be sustained and upheld in earthly life. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

How clear is our vocation Lord, When once we heed Your call: To live according to Your Word And daily learn, refreshed, restored, That You are Lord of all And will not let us fall. 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. Amen. (LSB 853:1,4)

Friday the Fifth Week of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 9, 2024

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

"Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'"' (John 3:5)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Nicodemus knew much. He was a Pharisee. He was a ruler of the Jews. He was a teacher of Israel. He knew the Bible by heart.

In today's language, Nicodemus was "a Bible preacher." If you would have heard Nicodemus's sermons, he would've been quoting the Bible left and right. He taught the Law. He kept the Torah. The Ten Commandments came off his lips as easily as talking about the weather. He knew many other commandments, too, commandments the Pharisees designed to keep good order, to show people how to live, to make sure everyone does everything the right way. Nicodemus knew much, he could teach you much. But he did not know how to receive gifts.

Not knowing how to receive gifts, expecting everything to come by way of works—that describes not only Nicodemus, but each of us according to our life of sinful flesh. Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. Privately. Almost as if he knew that he would hear things from Jesus that a good Pharisee should not hear, but he wanted to hear it anyway.

The first thing Nicodemus hears turns his world upside down. John 3:3: Jesus answered [Nicodemus], "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

This is different. Not the part about the kingdom of God. Nicodemus knew how to talk like that. He himself had taught it to many. To see the kingdom of God, you obey the Law, you keep the Torah, you live a clean life. But what is this "born again" Jesus speaks of?

Birth—that's not something you accomplish. No baby is born by being obedient.

To make the kingdom of God a matter of birth removes it from the realm of obedience or something you do. What baby was ever born because he made a decision to be conceived, or was brought into the open air of the hospital room because he called God into his heart?

Jesus gives Nicodemus, and us, to see the Gospel. Being born is receptive, it's passive. This is all the work of Jesus toward you. It is delivered to you as a gift by the Holy Spirit, who gives you the new birth (John 3:8). In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Baptized into Your name most holy, O Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, I claim a place, though weak and lowly, Among Your saints, Your chosen host. Buried with Christ and dead to sin, Your Spirit now shall live within. Amen. (LSB 590:1)

Saturday the Fifth Week of Epiphany

FEBRUARY 10, 2024

Today's Reading: Introit for the Transfiguration

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

Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the Lord our God is holy! The Lord reigns; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake! The Lord is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples. Let them praise your great and awesome name! Holy is he! The King in his might loves justice. You have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob. Exalt the Lord our God; worship at his footstool! Holy is he! Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen. Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the Lord our God is holy! (Psalm 99:1-5; antiphon: v. 9)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. "The Lord our God is holy! ... Holy is he!" (Psalm 99) The Introit for our Lord's Transfiguration is from Psalm 99. Did you notice how many times in this Introit God is named as holy? Yet, our Lord has the words of this Psalm spoken in a world which is unholy, and to sinners—you and me—who are unholy. And that which is unholy cannot make itself holy!

This Psalm is a comfort for the Lord's people Israel. As they live in an unholy world, and living as an unholy people, the Lord provides for them holiness. He sets a mountain to which He gathers His people, and at that mountain the Lord from Heaven has words spoken to make His people holy: "I, the LORD, who makes you holy, am holy" (Leviticus 21:8). The mountain to which the Lord is taking His people is, of course, Mount Zion, where the Lord is making His people holy, delivering to them the forgiveness of their unholiness through the blood of the sacrifice at the Temple.

The Psalm prophecies Christ! On the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter, James, and John see the Holy One. He is on His way to the cross. At His Mount Zion, His holy mountain, that is, at Golgotha, the holy One, Jesus, bears all unholiness. On that mountain, on the cross He gives the sacrifice to make every sinner holy.

This Psalm now belongs to you. To me, to every sinner Jesus gathers to His Name. In our unholy world, in our own unholy lives, Jesus brings holiness as a gift. You are now given to speak the words of this Psalm, and to pray for yourself, your family, and your neighbor, as one who has been made holy by Christ. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Abide with us, O Lord, we pray; The gloom of darkness chase away; Your work of healing, Lord, begin, And take away the stain of sin. Amen. (LSB 401)

The Transfiguration of Our Lord

FEBRUARY 11, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 9:2-9

Daily Lectionary: Job 7:1-21; John 4:7-26

"For he [Peter] did not know what to say, for they were terrified." (Mark 9:6)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. It's impressive—Jesus, God the Son from Heaven, standing on a mountain in radiant white clothing like never seen before. Moses lived some 1,500 years before the Transfiguration, he's standing there with Jesus. Elijah lived some 900 years prior; he too stands there with Jesus. Impressive.

