

REFLECTIONS

Sunday the First Week in Lent -
Holy Saturday

February 18, 2024 - March 30, 2024



This season's Reflections were written by

*Rev. Caleb Weight, Associate Pastor of Peace in Christ Lutheran
Church in Hermantown, MN*

*Deaconess Eleanor Corrow, Higher Things Board Member and
coordinator in LCMS Missionary Services*

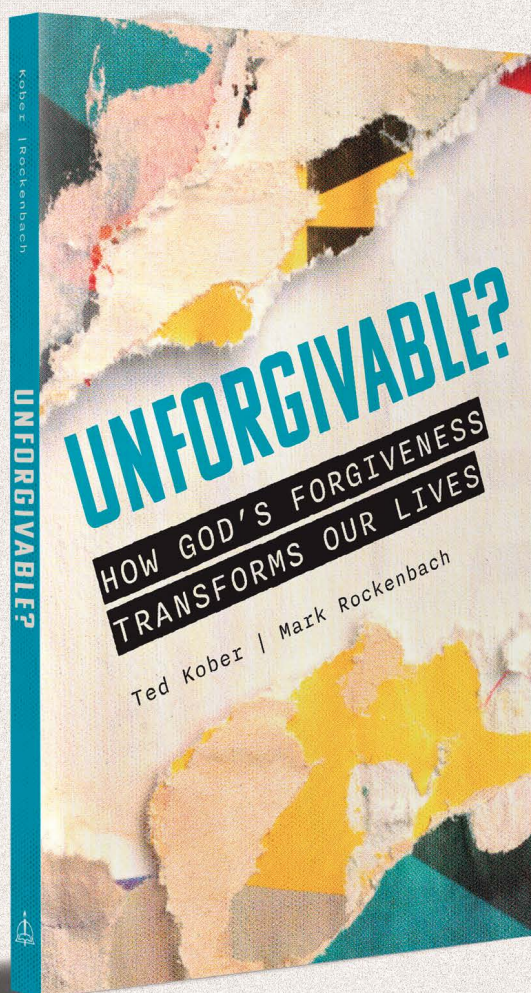
*Rev. Eli Leitzau, Pastor of Wheat Ridge Evangelical Lutheran
Church in Wheat Ridge, CO*

2023 Reflections Staff:

Karrie Jacoby, Reflections Editor

©2023 Higher Things, Inc., Lisbon, IA

HEAL FROM UNFORGIVENESS



Learn how to forgive as God forgives with the new book by Ted Kober and Mark Rockenbach. Filled with a blend of expert psychological research, personal stories, and Lutheran theology, these pages will lead you toward healing and true forgiveness in Christ.

ORDER AT CPH.ORG



1.800.325.3040

© 2024 Concordia Publishing House

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.

Sunday the First Week in Lent

FEBRUARY 18, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 1:9-15

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 4:1-26, Mark 2:18-28

As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending like a dove. (Mark 1:10)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Beginnings and endings are always the best part of a story. The beginning brings with it optimism, excitement, something new, a reason for hope. The ending, well, the ending resolves conflicts, it brings about completion, and it answers questions. A good ending brings everything full circle. In our reading today we have a beginning, not of a story, but a true account of the ministry of Jesus. In Mark, the beginning of the Gospel of Christ begins not with his birth, but with his Baptism. The beginning of the account of Jesus is a tearing open of the heavens as Christ comes from the water, heaven and earth meet in a moment of awe and wonder as the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus. With this comes the hope of all people, this Jesus is not an ordinary man, but He is the Son of God. He comes to take away the sin of the world. God dwells among men! He comes to bring heaven to earth.

Yet this hope fades away, Jesus, the son of God encounters rejection, He encounters false accusations, He encounters people who are spiritually blind. Eventually, He will encounter physical violence, He will be arrested, beaten, flayed, and crucified. All the optimism, hope, and excitement of Jesus would be snuffed out like a wick. The disciples scattered. But something else would happen as well. Jesus would cry out, He would give up His spirit, and the temple curtain which guarded the holiest of holies would be torn. The barrier between heaven and earth, shredded. The beginning comes full circle with the end, or at least the end of Lent.

As we prepare our hearts for the coming Passion of our Lord, we focus our hearts on Jesus who is the proclaimed Son of God, who tears open the heavens and reconciles you to God, the Father. He is the Alpha, and the Omega, the beginning, and the end. And in Him everything comes full circle, everything becomes complete. In the beginning of Mark, we get a glimpse of the end. Jesus goes before you, and He tears open the heavens, so that now, you who believe may enter in, and dwell in His presence forever.

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

O Lord God, You led Your ancient people through the wilderness and brought them to the promised land. Guide the people of Your Church that following our Savior we may walk through the wilderness of this world toward the glory of the world to come; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Monday the First Week in Lent

FEBRUARY 19, 2024

Today's Reading: Genesis 22:1-18

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 6:1-7:5, Mark 3:1-19

Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." (Genesis 22:8)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. They were on a mountain, a mountain where a sacrifice would be made. A knife lifted high above his head; Abraham was ready to strike. Isaac, laying there bound and helpless upon the makeshift altar, terrified as one can imagine, looking up at his father. In an instant, at the last moment an angel speaks "Abraham, Abraham!" God would not pour His wrath out on Isaac, not this day. He would not cover Abraham with grief at the death of his only son. Instead, God would provide for them a ram, caught in the thicket. Abraham would then give this mountain a name, "The Lord Will Provide."

God certainly does provide. He provides all things, as the First article of the Apostles Creed teaches us, as well as the explanation in Luther's Small Catechism. He provides us with food and drink, house and home, land, animals, and all that we have. But He not only provides for our physical needs, but He also provides for our spiritual needs as well. He gives us what we need, the only thing that can save us from death, is someone or something to die in our place.

They were on a mountain, a place where a sacrifice would be made. A hammer lifted high above His head; the Roman soldier struck the nail again, and again, and again. Jesus, laid there as He was crucified, looking up into the heavens, to His Father. But there would be no angel to step in, there would be no ram in a thicket, The world would go dark, Yet God provides even here, even now. Unlike Isaac, Jesus would die. Unlike Abraham, God takes on the grief of a Father who sacrifices His one and only son. God provides not just any old lamb, instead He provides the Lamb of God, the one who takes away your sin, and the sin of the whole world. The Lord provides the offering of His son, for you. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Alas! And did my Savior bleed, And did my sov'reign die? Would He devote that sacred head For such a worm as I? (LSB 437:1)

Tuesday the First Week in Lent

FEBRUARY 20, 2024

Today's Reading: James 1:12-18

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 7:11-8:12, Mark 3:20-35

Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. (James 1:12)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. It's not a secret. Life is hard. From the toddler that doesn't get to make any decisions for themselves, to the peer pressure and societal challenges faced by youth and young adults, to the aged whose body is failing them. Life is hard, and life will present you with many difficulties. This is not to scare you or cause you anxiety, but instead it is to prepare and inform you. This is at least what Jesus does when He guarantees trouble in John's Gospel. It is not a matter of if, but when. Difficulties come in many shapes and sizes. Difficulties that are products of a fallen and sinful world. Difficulties that may even be self-inflicted. Difficulties that may make you cry "Life's not fair!" Trials that may make you cry "God, why are you doing this to me?" James assures us that these do not come from God. God is not cruel, sitting in his heavenly throne sending temptations and trials your way. Instead, God is good, and He is unchanging.

Maybe you find yourself amid a difficult time. Maybe it is external, your friends no longer seem friendly, school is ramping up and you struggle to succeed, you wrestle with being a Christian in a secularized world that has become less welcoming to the Christian. Or maybe you struggle internally, maybe it's a sin, you can't help but gossip about others, or maybe you can't help but look at that website, or maybe it's that secret that you keep, that no one else knows, yet it eats at you day and night. God's word for you today is "persevere."

Do not blame God for these trials, but instead look to Him in a world that is ever changing, in a life that ebbs and flows as waves in the sea. Take refuge in Christ's Church and persevere. Persevere by continuing to cling to the Word, which endures forever while the earth passes away. Persevere by daily rising and dying in your Baptism. Persevere by partaking in the body and blood of Christ which sustains you during the trials and temptations of this life. Persevere by knowing that no matter the trial or temptation God's will for you does not change, God's love for you does not change, and God's forgiveness does not change. Trust this Word, it is for you. All good things come from God, so trust in Him, and in so doing, persevere. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Why should cross and trial grieve me? Christ is near With His cheer; Never will He leave me. Who can rob me of the heaven That God's Son For me won When His life was given? (LSB 756:1)

Wednesday the First Week in Lent

FEBRUARY 21, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 4:1-20

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 8:13-9:17, Genesis 9:18-11:26

The sower sows the word. (Mark 4:14)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Have you ever felt like it was your job to convert someone? Whether it be a family member, a friend, or even a random stranger? It is easy to fall into. We feel responsible for saving others, as ones who have been redeemed by faith in Christ, we cannot help but not be concerned for the eternal fate of others. So, we set out to convert. We strive to sway, convince, and even persuade people to believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We argue, debate, and provide evidence in the face of skepticism and unbelief. We then find ourselves bearing the burden of failure when the Word is rejected.

Maybe you have found yourself with this burden and guilt. You might have a friend you have invited to church over and over, they finally agreed to come, and when they came they didn't have a miraculous conversion but instead they said, "thanks, but no thanks." Or maybe it's a cousin, they don't know Jesus, and no matter how many times you share your faith with them, they sort of brush it off, or change the subject. No matter the case, no matter the rejection, the Parable of the Sower is of great comfort for all who sow the Word. Jesus makes something abundantly clear in this parable. It is never the fault of the Word.