Moses and Elijah are living! Breathing and talking. We should be comforted, there's no death for those belonging to the promise.

But the Transfiguration hits us with a danger: The God of power and might and holiness in the flesh. Moses and Elijah at His face in conversation. Are we comforted? Peter's not. He's terrified. Mark 9:6: "And Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.' For [Peter] did not know what to say, for they were terrified." James and John, too—terrified! Why? Isn't it good to see Jesus has power even over death?

We, like Peter, James, and John, stand in sinful flesh. Consciences unclean, looking to justify ourselves by the Law, yet knowing we cannot.

The eyes of flesh are veiled. The veil is the guilt; it's the shame covering us, not only for our own sin, but also the sin having been done to us. The veil is the unclean conscience reading everything according to the Law, finding no way out. To look at Jesus with veiled eyes is terrifying. With eyes veiled by the Law, we read the Bible and see God's holiness and power and divinity, but not His grace. 2 Corinthians 3:15: "For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts."

This is why we can read the Bible and find only rules and regulations and more Law of how to live. Then, in our sin, we're terrified. For sinful flesh reads Scripture in the way of the Law.

Christ lifts the veil! 1 Corinthians 3:16: "Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed."

"This is my beloved Son," says the Father, "Hear him." So we hear him. He says, I forgive you. Now, look at Him standing on the Mount of Transfiguration! See not a sight to terrify, but a Savior on His way to the cross to redeem us. For us, it is not fear, but faith. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Monday the Week of Transfiguration

FEBRUARY 12, 2024

Today's Reading: 2 Kings 2:1-12

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

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Ask what I shall do for you, before I am taken from you." And Elisha said, 'Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me.'" (2 Kings 2:9)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. That's a strange request. What does Elisha want with those words, "a double portion of your spirit on me"? Notice that little word "on." Why didn't Elisha say "a double portion of your spirit in me"?

Scripture does speak of the Holy Spirit being "in" a person. Paul speaks of this gift for the Christian: "Do you not know that ... God's Spirit dwells in you." (1 Cor. 3:16) In this way, David, praying for forgiveness, asks God to "take not your Holy Spirit from me." (Ps. 51:9,11) Comfort for the Christian: although we live in sinful flesh, yet our faith rejoices that the Holy Spirit dwells in us. It's God's promise.

But Elisha prays for the Holy Spirit upon him (not in him). Here Scripture speaks to us not of the life of faith (i.e., "the Holy Spirit" in us), but of an office. To have the Holy Spirit upon a man is for that man to be in the Holy Spirit's Office, bearing the mantle of proclaiming the Gospel. In this way, Jesus—who certainly has the Holy Spirit in him—speaks of the Holy Spirit coming upon him. When the Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus, Jesus has now been publicly placed in the office of proclaiming the good news of salvation (Luke 4:18). How could it be any other way? When the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus at His baptism, Jesus is publicly named as God the Son (Luke 3:22). Then the prophet John is able to publicly proclaim him to be the Lamb of God bearing the sin of the world (John 1:29). The Lamb of God bearing the sin of the world—is that not the perfect description of the office Jesus is given to be our Savior?

We now rejoice. Rejoice that all our sin was borne by Jesus as He fulfilled His office of the Lamb of God. And you now rejoice that the Holy Spirit dwells in you, creating in you a clean heart of faith. And rejoice that while every Christian has the Holy Spirit in himself or herself, the Holy Spirit is also upon those who are called to the Office of Holy Ministry, so that these called and ordained men now bear the office to proclaim Christ crucified to you for your salvation. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Lord Jesus, create in me a clean heart and let not your Holy Spirit be taken from me. In the midst of my sin, give to me, as you gave to David, a repentant heart to rejoice in your grace. Be with my pastor and all pastors, that they may have much joy in proclaiming your Gospel to those for whom you died. Amen.

Tuesday the Week of Transfiguration

FEBRUARY 13, 2024

Today's Reading: 2 Corinthians 3:12-18

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

But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. (2 Corinthians 3:17)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Freedom is a nice word. As Americans we love it. Freedom from oppression, freedom to speak your mind without fear, freedom to ... —you fill in the blank.

But we have to know that Paul is speaking of something else. Something more profound, more meaningful. For this freedom comes from the Holy Spirit, our Lord. For Paul, it is freedom from what? From the veil. The veil is removed and the Christian is free, you are free!

The veil is removed and we see our Lord for who He is, the Suffering Servant who is serving us with all His gifts. The veil is removed and we see that in the death of Jesus, we have died our death to the Law. For Jesus accounts His death to us, so that in Baptism, we are united to the death and the resurrection of our Lord Jesus (see Paul's extolling of Baptism in Romans 6).