As Jesus explains, the Word is not the problem. Instead, the issue lies with the soil, or there are external forces at play. There is indeed nothing new under the sun. Satan continues to prowl, sin continues to ravage souls, and the Word of God continues to be rejected. But there is another truth here. It isn't your job to convert anyone. That lies with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit works through the proclamation of the Word of God, and in so doing brings people to faith, it isn't you, it isn't how well you can convince, debate, argue, and persuade, instead it is the Lord's doing, it is the Spirit's work. Thanks be to God!

But it is up to the church to sow the seed. It is the church's job to proclaim the Word. Anytime the Word is proclaimed, seed is cast out onto the soil. As Pastors proclaim the words of forgiveness, seed is sown. In the public reading of the Scriptures, the Word is sown. In the faithful preaching of God's Word, seed is sown. In the Sacraments, seed is sown. When you share Jesus with a friend, seed is sown. When you bring someone to church, seed is sown. When you show the love of Christ to others, seed is sown. And the rest? That's up to the Holy Spirit.

Thursday the First Week in Lent

FEBRUARY 22, 2024

Today's Reading: 10 Commandments, 9th Commandment

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 11:27-12:20, Mark 4:21-41

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house" (9th Commandment)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Your friend got the new iPhone. You wish you had that, your phone is slow. It has a cracked screen, and the charger won't work unless the cord is wiggled just right. It's frustrating. If only you could have the new iPhone like your friend, then maybe life would be a little easier, a little less frustrating. Your friend is excited, understandably, and they tell you about how great it is, it has new features, and the camera is the best it has ever been. You feel that little pang in your stomach, it isn't sickness, it's envy. It leads you to start to have thoughts you wouldn't want your friend to hear. Thoughts about how spoiled they are, how they get everything, and you get nothing, how everything is handed to them, how it isn't fair.

You have been there, I am sure. We live in a culture that is constantly using envy and greed to hook consumers. Envy is a great marketing tool, it plays off emotions, and it traps people into buying things they don't need. But even more so, it causes us to sin, not only in disparaging those we are jealous of, but it reveals a deeper ailment, we are discontent with what God has given us. Of course, the Commandments are not there merely as rules, but also as protection. People make horrible decisions in the name of "keeping up with the Jones'" and enter crippling debt. But even more so, they look elsewhere to find contentment and fulfillment, and not to God who gives all good things.

Guard yourselves against envy. It is a subtle yet dangerous attack on your trust in God. Satan loves to use this against you, and he does. Instead, find fulfillment in the Word of God and who has said you are, remembering that you are a baptized child of God who has received forgiveness, life, and salvation. Find contentment by giving thanks for all He has blessed you with, both great and small. And regularly be satisfied with the body and blood of Christ. Do not seek contentment in the things you do not have, but instead find peace and joy in the Lord. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Almighty God, you have given us all good things. Help us, we pray, to find contentment in what we have been given, and guard us from jealousy and covetousness, and in all things, bring us satisfaction in you. Amen.

Friday the First Week in Lent

FEBRUARY 23, 2024

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 13:1-18, Genesis 14:1-24, Mark 5:1-20

When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. (Mark 5:6)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Today's reading is one that could be a horror movie. A demon possessed man, crying out, cast from society, dwelling in the place of death, the tombs. Chains cannot hold him, chains cannot bind him, he is in agony. A horrific sight, indeed. It sort of recalls many modern horror films revolving around possession (hang with me). I used to watch these movies before I realized they were bad for me. And while watching them there was always a common theme. Evil was greater than God. Time after time there was someone acting in the name of Christ, and they were deemed to be utterly powerless. As if Christ Himself was powerless. Poor film making if you ask me. That is not what we encounter in today's reading.

As Jesus enters the scene, there is no match for Him. The demons tremble in fear at His presence and beg for mercy at His command. These demons do not battle against Him, but they bow before Him. This is not the Jesus of low budget horror films, this is Jesus, the Son of God and Lord of all. They obey His command. Evil is not greater than God, not in reality. Jesus comes to conquer over evil, and conquer He does. There is a beautiful irony here in this narrative.

The demon possessed man dwells in the tombs, the place of death, no chain can hold him, and he cries out. Evil has got a hold of this man. But Jesus would go, and He would be chained. He would be crucified, and from the cross He would cry out. From there, He would go to the grave, yet the grave could not keep Him. Jesus uses the means of evil as His tools for victory. This is your God, and this is who loves you. Legions of evil cannot keep Him from you. Legions of sin cannot keep it from you. Legions of death cannot keep Him from you. Thanks be to God, to the Lord of all creation. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

At the name of Jesus Ev'ry knee shall bow, Ev'ry tongue confess Him King of glory now. 'Tis the Father's pleasure We should call Him Lord, Who from the beginning Was the mighty Word. (LSB 512:1)

St. Matthias the Apostle

FEBRUARY 24, 2024

Today's Reading: Matthew 11:25-30

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 15:1-21, Mark 5:21-43

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)

All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Matthew 11:27)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Jesus chose His apostles, and it is to these He revealed Himself to. He explained parables to them, He brought three of them with Him to the Transfiguration, and those same three with Him to the Garden of Gethsemane. He instructed them, and appeared to them after His Resurrection, then tasked them with continuing to proclaim the Gospel to all nations. They knew Jesus because they witnessed His ministry, His death, and His resurrection, and in turn we know them. They were the ones that Jesus chose and are the ones which were recorded. They went and preached great sermons, endured great resistance, and even died in some instances, remarkable deaths. Yet, their significance was found only in that they knew the Son, Jesus Christ.

After Judas' death, the disciples needed someone to replace him. So, they chose Mathias. We don't know much about him, other than his mention as being chosen by the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts. Yet, he was one of the twelve who knew Jesus, for he had been with him. He may not have been one of the original twelve, yet this unknown Apostle would go and proclaim the Gospel to many, and he would even be martyred for confessing the Christian faith. This mostly unknown apostle was known only in so that he walked with Jesus, and proclaimed his death, resurrection, and ascension. It was revealed to him.

So, what can we learn from Mathias? Notoriety is not what makes a Christian. It is Christ. You do not need to be well known, you do not need to be one of the names recorded, you do not need to be popular to confess Christ among your peers. All you need to do is know Jesus for who He is, which is the Messiah, the one who was crucified, died, resurrected and ascended. The Jesus who is coming back. Even if you never achieve fame or popularity, because you know the Son, the Father will know you. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Gracious God, as you emboldened your servant Mathias to spread your Gospel even unto death, may you also give us strength and courage to do the same. Amen.

Sunday the Second Week in Lent

FEBRUARY 25, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 8:27-38

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 16:1-9, 15-17:22; Mark 6:1-13

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. (Mark 8:34)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. In 1989, the band Queen wrote a song that defined the world in which we live. The chorus goes as such, "I want it all, I want it now." The message is clear, life is about the pursuit of wants and desires, scratching and clawing until you get what you want. So much of our lives center around personal success, achievement, and goals. Just go to the bookstore, and there are far more books set on self-improvement than self-sacrifice. It's in this world the Christian strives to be faithful to the call of Christ, yet it is challenging because Christ calls us to something radically different. Queen's creed may be "I want it all, and I want it now," but Christ calls you to a different way, a way where your wants and desires take a back seat to the needs of others. Instead, Jesus calls you to deny yourself, and follow him.

It's an unpopular topic, self-denial, in a world which revolves around instant gratification. It's difficult to reject your own desires no matter how destructive they might be. Yet, Jesus calls us to a better way, He calls you to deny your sinful desires. And I don't need to tell you which ones those are, you know them. And it might seem heavy, difficult, and demanding. But this is life and death. "What good is it to gain the whole world and lose your soul?" (Mark 8:35) Plus, as you follow Jesus carrying your cross, be reminded that His yoke is easy, and His burden light. We follow a Savior who has gone before us in suffering, who has brought purpose to suffering, and has sanctified suffering. Therefore, your suffering is not in vain, but instead it finds fulfillment in Jesus.

So do not follow the ways of the world that cry to you, do not appease the world which asks, "what do you want, and when do you want it?" Sure, you could take it, you could burden yourself with the never-ending grind for wanting more and wanting it now. Or you could follow Jesus. You could reject the way of this world and embrace your cross of self-denial. And maybe, just maybe, you'll find it lighter than you expected. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Monday the Second Week in Lent

FEBRUARY 26, 2024

Today's Reading: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 18:1-15, Genesis 18:16-20:18, Mark 6:14-34

*No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham
(Genesis 17:5)*

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Names are important. They give you identity. And many of you reading this have names that were picked specifically for you. Your parents may have agonized over picking the perfect name, or one with special meaning, or one that would tie you to past generations. Either way, your name makes you, you. Your name also ties you to a group of people, your family. This family that you are somewhat stuck with whether you like it or not. It's true, our names bring with them a sense of identity. Even more so, God cares about names.

God is in the business of giving people new names. Particularly those people in which He makes a covenant or in more modern terms, an agreement with. Here, we see God give Abraham and Sara new names and with it a promise. They are going to be made into a great nation, and this covenant is one that will be everlasting, it will be eternal. This is not the only instance in which we see God giving someone a new name, Jacob is given the name Israel, Cephas is named Peter, and Saul is renamed Paul. All of them have something in common, they believe the promises of God, and in so doing they are made righteous, they receive what God has to give.

You too have received a new name. In Holy Baptism, God gives you His own name as the sign of the cross is placed upon your forehead and upon your heart, you are marked as one redeemed by Christ. Then, you are given the name of the Holy Trinity, you are baptized in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The promises of God are given to you, and you receive them in faith. This means, you become an heir to all the things God has to give you. By receiving His name, you are adopted into the community of saints. By faith you receive forgiveness, life, and salvation. They belong to you in this eternal reality. These promises are for you here and now. So, there you have it, you have been given a new name. It's what God does, and He does it for you. 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 seed, your chosen host.
Buried with Christ and dead to sin, your Spirit now shall live within. (LSB
590:1)*

Tuesday the Second Week in Lent

FEBRUARY 27, 2024

Today's Reading: Romans 5:1-11

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 21:1-21, Mark 6:35-56

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! (Romans 5:9)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. The first article of the Apostle's Creed confesses that God is almighty, righteous, and just. We confess that "we should fear, love, and trust God above things." (SC) Of course we know well what love and trust entails, we are quite familiar with those words, feelings, and how that looks in our lives. But what about fear? How often do we think about fearing God? Of course, this fear isn't necessarily the kind of fear you have of spiders, heights, or the dark. Instead, it is a fear of awe, wonder, and reverence. It is a fear that comes with knowing you deserve God's wrath.

You know this feeling. It's that little voice in your head that reminds you of the sins you have committed. It comes in the quiet of night, when you lie restless in bed counting the different marks on your bedroom ceiling. In the silence Satan whispers in your ears, "You are a sinner, and God hates sin, so God hates you." It is the feeling of oppressive guilt, the kind that buries itself in the pit of your stomach. This is the fear of God, knowing that we are unworthy.

If this is you, if you stare into your past fearing the wrath of God over your sins, I want you to read these words from Martin Luther in a Pastoral Letter from 1530, that speaks true to you who read this today: "When the devil throws our sins up to us and declares we deserve death and hell, we ought to speak thus: 'I admit that I deserve death and hell. What of it? Does this mean that I shall be sentenced to eternal damnation? By no means. For I know One who suffered and made a satisfaction in my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Where He is, there I shall be also.'" (Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel) Dear Christian, the wrath of God has been satisfied by Christ on your behalf. Know that your sins have been forgiven, and when you find yourself in that still quiet place, rest well knowing that you rest in the mercy of God who loves you. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

*Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness My beauty are, my glorious dress;
Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed, With joy shall I lift up my head.*
(LSB 563:1)

Wednesday the Second Week in Lent

FEBRUARY 28, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 7:1-23

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 22:1-19, Mark 7:1-23

What comes out of a person is what defiles them. (Mark 7:20)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. It can be easy to blame your sin on other people, your circumstances, or even ignorance. But Jesus makes one thing clear in our reading, sin is a heart problem. No one causes you to sin, instead it is something that you are born with. It is ingrained in your DNA, woven into the fabric of your being. Sin has infected you like a disease, and on your own it is winning. It spreads from within, and out it comes. You gossip about friends, disobey your parents, watch pornography, oppose authority, and neglect the Word of God. Your heart is to blame for it all. Apart from God, your heart is hardened, like stone.

But Jesus has something to say about that, while you are infected with sin, Jesus is the great physician. He treats you with His mercy, His grace, and His forgiveness. In Baptism He cleanses you, in the Lord's Supper, He offers His body and blood as medicine, a balm for those who ache and hurt. Jesus treats the infection at its center, He takes that heart of stone and crushes it, and He replaces it with a heart of flesh, and while it was once stone, it now beats for God, and beats for service of neighbor.

This new heart no longer looks inward towards itself, but toward all those in need. This new heart is one that is infectious with love. It pours our Christ to others. This new heart hates sin and loves righteousness. This new heart repents and receives forgiveness. This new heart grows in holiness and Christian maturity. For this new heart is from Jesus. And He has graciously given it to you. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

In Adam we have all been, One huge rebellious man; We all have fled that evening voice

That sought us as we ran. (LSB 569:1)

Thursday the Second Week in Lent

FEBRUARY 29, 2024

Today's Reading: 10 Commandments, 10th Commandment

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 24:1-31, Mark 7:24-37

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)

You shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. (The 10th Commandment)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Last week the ninth commandment warned us from coveting our neighbors' possessions, a real struggle and temptation in today's materialistic society. The tenth commandment now turns not to possessions, but to relationships. Loneliness is an unspoken epidemic in our post COVID world. People spend more time interacting with people online than they do face to face. And even when they do, it's often hidden behind the guise of a screen on Facetime or Zoom, a counterfeit face to face interaction. We have become a society of isolation, the barrier is no longer distance, but keyboards and screens. Authentic relationships can be hard to come by, so when you see others thriving, you may feel a twinge of jealousy seeing someone have something you don't have.

This jealousy could lead you to doing foolish things. The explanation of the tenth commandment suggests that this jealousy could lead you to essentially sabotaging other's relationships. Gossiping, resentment, cruelty, pick your poison, coveting leads to all sorts of relational issues. So, once again it is important to guard yourself against coveting not only possessions, but other relationships and social circles. It isn't wrong to desire relationships, it isn't sinful to crave face to face interaction, but who you are friends with doesn't define you. Your relationships are not where your identity is found. Instead look to Christ who meets you where you are at. He draws near to you even when others keep their distance. And he gives himself to you in His body and blood. It doesn't get more personal than that. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Here O my Lord, I see Thee face to face; Here would I touch and handle things unseen; Here grasp with firmer hand thee eternal face, And all my weariness upon Thee lean. (LSB 631:1)

Friday the Second Week in Lent

MARCH 1, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 8:1-21

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 24:32-52, 61-67; Genesis 25:1-26:35

Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? (Mark 8:18)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. There were numerous signs pointing to Jesus being the long-awaited Messiah. It always baffles me that they couldn't see and they couldn't hear; they were blinded by their own self-righteousness. Of course, on this side of the Resurrection we can see the signs clearly. Here Jesus points to twelve and seven loaves. Numbers with great significance for Israel, twelve being the twelve tribes, and seven being a number of completion and fulfillment. Yet, these Pharisees do not see what is before them, but you do.

This Jesus at the end of Lent would bring about the fulfillment of the Scriptures. He would go to the cross, where He would be smitten, stricken, and afflicted. He would pour out His blood on the cross like a lamb led to the slaughter. He would be mocked, yet no objection would leave His mouth. There the sinless Son of God would take upon Himself the sin of the world. Not only does He fulfill the prophets, but He would fulfill the promise God made to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 and He would crush the head of Satan, and He would slam the door closed on death and open wide the graves. As we walk towards Holy Week, this remains at the center. Jesus Christ, the true Son of God, the one whom the prophets speak, is the Messiah in which all things find fulfillment and completion, including you. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Stricken, smitten, and afflicted, see Him dying on the tree! 'Tis the Christ by man rejected;

yes, my soul, 'tis He, 'tis He! 'Tis the long-expected Prophet, David's Son, yet David's Lord;

by His Son God now has spoken; 'tis the true and faithful Word.

(LSB 451:1)

Saturday the Second Week in Lent

MARCH 2, 2024

Today's Reading: Psalm 69:14-16; antiphon: Psalm 69:9

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 27:1-29, Mark 8:22-38

Answer me, Lord, out of the goodness of your love; in your great mercy turn to me. (Psalm 69:16)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Have you ever felt like God was silent? You cry it in the dead of night as the walls close in and yet it appears that there was no answer? Maybe you look around the world and you see all the suffering, chaos, and tragedy and wonder where God is amid this mess. Or maybe your life is not going the way you imagined it would at this point, it has not gone as planned, and when you look around you wonder if God is really there. Whoever is reading this, I do not know what your life looks like or where you have been, but I can imagine maybe you have cried out to God and pleaded for an answer as the Psalmist does here.

Satan loves when we feel isolated and alone. He wants you to look for answers in other places. He wants you to turn to other means of spirituality. He wants you to search for answers in Astrology, different crystals, palm reading, and Tarot Cards, but God cannot be found in any of these places. God does not answer by means of these pagan practices; these are a false god. Instead, if you look for God's answer, if you cry out, know that He has already answered. He has answered you in Christ.

Jesus is the answer to you. Jesus is God's yes. It is His assurance that He loves you, that He cares for you, and that He draws near to you. In Christ God turns toward you and He offers you forgiveness and mercy in your nights of anguish. When you look around the world and wonder where God is amid the mess you can look to the cross and see that He has taken on the suffering, chaos, and tragedy. So, when you are looking for an answer, I encourage you to look to God's Word, visit your Pastor and receive forgiveness, attend the Divine Service and feast on the Body and Blood of Christ. This is the answer God gives out of His goodness and mercy. And it is found only in Christ, and it is good news for you. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Jesus, advocate on high, Sacrificed on Calv'rys altar, Through Your priestly blood we cry: Hear our prayers, though they may falter; Place them on Your Father's throne as your own. (LSB 773:3)

Sunday the Third Week in Lent

MARCH 3, 2024

Today's Reading: John 2:13-22 (23-25)

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 27:30-45; 28:10-22; Mark 9:1-13

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. (John 2:19-21)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. The temple in Jerusalem that Jesus references here was originally built by Solomon, David's son, and was central to the worship life of the Jewish people. It had, over the centuries, suffered destruction and desecration, but had finally been rebuilt to be even more grand than it had been in the days of Solomon. As Jesus' detractors here say, it had been under reconstruction for forty-six years. That amount of time represents a great deal of money, sweat, and labor dedicated to refashioning the temple. Rebuilding the temple mattered because it was understood to be the place where God promised to dwell with His people and the reconstruction was considered a fulfillment of that promise.

It makes sense to us that we would find God in the beautiful and magnificent, perhaps in a spectacular sunset or in a gorgeous building. Indeed, Christians have also built beautiful churches to house, direct, and inform our worship of God. Jesus is not saying here that beautiful buildings are wrong, but He does what He so often does—takes what seems very straightforward, that we should invest our time and money on constructing something beautiful for the worship of God, and reverses it. Instead of pointing to the temple as the central aspect of worship, as would perhaps be expected, He points to His body, a body which will soon be broken and killed, but on the third day rises in fulfillment of an even greater promise. Jesus is saying here that God's promise to be with His people is no longer connected to a particular geographic spot or building but is instead connected to where His crucified and risen body is to be found.