The veil is removed and our eyes of faith see that we are no longer slaves to sin, death, and the devil, but our Lord has freed us to live as His own, daily standing up in the gift of repentance, that is, standing up to live in righteousness and purity by faith. This is the work of our Lord, the Holy Spirit, who daily keeps us in the Gospel of our Lord Jesus.

The Holy Spirit knows your temptations and weaknesses, He knows your doubts and failings. And He wants you troubled or enslaved by none of it! So He brings you to the gifts of Christ. When you hear the words, "I forgive you all your sins," you may know that the Holy Spirit is there, in those words, by those words, freeing you from the guilt of your sin. When you remember the promise of your Baptism, the promise that you bear the Holy Name and that in the promise of Baptism Jesus is with you, even until the end of the age, the Holy Spirit is there, in that promise, daily cleansing you and making you His own. When you hear Jesus say (through the mouth of the pastor), "Take and eat, my body; Take and drink, my blood for the forgiveness of your sin," the Holy Spirit is there, by those words delivering the holy body and blood once shed upon the cross to your mouth now—all to forgive you, to give you life, to make you free.

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

O Holy Spirit, my Lord, remove the veil which enslaves me to the Law. Free me from my doubts, from my despair, from the lies of the devil. Let me hear the Words of my Savior, Christ Jesus. Keep me steadfast in his Word. Amen.

Wednesday the Week of Transfiguration

FEBRUARY 14, 2024

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

[Job said,] I loathe my very life; therefore I will give free rein to my complaint and speak out in the bitterness of my soul. I say to God: Do not declare me guilty, but tell me what charges you have against me. Does it please you to oppress me? (Job 10:1-3)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Do you want to argue with God? Sounds blasphemous. Job argues with God. Scripture shows us many people of faith arguing with God. Jacob wrestled God, telling God he would not let him go. Finally God said, "Let me go ..." But Jacob did not let go until God blessed him (Genesis 32:22-28). Did these men of faith sin by arguing with God?

The key is the word "faith." Faith holds onto God even when God seems your enemy. When everything in life is down the drain, when no blessing can be seen, faith holds onto what cannot be seen. Faith holds onto the promise. And when we don't see the promise, we are given to argue with God, to say to God essentially, "You have given me your name as an oath, I belong to you, yet I don't see the blessing, and, as Job said, I loathe my very life (Job 10:1)".

Faith calls on God to once again speak His promise. To see this, we need only to look at how God teaches us to pray. Among the Psalms of praise, of thanksgiving, of extolling the Word, our Lord gives us to pray also Psalms of complaint. Look at Psalm 13, where the Lord gives us words by which we are to argue that He has forgotten us (Ps. 13:1) and to demand that He give us an answer (Ps. 13:3).

The Lord answered Job's prayer. Job's account began with him giving sacrifice for his family, knowing that by the Lord's gift of sacrifice the Lord was forgiving sins and making Job and his family holy (see Job 1:1-5). After going through much affliction, Job argues with God. God answers the argument. He calls Job to account where he was wrong, but more importantly, speaks to Job again the word of promise. Not only that, but the Lord tells Job's friends (who have been giving Job bad counsel regarding God) to go to Job so that Job could give the sacrifice to atone also for their sins.

Can you argue with God? Yes. Just remember Job. Use the words the Lord gives you in Psalm 13 (or other Psalms of complaint). Call on God to speak His promise to you. Ask for His Gospel. Don't let Him go. He wants to hear your prayers. He wants to answer your complaint. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Lord, in the midst of my doubts, my despair, my loss of hope, bless me! Let me hear your promise! Keep me steadfast in your Word. Amen.

Thursday the Week of Transfiguration

FEBRUARY 15, 2024

Today's Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

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

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. There is much negative to say. That's hardly a secret. All the deceit, the lies, the shameful behavior, the hidden acts, not to mention, everyone around me, including my closest friends, including myself, are in sinful flesh, which means, we're sinning—there's much negative to say. So speak the accusation! That'll help straighten matters out.

Scripture names the one who is to be known for laying the accusation: Satan. The word "satan" is the Hebrew word for "the accuser." So anytime Satan or his demons are around (and when are they not in this sinful world?), we can expect the accusation. Satan accuses Job, who belonged to the Lord of being unrighteous (see Job 1:8-10). Satan laid the accusation against Joshua (Zechariah 3:1). Is it any secret why Judas Iscariot committed suicide? With Satan "in his heart" (John 13:3), what would we expect? Satan will lay the accusation (and Judas was, indeed, guilty), but Satan will not deliver the Gospel.

When we hear the accusation (as we should, after all, hear the accusing Law), but we do not hear the Gospel of all sins forgiven, Satan has us just where he wants us.