Where can we find Jesus' body today? A beautiful church or cathedral is no guarantee of His presence; however, we can be assured of His body broken for us in the bread and wine of His Supper given to us. We can find His body in the two or three gathered in His name to receive His gifts. Look not to what you can see with your eyes for assurance of your God with you, but instead look for His body where it has promised to be for you. In the Name ✠ of Jesus.

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy, be gracious to all who have gone astray from Your ways and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of Your Word; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Monday the Third Week in Lent

MARCH 4, 2024

Today's Reading: Exodus 20:1-17

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 29:1-30, 31-34, Mark 9:14-32

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (Exodus 20:2)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Today's reading is the Ten Commandments. Honestly, this section of Scripture can be a bit of a hard slog, where God is viewed as the great cosmic killjoy, setting out the rules we are to follow to keep Him happy. And as we try to follow these rules sometimes it can seem deeply unfair, as the harder we try the worse it can get, as we try to white-knuckle our way to holiness. And when we inevitably fail and mess up, we seemingly receive little consolation in God's declaration that He's a jealous God who will punish the children for the iniquity of their parents (Exodus 20:5).

None of this seems fair at all. Then the temptation can be to maybe ignore some of the rules, perhaps God didn't really mean what he said? Or maybe major in the rules you know you can keep, downplaying the ones you can't, and hoping no one will notice, least of all God. In all this wrestling with the Ten Commandments and our sinful nature though it's easy to forget where God starts when He begins to speak. He does not say you are all a mess, and here's a plan to clean up your life. Nor does He say you are all having too much fun and I'm jealous so I'm going to ruin it for you. He does the opposite, He tells us about His character and His love for His people. He is a God who rescues from bondage, from certain death, He is a God interested in the delivery of His people. Here, He reminds His people, very freshly delivered out of slavery in Egypt by God through the hands of Moses, that He is their rescuer, their protector, their guardian, who wants to keep them safe and free.

It can be easy to look at the Law as a new form of bondage, and it certainly does serve to keep our sinful natures corralled, but we are not free when our sinful natures are liberated, we are free in our new life in Christ. In our Baptism we are rescued from the bondage of sin, as our old selves are drowned, and raised to live in new life. That new life sees the danger in letting our sinful selves run free, and rejoices in the freedom in Christ to live the life He has called us to. 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, Save by His grace through faith alone. (LSB 579:6)

Tuesday the Third Week in Lent

MARCH 5, 2024

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

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 35:1-29, Mark 9:33-50

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong (1 Corinthians 1:27)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Shame is pervasive, and many of us wrestle with it. Shame has strange ways of revealing itself, sometimes as anxiety, sometimes as anger, sometimes it looks like perfectionism and a need to please all the people around us. Shame is much more deeply rooted than simple embarrassment; instead of saying "I did something terrible" it says, "I am terrible." Shame becomes tangled in our self-identity, driving how we see ourselves and how we see our place in the world. Those who experience shame imagine that no one could understand how bad they are, not the wise and strong of the world, and certainly not our God, because shame feels like a weakness, an earned disfigurement.

In contrast there are the wise and strong of our age, people who seem to have it all together, who made all the right choices, who are shining examples of success and well-being. Paul tells us that God chose what is weak and foolish in the world to shame the wise and strong, because even they will inevitably run to the end of their own strength and wisdom, shocked to find it in fleeting supply. This is the true place of shame, the truly earned disfigurement is a life shaped by one's own limited power and wisdom that leaves no place for the mercy of God.

In response to our shame and weakness God's mercy is inextricably poured out in abundance in countless ways. Here Saint Paul shows us that gospel-land is backwards-land. Let me say that again. Gospel-land is backwards-land. In the reign of Jesus, the world looks like the last being first, the first being last, the weak being strong, the rich sent away empty. In God's economy the foolishness of Christmas and Easter conquer the seemingly insurmountable powers of death and hell. Jesus doesn't conquer as we expect a king to conquer, instead He conquers as a helpless baby and a crucified victim. Today He conquers in a bit of water, bread and wine, His Word. It's foolish to think these things could conquer a bingo game in a nursing home, much less the powers of sin and hell arrayed against us each day, yet this is the promise of our God. Our God takes the dead and makes them alive, He takes the shame of the cross and makes it a throne, He takes our shame and calls us beloved, He takes sinners and makes them saints. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

*When the woes of life o'er take me, Hopes deceive, and fears annoy
Never shall the cross forsake me; Lo, it glows with peace and joy. (LSB 427:2)*

Wednesday the Third Week in Lent

MARCH 6, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 10:1-12

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 37:1-36, Mark 10:1-12

And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away." And Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment." (Mark 10:2-5)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. This is one of those hard passages of Scripture that makes people cringe at how out of date Jesus is. Surely Jesus isn't telling us that divorce is unlawful, because Jesus understands that we all live in the real world. Even Moses and the Pharisees understood this reality, so surely Jesus would provide a little more leeway. But Jesus claps back, informing them that the only reason Moses allowed for the "certificate of divorce" loophole was because of their hardness of heart.

Jesus doesn't take the easy way out and try to untangle the legal mess, instead He points out that the primary issue here is the hardness of heart in regard to the will of God. Hard hearts are not receptive to the will of God, which means they cause us to sin, cause others to sin against us, and cause us to compound each other's sins. Hard hearts are not hearts softened by the Word of God, cultivating the fruit of the Spirit, such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, and self-control. Instead of treating each other according to the fruit of the Spirit, even in our marriages, hard hearts have marriages shaped by the works of the flesh marked by such things as idolatry, sexual immorality, jealousy, enmity, anger, etc. It's easy to see why marriages formed this way would lead to divorce.

Yet, it's also clear that this supposed loophole isn't really a loophole at all. This is because the answer to the fruits of our hard hearts and prevalent sin is not a loophole in the Law that we can claim to avoid accountability. In the face of God's Law the answer is not a good lawyer to argue our case, pull some fancy legal maneuver, and get us acquitted on a technicality. No. The answer to the Law's condemnation, to the hardness of all of our hearts, is to plead our guilt, and beg the mercy of our judge. But thanks be to God it is His joy to have mercy on His beloved in the name of Jesus, His only begotten Son. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

On my heart imprint Your image Blessed Jesus, King of grace, That life's riches, cares, and pleasures Never may Your work erase; Let the clear inscription be: Jesus crucified for me, Is my life, my hope's foundation, and my glory and salvation (LSB 422)

Thursday the Third Week in Lent

MARCH 7, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 10:13-31

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 39:1-23, Mark 10:13-31

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God." (Mark 10:25-27)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. It is natural that when we find a hard word from Jesus that we try to find the loophole. The saying about the camel and the eye of the needle is an example—people find many creative ways to explain why it doesn't mean what it says. For example I remember hearing that the "eye of a needle" was a special gate into Jerusalem, and camels couldn't go through it while they were piled high with the things they often carried for travelers, so the trick was to take off the camel's saddle and provisions. So what Jesus really means here is that we can have stuff, we just shouldn't be too attached to it. It's a nice story, but it's completely made up, to, again, find us a loophole around the clear saying of Jesus. It's harder for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God than it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.

Well, maybe the Good News is this doesn't apply to you or me because we aren't rich. It's not as if any of us is Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos building rockets into space for fun with our spare change. Most of us are more in the bracket of people who still watch the fluctuating gas prices and food prices with trepidation. Surely, we're not rich, so we've escaped this word of condemnation. Sorry, but if you had something to eat today, you're richer than vast swathes of the world's population. There aren't many people in the world this warning doesn't apply to. It's okay if that troubles you, it troubled the apostles as well. Do you see how they respond, immediately recognizing the implications of Jesus' statement? They wonder if this is the standard then who could possibly be saved. But Jesus does what Jesus so often does, instead of pointing us to a path to save and sanctify ourselves by keeping the Law, instead He points to the goodness and mercy of God. It is impossible for us to keep the Law, try as we might. But behold, with God the impossible becomes possible. Just as the lame walk, the dead rise, and the sinful are forgiven, you are saved not by your poverty but by the overflowing prosperity of God's exceeding mercy. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Now my conscience is at peace; From the Law I stand acquitted. Christ hath purchased my release And my ev'ry sin remitted. Naught remains my soul to grieve; Jesus sinners doth receive (LSB 609:6)

Friday the Third Week in Lent

MARCH 8, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 10:32-52

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 40:1-23, Mark 10:32-52

But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:43-45)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. In today's reading we come across the disciples who are once again bickering, frustrated that James and John are asking to be seated at Jesus' left and right hands in His glory. This raises a question of how to achieve greatness in the new kingdom Jesus is inaugurating. Jesus once again subverts expectations by contrasting how the world works and how His kingdom works. He reminds them that for the Gentiles greatness is marked by rulers who exercise their power for the control and submission of those below them. This is the way of the world, and it's natural to assume that in God's economy power dynamics would look similar to the world's. Yet exactly the opposite is true, as Jesus indicates, greatness among them comes through service, which requires a relinquishing of power and control.

Service comes from a love for others, a recognition of their needs, and response to fulfill their needs. This service is largely invisible to the world, and when it is seen, it doesn't look like anything particularly spectacular and laudatory, which is probably precisely the point. Instead it comes in small moments, not grand gestures. Service comes at an emptying of ourselves, our own comfort, ego, desires, plans, and instead is a voluntary submission to our neighbor's needs, only to be really seen, understood, or acknowledged by our Father in heaven. Because of how unspectacular this greatness is to our eyes, it's easy to miss those who are living quiet, sanctified lives, serving their neighbors. Think of how Jesus serves us. First, He serves us with a criminal's shameful death, then He gives us the forgiveness won there in spoken words, splashes of water, a sip of wine and a bit of bread. It doesn't look spectacular, and sometimes it doesn't even feel spectacular, at times even boring and mundane. But this is where we access the greatness of Jesus' kingdom, because only after we have been served by Him, being washed in His mercy and forgiveness, can we see rightly our needs that are met only in Him. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Jesus, greatest at the table, The almighty Son of Man, Laid aside His outer clothing, Poured some water in a pan; As the Twelve lay, hushed in silence, He the servant's task began. (LSB 446:1)

Saturday the Third Week in Lent

MARCH 9, 2024

Today's Reading: Psalm 27:3-5; antiphon: Psalm 27:1

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 41:1-27, Mark 11:1-19

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? (Psalm 27:1)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Have you ever watched a scary movie then that night had innocuous things in your bedroom transform into something creepy and sinister? Suddenly that chair in the corner becomes something much darker, the creaking pipes sound like footsteps in the hallway, and on it goes until you either talk some sense to yourself, turn on the light, or completely give way to fear and resign yourself to sleeplessness. Because of a mixture of darkness and imagination, a place of safety and rest becomes the habitat of various monsters that are probably under the bed or in the closet.

Fear is powerful. Fear can lead us to see things that aren't there, take actions to protect ourselves that look silly in the light of day, and can lead us to put the worst possible construction on our neighbor's actions. There's a reason people say you shouldn't yell "fire!" in a crowded theater—and it's not because people are concerned that the occupants of the theater will quietly exit, but rather because they will panic and cause harm to themselves or others. Fear is a strong motivation to make many ill-informed choices, and people know this. So much of our cultural and information landscape now is constructed to make people afraid, we even have a word for mindlessly scrolling on our phones, sucked into increasingly bad news: doomscrolling. Fear holds us captive, and it is easy to begin to take counsel of it, using fear as a justification for greed, lovelessness, and despair. When we are formed by fear it is difficult to see the goodness and provision of the Lord, and to feel utterly lost in the doom and the darkness.

But God interrupts our doomscrolling to tell us a different story, a story where we need not be afraid. The LORD is our light, entering into that darkness, where we see monsters under the bed or on our social media, and disperses the shadows. We can rest in that comfort and joy, that though there surely are monsters in this world, and it may look a bit like they are winning, the greatest of these monsters has already been defeated. Salvation is ours, the victory has been won, and our lives are secure in the Lord's stronghold. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

O little flock, fear not the foe Who madly seeks your overthrow; Dread not his rage and pow'r. And though your courage sometimes faints, His seeming triumph o'er God's saints Lasts but a little hour. (LSB 666:1)

Sunday the Fourth Week in Lent

MARCH 10, 2024

Today's Reading: John 3:14-21

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 41:28-57, Mark 11:20-33

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. (John 3:17-18)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Jesus does not come to the world for condemnation, but for salvation, rescue from sin, death and the devil. For many people the name of Jesus sounds like condemnation and judgment, so it is met with anger. This happened too in Jesus' day, some people rejoiced at the gifts He freely gave from physical healing, bread, deliverance from demons, to forgiveness of sin itself, while others recoiled at these gifts, declaring the words and actions of the only Son of God blasphemous. How ironic is that, to accuse God of blasphemy? Yet to the spirit of the age, whether our age or theirs in the first century, Jesus is indeed blasphemous.

This spirit of the age would tell us many things, like we don't need salvation because we're great just the way we are so we really only need acceptance, not forgiveness. Or the spirit of the age may declare that there are many paths to salvation, all equally warranted, a religious 'Choose Your Own Adventure' of sorts. Or the spirit of the age may declare that salvation can come to the world if we band together and work hard enough to save it all. To sheep without a shepherd any degree of shepherding can feel like condemnation, even if the Good Shepherd is there for rescue not punishment. Jesus is our Good Shepherd, who has come to us for salvation not condemnation, and the way to receive this salvation is to believe in the name of the Son of God.

To believe in the name of Jesus means to believe in everything He says and does and shows us regarding the character of God. It means believing that we all need rescuing from sin, death, and the devil, and that it is in God's nature to provide us with that rescue. Our sins condemn us, but only inasmuch as we wrestle them away from Jesus to fix them ourselves, instead of surrendering them in faith in His promise of forgiveness. Jesus has come into the world to save sinners, and that is good news for all who place themselves in that number. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Monday the Fourth Week in Lent

MARCH 11, 2024

Today's Reading: Numbers 21:4-9

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 42:1-34, 38; Mark 12:1-12

And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live. (Numbers 21:8-9)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Looking at a bronze serpent is not medicine and is not the surgeon general's recommended treatment for snake bite. Yes, even the people in the time of Moses knew this; contrary to popular belief ancient people were not stupid. Moses is not giving us or his people a cure for snake bite though, he is giving them a cure for something much deeper. The reason the Israelites needed a cure for the snakes that plagued them is because the Lord set snakes into their camp in response to their grumbling.

They had just been rescued from slavery in Egypt, had seen any number of mighty acts of God in service of their deliverance, and yet saw fit to grumble not just about the lack of food, but even questioning why they had been rescued from Egypt for this. Ingratitude is fertile ground for sin, because it turns us away from God and towards our own sense of entitlement. God doesn't send serpents into their camp just because He was mad that they didn't say thank you enough, like that relative who always keeps a record of holiday thank you cards, but because they were reminiscing about their time in Egypt. It is easy to see a life in obedience and reliance on God as a deprivation, at times it seems like others have it so much easier, or at least have a whole Sunday morning to sleep in. But God is reminding the Israelites (and us) that people do learn to love their chains, and that captivity can look like liberation, but liberation comes at trust in His Word.

This is why in response to their repentance in the face of poisonous snakes, He gives them a sign of their affliction attached to a word of promise. The healing from the fruit of their sin came from trust in the promise that all who looked on the snake would live, not in the snake itself. So it is with us, as we look not to a bronze serpent, but to the wages of our own sin poured out on Jesus and His death, trusting in the promise that by death He has overcome death for us. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Jesus grant that balm and healing In Your holy wounds I find, Ev'ry hour that I am feeling Pains of body and of mind. Should some evil thought within Tempt my treach'rous heart to sin, Show the peril and from sinning Keep me from its first beginning. (LSB 421:1)

Tuesday the Fourth Week in Lent

MARCH 12, 2024

Today's Reading: Ephesians 2:1-10

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 43:1-28, Mark 12:13-27

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:4-6)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. But God...those are powerful six letters. Paul here tells us exactly what our condition is, in no uncertain terms. We are dead, and we're dead because of our trespasses. What are our trespasses? Those are all the big and small ways we've broken God's law: failing to love Him, failing to love our neighbors, putting ourselves first, serving the desires of our sinful hearts, and maybe even justifying all this sin under some delusion of self-righteousness. These trespasses don't just leave us crippled, injured, or weak, instead they kill us. We're entirely captive to them, just as a dead person is entirely captive to death and can do nothing to free herself. Think of it like Lazarus, stinking and rotting in his tomb, certainly unable to walk out under his own steam, but was freed from death by the call of Jesus.

We are similarly bound up in our grave clothes of sin, and our God, who is rich in mercy and love, calls to us by name, very often for the first time at the font, telling us to come out of our graves. Despite our stinking corpses of sin, He loves us and calls us His own, and makes us alive in Him. His intervention into our deaths is not some spiritual potpourri to cover the smell and make us look a little more presentable, instead when God makes us alive, He is breathing new life into us just as He breathed life into creation by His Word. His Word of grace brings true life to all the dead places destroyed by sin. All of this He does for you by grace. He doesn't bring you life and treasures eternal because you did something to earn it or warrant it, after all God owes none of us anything, but because He is a God of love and mercy, He seeks to bring peace where there is affliction, grace where there is only condemnation, life where there is death. Your God has called you His own, made you His own, and will raise you up with Him, not because of who you are, but because of who He is. Thanks be to God. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Salvation unto us has come By God's free grace and favor; Good works cannot avert our doom, They help and save us never. Faith looks to Jesus Christ alone, Who did for all the world atone; He is our one Redeemer.

(LSB 555:1)

Wednesday the Fourth Week in Lent

MARCH 13, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 12:28-44

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 44:1-18, 32-34; Mark 12:28-44

And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." (Mark 12:41-44)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. There is the social media trend of "boy math" versus "girl" but here we are introduced to "Jesus math." Jesus doesn't math correctly, and this is a repeated problem with Him. He leaves ninety-nine sheep to find one, He insists that the greatest is actually least in His kingdom, that the least is greatest, and here He is saying that a woman who didn't give enough to cover a single bulletin put more in than all the rich people whose offerings were surely exponentially more than hers. A truly ludicrous assertion.

The rich give out of their abundance, meaning their leftovers, and probably not enough to feel a bit of a financial pinch. In contrast, the widow gives out of her poverty, which means her gift is a sign of her hope and expectation, she literally puts her money where her mouth is regarding her trust in God's provision. Presumably the widow is not a fool and knows that the money she gave was all she had to live on, but she trusted that her Lord would provide all that she needed to support this body and life.