To speak the Law for the sake of the Law, and not for the sake of the Gospel—that is, to speak the accusation but to withhold the Gospel—is to fail to give the full testimony. The Gospel is the full testimony. The blood of Jesus atoned for the sins of Job (despite what Satan would have Job believe); the blood atoned for Joshua's sin, and for Judas's sin. And for your sin.

We are people of the Gospel. The Commandment tells us to not give false testimony against our neighbor. The Catechism further expounds that we are given to, "defend [our neighbor], speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way." We are able to do this because the one thing we know for certain about our neighbor's sin is that Jesus took that sin upon himself and bore it to the cross.

When we look at our neighbor, we may see him for his sin, his failures, his shame. Or we may see him as one redeemed by the blood of Christ Jesus. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Friday the Week of Transfiguration

FEBRUARY 16, 2024

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

For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me. (John 5:36)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Jesus gives us so much in those few words: “the works that the Father has given me.”

What does it mean to be Son of the Father? For Jesus, it means to receive all things by way of gift. Jesus, as God the Son, has all power. Is anything outside His grasp? Yet, Jesus considers nothing according to how He can grasp it (see Philippians 2:6-7). Rather, Jesus receives all things as a gift. Before He ascends to Heaven, He tells His eleven Apostles (Judas has not yet been replaced), “all authority in Heaven and on Earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28). The word of Gospel Jesus speaks, this, too, is given Him by his Father (John 17:8).

What does it mean for Jesus to be Son of the Father? It means that from His Father He receives all things not by way of power and grasping, but by way of gift.

You are a child of the Father—a son or daughter. After all, Jesus gives you to pray, “Our Father, who art in Heaven ...”

You belong to Jesus because you have been given to Him by His Father (see John 17:6). In this way, everything Jesus did to redeem you, to purchase you with His own blood and atone for your sin, to gather you into His Church—He has done it all because it was given Him to do by His Father.

So now, you are a child of the Father. Everything comes to you by way of gift. Our temptation is to think that things come to us by way of our work, by power, by what we can grasp. This is, indeed, the way of the world, which is under the Law. So in our world, if you don’t work, you don’t eat. If you don’t study, you don’t pass. If you don’t take the bull by the horns, you come up empty-handed. That is the way of the Law, and it remains thus in our world until our Lord comes again.

But in our life before the Father, our life of faith, it is all a gift. The Father gives His words to Jesus, Jesus receives the gift. Then Jesus speaks His words to us, and by those words, He makes us children of the Father. You belong to the Father. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Father in Heaven, let your will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven. Your will is that your Son’s word go forth to all sinners. Let me daily hear your Son’s word, and let me rejoice in speaking His word Jesus to comfort my fellow Christians and, where you give me opportunity, to bear witness to my neighbor. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Saturday the Week of Transfiguration

FEBRUARY 17, 2024

Today's Reading: Introit for Lent 1

Daily Lectionary: Job 13:1-12; John 6:1-21

For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.." [Psalm 91:9-11]

In The Name ✠ of Jesus. How strong do you feel against Satan? How good at turning back the temptations of the demons?

Maybe we don't want to answer that question. If I say, "I am strong against Satan, I am good at turning back temptation!", then I'm guilty of self-righteousness, self-deception, and high arrogance before God. On the other hand, if I say, "I have no chance against Satan, temptations overcome me at every turn," then I have left myself as powerless against the devil; I might as well give up. Either way, the Law crushes me, either for self-righteousness or for falling to temptation, both of which are about the same thing anyway.

Maybe we need a different question. How strong is Jesus against Satan? How good is He at overcoming temptation?

This question gets an entirely different answer. When tempting Jesus, Satan used the words of Psalm 91. "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down [from the Temple pinnacle]," said Satan, "for it is written, '[God] will command his angels concerning you to guard you.'" (See Luke 4:1-13)

It was a real temptation. Jesus can "prove" His faith. Why shouldn't Jesus trust the words of the Psalm? But Jesus turned not to the words being twisted by the devil, but to the words "It is said, 'you shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" (Deut. 6:16)

Jesus needs to prove nothing to Satan, as if jumping from the Temple would prove His faith. Jesus turned back Satan's temptation. Though tempted as we are, Jesus is without sin. Satan has no accusation to hold against Him, the holy Law has no guilt for Him.

Jesus did not walk into that wilderness to be tempted by Satan because it was something Jesus needed for Himself. He did it for us. He did it for every sinner, for each one of us as we daily fall to Satan's deceit and temptations. Jesus underwent the temptations which belong to us. And He overcame it. For us. He, the righteous One now accounts His righteousness to us, even as on the cross, our falling to temptation was accounted to Him.

How strong are you against Satan? No, rather ask, how strong is my Lord against Satan? For He is the One who forgives me, who commands His angels concerning me, and who guards me in all my ways. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

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