The lesson here is not a formula for how to give to your church, Jesus is not commanding everyone to give all they have to the church, risking starvation and homelessness. Rather He's again showing that in worldly abundance there is poverty, in poverty there is abundance, and with our eyes it's often hard to see which is which. Often we're at the end of our ropes emotionally, financially, spiritually, and feel as if we have nothing to give, and wonder how we'll find the strength to do the things we know we should. With the widow we can be comforted that when we give what we have out of our poverty of money, time, or emotional well-being, it is blessed, not measured for quantity, because the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in Spirit. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

*Seek first God's reign, His boundless grace, His holy name in all you do:
Christ first and last in ev'ry place; All else will then be given you.*

(LSB 736: 6)

Thursday the Fourth Week in Lent

MARCH 14, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 13:1-23

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 45:1-20, 24-28; Mark 13:1-23

And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains. (Mark 13:7-8)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. War is so terrible that even a rumor of it brings a particular anxiety. This is no less true today, when a threat of war between nuclear powers brings the dread of annihilation on a scale the world has never seen. We can turn on the news and see war fully underway in various parts of the world, from Europe to the Middle East, and calls for world peace seem like a clichéd punchline to a bad joke. For much of the world, war is a constant part of daily lives, causing suffering that is physical, economic, and emotional, and so it can in a very literal sense feel like the end of the world.

Since the 1980's a certain type of false teachers took to reading the Bible as a sort of code to decipher world events, and each new outbreak of war would be a signal to them that the end was coming. At times it felt a little like apocalyptic prophecy BINGO: after a certain set of criteria would be hit, that was it, it meant Jesus was coming any day now. Of course, all these prophetic declarations fell short because there are always wars and rumors of war. They're ubiquitous in a world stricken with sin and death. Jesus here isn't giving us a roadmap, so we know how close we are to arriving at his second coming. Instead He is telling us that the trouble in the world doesn't happen outside of the knowledge or power of God, but the trouble is part of the pathway to the joy of His return. It's no accident He uses the metaphor of birth pangs—labor is hard, it's messy, it can feel like death is approaching, but it is the approach of new life entering this world. Similarly, our trials are far from the approaching drumbeat of death but are the signs by which we can know that true, full, and abundant life is making its way into the world. They remind us to look to the glorious appearing of our Lord, who promises to return and, in the words of Tolkien, make all the sad things come untrue. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

O Jesus Christ, do not delay, But hasten our salvation; We often tremble on our way In fear and tribulation O hear and grant our fervent plea: Come, mighty judge, and set us free From death and ev'ry evil. (LSB 508:7)

Friday the Fourth Week in Lent

MARCH 15, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 13:24-37

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 47:1-31, Genesis 48:1-49:28, Mark 13:24-37

But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. (Mark 13: 32-33)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. There is a cottage industry dedicated to deciphering the signs and learning when Jesus will appear, and unsurprisingly it makes people a lot of money. Yet, oddly enough despite protracted explanations about how various verses can be used to predict the precise date of Christ's return, these verses are rarely addressed. Jesus couldn't be clearer, no one knows the day or the hour, so people should quit using the Bible like a magic decoder ring that will tell them exactly when.

Instead of looking for signs to give us a timeline, we should simply always be prepared for His return. How do we do that? By staying awake. Jesus doesn't mean we should undergo a rigorous diet of sleep deprivation, instead He is saying that we shouldn't allow ourselves to be distracted by all the cares and comforts of this world and lured away from Him. It's easy to forget, especially living with the abundance with which many are accustomed, that we rely on God for all our needs of body and soul. As a result of this abundance many think that the life we have is ours to possess and control. It's easy to let our souls shrink as we fritter our lives away on silly, meaningless things, complaining of boredom, and grumbling about the neighbors we have been given to care for. Yet Jesus says to stay awake and be on guard because the days are evil. We certainly see this in all the things that lull us into numbed distraction. Like a person walking across the street staring at their phone, we amble through our lives, unaware of all the dangers that assail us. These distractions aren't always obvious things, sometimes it's things that simply rob us of gratitude and cultivate our grumbling.

Instead of cultivating anxious grumbling, our wakefulness cultivates a hopeful longing, awaiting the day when we can bow to our merciful judge who brings healing and restoration with Him. Just as we would stay awake in eager anticipation of a loved one's long-expected late-night return, we await our Lord's return. And however joyous our loved one's return might be, think how much more joyous that glorious day will be. What a reason to stay awake to watch and pray. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

The clouds of judgment gather, The time is growing late; Be sober and be watchful, Our judge is at the gate: The judge who comes in mercy, The judge who comes in might To put an end to evil And diadem the right. (LSB 513:1)

Saturday the Fourth Week in Lent

MARCH 16, 2024

Today's Reading: Psalm 116:1-4, 8; antiphon: Psalm 43:1

Daily Lectionary: Genesis 49:29-50:7, 14-26; Mark 14:1-11

But Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial."
(Mark 14:6-8)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Imagine what it must have looked like: everyone is gathered around having a civilized dinner with this fascinating teacher, then this woman bursts in and breaks her jar of oil and pours it on His head. You can picture the stuttered incredulity, yet she is presumably unfazed, even in the face of a scolding over her wastefulness. The Bible has a great deal to say about care for the poor, and with this backdrop it seems perfectly reasonable that people would be concerned about this woman's waste of three hundred denarii, as that was almost a year's wages. One expects Jesus to whole-heartedly agree with their concern, yet Jesus commends her, calling her act beautiful, and declaring that wherever the Gospel is proclaimed in the world this story will be told in memory of her. Funny that despite that Mark seemingly still forgot her name.

Jesus sees and understands the devotion of the woman in Bethany. Her actions are not frivolous, rather they are an unrestrained act of worship. She also recognizes the urgency of the moment, as Jesus will soon die, and dedicates her savings to the care for Jesus' body. This is really an extraordinary thing, as one can surely understand dedicating your savings to a cause that will continue, then it seems like more of an investment, but to dedicate your savings to anointing a soon dead messiah is foolishness. Yet the woman in Bethany brings what she has and willingly pours it all out for Jesus. She has a job to do, worship to offer, love to bring to the soon crucified king, with no time for concerns about practicalities. With these actions she places His death in the center of her own life, literally pouring out her savings to honor it, and in this way shows us all the meaning of discipleship. As we begin to turn our faces toward Golgotha, we too have an opportunity to contemplate what it means to honor the body poured out for us for the forgiveness of sins. We do not honor Jesus by somehow trying to pay Him back, but by receiving the gifts in His body and blood as He has ordained, and perhaps we can consider the delicious impracticality of clinging to that promise. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Sunday the Fifth Week in Lent

MARCH 17, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 10:35-45

Daily Lectionary: Exodus 1:1-22, Mark 14:12-31

[Jesus said,] "But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:43b-45)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, otherwise known as the sons of Thunder for their boisterous and blustery natures, come to Jesus with a request. Actually, it isn't so much a request as a demand. (Isn't that just like the sinner to demand that God does something for him?) Well, anyway, they want to sit at Jesus' right and left when He comes in glory. Now I know that we are supposed to put the best construction on everything, but I'm pretty sure that the only reason that they ask this is because they assume that Jesus' glory is going to look like a throne and a crown and a scepter of might and a courtroom of servants for as far as the eye can see, and they want to get in on the action. Goodness, I most certainly would!!!

Ah, the sinner and his narrow understanding of greatness... Jesus sits down these two thunderous brothers (and us while he's at it) and teaches them/us a better way: To be first is to be a slave. To be great is to be a servant. For you see, greatness isn't measured by how many people have bowed before you, but by how many people you have bowed before.

But lest we think that Jesus is laying out for us a path of greatness that we must walk, He would instead have us know where His true glory is to be found. He is making His way to Jerusalem; in fact, it is in the very next chapter. And from there He will ride His humble mule of a mount all the way to the cross. For it is at the cross where true greatness is found. It is at the cross where Jesus' glory is put on full and gruesome display. Broken servant-body hanging derelict for you. The blood of a slave gushing forth to cover all your sins.

In the weakness of the cross is where we find the greatness of our God. And that is not a greatness that we must earn, instead it is a greatness that we may freely receive. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Almighty God, by Your great goodness mercifully look upon Your people that we may be governed and preserved evermore in body and soul; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You, and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Monday the Fifth Week in Lent

MARCH 18, 2024

Today's Reading: Jeremiah 31:31-37

Daily Lectionary: Exodus 2:1-22, Mark 14:32-52

And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (Jeremiah 31:34)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. If you remember anything about Jeremiah you will remember that this guy loves to weep. Day and night tears streamed down his face, not because he was a cry baby, but because of the grief that he bore over the people of Israel, the nation of Judah. And because Jeremiah was God's prophet, his tears were God's tears. ... Remember, the people were in exile and this was all from their own doing. For generation upon generation they had played footsie with other gods, batted eyes with foreign idols, and found themselves in the backseat of Baal's car.

Their sin was idolatry, First Commandment stuff, but it was often expressed in terms of the Sixth Commandment because YHWH was their true Bridegroom that they had spurned. Jeremiah and the many prophets before him had constantly warned the people of their idolatrous adultery, but the people never listened. And so now they find themselves in Babylon, Jerusalem destroyed, Temple torn to the ground. Things couldn't get any worse. They had broken the covenant God had made with them and now they reap the fruit of their labor.

But mystery of all mysteries, God is not yet finished with them. Like an ever faithful husband He promises to make another covenant with them. Not like the old one cut with the blood of bulls and goats, but a new one cut with the blood of a firstborn Lamb. It is this covenant that will last forever, that will never be broken. And the knowledge of the Lord will be written on their hearts, on your hearts, because He will forgive their iniquity in Christ and remember their sin no more because of the sacrifice of His Son.

And this promise of God will be yours until the eternal vastness of the heavens can be measured, which is just His way of saying, "This covenant in Christ will never end." In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Come to Calv'ry's holy mountain, Sinners, ruined by the fall; Here a pure and healing fountain Flows for you, for me, for all, In a full, perpetual tide, Opened when our Savior died. They that drink shall live forever; 'Tis a soul renewing flood. God is faithful; God will never Break His covenant of blood, Signed when our Redeemer died, Sealed when He was glorified. (LSB 435:1,4)

St. Joseph the Guardian of Jesus

MARCH 19, 2024

Today's Reading: Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

Daily Lectionary: Exodus 2:23-3:22, Mark 14:53-72

And [Joseph] rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my Son." (Matthew 2:14-15)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Is it too much to say that fathers are important, that fathers matter, that there is a difference between men and women, and a distinction to be made between the role they play in raising children and nurturing the next generation? Not too long ago all of that would have been simple and easy to proclaim, almost as if it is woven into the fabric of God's good nature. But times change, things get weird, people go a little bonkers and so perhaps it is good to take the time to think about these things every once and awhile.

So are fathers important? God certainly seems to think they are. So much so, that He made sure that His Son had a defender, a protector, a guardian. And this great champion of Jesus, this guardian of Christ, was none other than Joseph: a devout and merciful man who before the visit from the angel had decided to divorce his betrothed in private so that the crowds wouldn't smash her head with rocks until she and the baby inside of her were dead.

And so I suppose it says something about the nature of fathers that our Heavenly Father made sure His Son had an earthly father, not a second mother, not a family friend, not a bigger brother or a kindly uncle, but a father. And in our text for today Joseph fulfills one of the most important duties of the vocation of fatherhood, and that is to protect his children.

So down to Egypt Joseph races with his bride and his son, all so that the prophet Hosea could be fulfilled, all so that Jesus didn't die in the streets of Bethlehem at the hands of Herod. God provided His Son an earthly father so that Joseph could make sure that Jesus made it to the cross. ... I know that seems weird, but how else could we look at it? Jesus needed to fulfill the law in our stead and then die as a sacrifice on the cross for our forgiveness and our Heavenly Father partly used Jesus' earthly father to accomplish that. ... So let us give thanks to our Heavenly Father for Joseph, the Guardian of our Lord. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

We sing our thanks for Joseph, The guardian of our Lord, Who faithfully taught Jesus Through craft and deed and word. Grant wisdom, Lord, and patience To parents ev'rywhere Who guide and teach the children Entrusted to their care (LSB 517:14)

Wednesday the Fifth Week in Lent

MARCH 20, 2024

Today's Reading: Hebrews 5:1-10

Daily Lectionary: Exodus 4:1-18, Mark 15:1-15

And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. (Hebrews 5:9-10)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. You hear a lot of priestly stuff and Temple stuff and tabernacle stuff in the book of Hebrews. It can be a little overwhelming and perhaps even a little confusing for those of us who are not as well versed in the Old Testament as we should be. So at risk of over simplifying it all, let's just say that the writer of Hebrews is showing us how Jesus fulfills the entirety of the Old Testament; and He does so for you.

Jesus is a priest. We have all heard that before, but He isn't a priest in the normal order of priesthood. He doesn't come from the line of Levi. His umpteenth great grandfather wasn't Aaron. And so He isn't a priest like we would see in the Temple. Don't get me wrong, He has some similarities with the Levitical priesthood, namely standing as a mediator between God and His people, but there are some differences as well. And the major difference is that Jesus is an eternal priest, whereas all the rest were merely temporal.

But there is more... Melchizedek was the king of Salem. His name means "King of Righteousness" and His title means "King of peace". For Jesus to be a priest in this order means that He is an eternal priest who eternally brings righteousness and peace to His people. ... Priests stand as mediators. They stand in the stead of God for the people and in the stead of the people for God. This Jesus does more perfectly than any priest in the order of Aaron because every other priest had to first offer sacrifices for his own sins, but not Jesus.

Jesus only offers a sacrifice for us, for you. And opposite the Levitical sacrifices, which were made up of bulls and goats and rams and lambs, perpetually and habitually being slaughtered day and night, Jesus' sacrifice was once and for all. He the priest, He the sacrifice. He in the order of Melchizedek, He in the order of the Passover Lamb. ... Jesus gives you gifts as your High Priest and those gifts stem from His sacrifice on the cross. So receive from your kingly priest the gifts He has for you: life, salvation, and forgiveness. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

They rise and needs will have My dear Lord made away; A murderer they save, The Prince of Life they slay. Yet cheerful He To stuff'ring goes That He His foes From thence might free. (LSB 430:5)

Thursday the Fifth Week in Lent

MARCH 21, 2024

Today's Reading: The Creed

Daily Lectionary: Exodus 4:19-31, Mark 15:16-32

Who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death. (The Second Article: Part Two).

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. The Second Article of the Creed is about Jesus, it is about Jesus for you. It is the salvation story simplified into the smallest little paragraph. ... God took on human flesh, He incarnated Himself to be one of us. He stepped out of the glories of heaven, the vast everythingness and everywhere-ness of His infinite omni-ness and He placed Himself as the smallest speck within a virgin's fallopian tubes, all so that He could float down into her uterus and be one of us, one with us in every way.

Out of the womb and into the fallen world; perfect God yet perfect man. The Law ever before Him, ever being fulfilled in every active way imaginable, passively crossing every single "t" and dotting every single "i" in perfection. Jesus standing as Israel, God's son, before the Father: Israel as Israel should have been (perfect) and Israel as Israel truly was (sinful): The paradox of the Gospel as Jesus stands as both perfect sacrifice and at the same time, sin itself.

Then off to the place of purchase and triumph, Calvary and Golgotha, wallet full of a priceless currency that doesn't glisten like gold or silver, but instead pulsates with the blood-red vibrancy that courses through His veins. ... Perfect Lamb led to the slaughter so that His blood could cleanse us from all our sins. Innocent as only God can be, yet held guilty for every last crime of humanity. All sins forgiven, all shame remitted. Death killed and laid to rest in His tomb. Satan's head crushed with a nail-pierced heel.

In fancy theological talk we call this "The Great Exchange" for that is what Jesus did for humanity every step of the way. What is His is now exchanged for what was ours: sins for righteousness, death for life, dirty shame for a clean conscience. ... All of this culminates next week on Good Friday, when Jesus cries out, "It is finished!" And for the sake of Christ, it is. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

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

Friday the Fifth Week in Lent

MARCH 22, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 10:32-34

Daily Lectionary: Exodus 5:1-6:1, Mark 15:33-47

[Jesus said,] "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise." (Mark 10:33-34)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Jesus is leading His disciples to Jerusalem. This may sound like a simple and unimportant point, but it holds more meaning than what we first might assume. For it is God who leads His people along the Way. While it may seem sometimes as if we are wondering aimlessly through this Vale of Tear, it is our Lord who is always in front of us, leading us to the cross. And what better time to be reminded of this than two days before Holy Week when we will be led from Palm Sunday all the way to Good Friday and the place of our salvation? ... Now back to the text...

It is interesting that some who are following Jesus are amazed and excited while others are afraid. Judging by what happens immediately following our text, of which we heard about last Sunday, it would seem as if those who were amazed were the Twelve. They still don't understand what it means that Jesus is the Messiah. They still don't quite grasp the enormity of what is about to transpire in only a few days, even though Jesus has already told them.

And so He tells them again. And perhaps we should take note of this. The most important thing that Jesus ever did, the whole purpose for Him becoming incarnate and taking on human flesh, is so that He can go to the cross and die for the sins of the world. ... The sinner in us often gets tired of hearing about the cross. We want the glory without the suffering. We want the "Now what?" after Good Friday. But without Good Friday nothing else matters. Without Good Friday all the "Now what's," in the world are pointless.

So gird your loins my brothers and sisters. Next week Jesus is once again leading you to the cross so that He can once again tell you everything that He has done for you. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Then, for all that wrought my pardon, For Thy sorrows deep and sore, For Thine anguish in the Garden, I will thank Thee evermore, Thank Thee for Thy groaning, signing, For Thy bleeding and Thy dying, For that last triumphant cry, And shall praise Thee, Lord, on high. (LSB 420:7)

Saturday the Fifth Week of in Lent

MARCH 23, 2024

Today's Reading: Psalm 24

Daily Lectionary: Exodus 7:1-25, Mark 16:1-20

Lift up your heads, O gates! And lift them up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. (Psalm 24:9)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. God comes to us. That is what He does. Time and time again, He comes to His lost and fallen creation. He comes to people. He communes with them. He bestows grace and favor. He comes down from heaven, to this earth. He comes. ... For David this happened in a tangible sort of way. The Ark of the Covenant, the mercy seat of God, was now being brought into the city of Jerusalem. For the first time the Ark was there. For the first time, God located Himself in the holy city, the hill of the LORD, Mount Zion.

Thousands of years later He comes in the strangest glory, in beaten, bloody, stripped, and naked glory. He ascends the hill of the Lord, the hill of Calvary; right there in the city of David where He had entered into all those years ago. His clean hands clinging to the shame of your cross. His pure heart bearing the weight of your sin. There is the glory of your Lord, O Jerusalem. There, despised, rejected, dismissed by all the world. Up there on that tree is the strength and might of your God in all of His weakness. Fighting tooth and nail in a battle with sin and death and Satan. ... Lift up your heads, O Jerusalem, and gaze upon your King of glory!

Be lifted up, O ancient doors, because your King comes to you. He in His glory, He with His cross, He comes to you! In a flood which washes your filthy hands and impure hearts He comes, bringing His death so that you might be buried within, bring His resurrection so that you might have life eternal. In a Word He comes: Absolution spoken from lips of a pastor which bring to you the sureness that, "It is finished!" In a meal, body and blood given to you, He comes. Communion with God, fellowship with your Savior, unity with those who kneel next to you.

In all of this He comes, bringing in tow the gift of the cross, making your hands clean and your hearts pure. He comes blessing you with His righteousness that allows you to stand in the holy place of God and ascend the hill of the Lord. Jesus is your God of salvation, and He comes to you. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Who may ascend Mount Zion's holy hill To do God's will? The One whose unstained hands Can meet the Law's demands, Whose purity within Reveals One free from sin. Come, praise this King who claims the cross as throne—Praise Him alone! (LSB 339:3)

Sunday in Holy Week

MARCH 24, 2024

Today's Reading: John 12:12-19

Daily Lectionary: Exodus 8:1-32, Psalm 118, Hebrews 1:1-14

So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" (John 12:13)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. It's a strange thing to see a king riding triumphantly to His death, especially when He knows about it while no one else does. The Pharisees want Him dead, that certainly is the truth, but they aren't quite sure how to accomplish this yet. There is still a lot of scheming and bribing that has to get done. Whatever the case, Jesus will end up on that cross, one way or another. But no matter how it may look, no one places Him there. He goes willingly.

And so the crowds that once saw Him raise Lazarus from the grave follow Him with palm branches waving, shouting from the top of their voices, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" ... They are calling for salvation even if they don't fully understand what it is they are asking, for that is what Hosanna means, "Save us." But whether they understand it or not, Jesus will save them. It is going to look strange. It is going to look weak. It is going to look broken and bloody. It is going to look like death. But this King knows that it is only through His death that His servants will have life, so onward He goes. He will not be denied His crossly-throne.

We join in this cry of victory, in this plea for salvation, uniting ourselves in song with that palm-branch-waving crowd. We do this in the Service of the Sacrament in the words of the Sanctus. Every single Lord's Day, a new Palm Sunday all over again, as our King comes to us in simple and meager ways. The only difference is that on that first Palm Sunday Jesus was riding to the cross, every Lord's Day after He is riding from the cross in order to give to you what He won there.

"Hosanna! Lord, save us!" And He does, every single time, as He feeds us with His broken Body and Blood outpoured. ... How fitting... with your tongue you cry out for salvation and with your lips you receive it! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Almighty and everlasting God, You sent Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, to take upon Himself our flesh and to suffer death upon the cross. Mercifully grant that we may follow the example of His great humility and patience and be made partakers of His resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Annunciation of Our Lord

MARCH 25, 2024

Today's Reading: Luke 1:26-38

Daily Lectionary: Exodus 9:1-28, Lamentations 1:1-22, Hebrews 2:1-18

And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus." (Luke 1:30-31)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Since the Fall our sinful nature can't comprehend a God who does things the way in which He does. We would think for Him to work in only high and mighty ways above us and apart from us, but our Lord isn't who we think He is. And so today we hear about a God who doesn't deem Himself so high and mighty above us as to leave us in our fallen flesh. But instead, we have a God who deemed us worthy enough that He would become one of us and save us from our fallenness, not to save us from our humanness.

And He does so even as a little embryo floating down fallopian tubes, even as a soiling-himself infant in a cattle stall, even as a stumbling toddler and a pubescent teenager and twenty-something carpenter and a thirty year old dead man on a cross. He does this as He bursts out of the tomb, not leaving the shell of His humanity in the grave to rot, but raising it up in perfection while still bearing the marks of the cross so that we might forever know that the death of this God-man means the life of mankind. And even to this day He has done this by assuming our human nature up into the heavens, seated at the right hand of God giving us the very thing that we always desired, but were too shortsighted and ignorant to understand. For we were always going to reign until eternity with Him; not by us becoming like Him, but by Him becoming like us.

Is there any better way to prepare ourselves for the coming Holy Week; to prepare ourselves for the institution of a Supper of the flesh and blood of Jesus; to prepare ourselves for a dark Good Friday when the Son of God hangs derelict on a tree with human hands and feet nailed and human blood flowing mingled down; to prepare ourselves for the empty tomb and the risen Jesus in the flesh; is there any better way for us to prepare for all of that than by us celebrating today the Annunciation and human conception of our God? ... If there is, I know not of it. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Why lies He in such mean estate Where ox and ass are feeding? Good Christians, fear; for sinners here The silent Word is pleading. Nail, spear, shall pierce Him through, The cross be borne for me, for you; Hail, hail the Word made flesh, The babe, the son of Mary!

Tuesday in Holy Week

MARCH 26, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 14:1–15:47, John 12:20-50

Daily Lectionary: Exodus 9:29-10:20, Lamentations 2:1-22, Hebrews 3:1-19

Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." (John 12:20-21)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. I have this phrase, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus," on my pulpit, staring back at me each and every time I climb up there to give a sermon. I have it up there to remind me that I have only one job to do: Preach Jesus. If I fail to do that simple, but momentous, task then I have failed to do what my Lord has called me to do and I have failed to give my congregation what they need.

Pastors sometimes get into the habit of wanting to be kitschy, wanting to entertain their congregations with the new and coolest theology. Pastors are sinners too, and sometimes the foolishness of the cross just seems too darn foolish to preach each and every single Sunday. But if it was good enough for St. Paul ("For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." Corinthians 2:2 then it should be good enough for your pastor.

Notice what happens in our text after the Greek travelers told Philip that they wanted to see Jesus... Philip goes to Andrew, and then Andrew and Philip go and tell Jesus and immediately Jesus starts talking about His crucifixion. It's in coded language of course, using words like "hour for the Son of Man to be glorified," and "when I am lifted up from the earth," but it is all there for those who have ears to hear it. Meaning that when Jesus wants you to know something about Him He wants you to know nothing apart from the cross.

If the cross isn't part of the equation then the answer is going to be wrong, and I'm not talking about some throw-away line at the end. If your pastor's sermon doesn't have Christ's death as the cornerstone then go up to Him after the service and ask to see Jesus.

This is Holy Week. Everything that has to do with Christ centers around this week, centers around the crucifixion, because the cross is the only reason why God became incarnate: to die for you. If you don't get Christ and Him crucified every Sunday, demand that you do! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

A Lamb goes uncomplaining forth, The guilt of sinners bearing And, laden with the sins of earth, None else the burden sharing; Goes patient on, grows weak and faint, To slaughter led without complaint, That spotless life to offer, He bears the stripes, the wounds, the lies, The mockery, and yet replies, "All this I gladly suffer." LSB 438:1

Wednesday in Holy Week

MARCH 27, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 14:12-21

Daily Lectionary: Exodus 10:21-11:10, Lamentations 3:1-66, Hebrews 4:1-16

Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me." They began to be sorrowful and to say to him one after another, "Is it I?" (Mark 14:18-19)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Have you ever found it odd that the disciples need to ask Jesus if it is them? Each one asks Him, "Is it I?" I always thought that you would probably know if you were about to betray your friend and turn him over to a bunch of murderers. But maybe I'm wrong about that...

And another thing... Jesus doesn't seem to clear anything up, does He? He doesn't comfort Peter with an, "Of course not," or take John aside and tell him he can breathe a sigh of relief. No, He just lets it awkwardly hang there, giving some ambiguous answer of how it is one of the twelve dipping bread into oil with Him. But all of them had surely done that. Is Jesus saying that any of them are capable of betraying Him?

I hope that isn't the case because if any of them could've betrayed Him then that means that I could've betrayed Him. ... But, then, who am I kidding, why do I think that I am above such a thing? I know the wretchedness of my heart and the evil that lurks within. Maybe I should stop pretending I am better than I really am and just go ahead and number myself with Judas.

Notice that Jesus doesn't comfort any of His disciples with the Law or with a call to their own self-righteousness, for that would only bring them despair. Instead, He just moves on to the Gospel, to the only thing that can and will relieve a terrified conscience who has just figured out just how depraved he really is. ... And so Jesus institutes the Lord's Supper. We'll talk about that tomorrow, but just know that it is pure Gospel!

So in the midst of your doubting and your terrified conscience perhaps you should stop asking, "Is it I, Lord?" Of course it is you. ... So move on from that question to the one that matters, 'Is it you, Lord, who will save me from my sin?' And He will say, "Yes! I am your Passover Lamb that has been slain for you!" In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

*On whose hard arms, so widely flung, The weight of this world's ransom hung,
The price of human kind to pay And spoil the spoiler of his prey. O tree of
beauty, tree most fair, Ordained those holy limbs to bear; Gone is thy shame,
each crimsoned bough Proclaims the King of Glory now. (LSB 455:4,5)*

Thursday in Holy Week

MARCH 28, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 14:22-26

Daily Lectionary: Exodus 12:1-28, Lamentations 4:1-22, Hebrews 5:1-14, Psalm 31

And as they were eating, he took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many." (Mark 14:22-24a)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. We like to take the Lord's Supper and turn it into something that it isn't. Don't be surprised, we do that with a lot of good things. In fact, we do that with almost all of the good things that God has given to us. We want to wrestle them away from His almighty arms and then pretend to give them back to Him as if they were ours all along.

But these things, the things of the Gospel, the things of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, the things of worship and the Divine Service, they aren't ours. Well, let me rephrase that... They are ours. They are just not ours to give, but instead they are ours to receive. Our Lord gives good and everlasting gifts, Himself and His cross, forgiveness and everlasting life, through these tangible things. And He does so because we are tangible. We have skin to feel and ears to hear and tongues to taste, just like our Lord created us to have.

And so our Lord gives us His Supper. Fulfillment of the Passover feast. That which brought the Israelites salvation, of which they celebrated for generations in order to be incorporated into that first Exodus, now comes to a close in a new meal and new covenant. No need to sacrifice lambs anymore, for the true Lamb has already been sacrificed.

Christ comes to you in time and space, His true Body in the bread and His true Blood in the wine, in order that your troubled conscience might be comforted and you can be united with Him. ... He instituted this very Supper in order that you might know that your sins are forgiven. No doubt about it, Christ is for you, His cross and salvation are for you. And how can you be so sure? Because He has brought it so close to you that you can taste it. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

The holy Lamb undaunted came To God's own altar lit with flame; While weeping angels hid their eyes, This Priest became a sacrifice. The veil is torn, our Priest we see, As at the rail on bended knee Our hungry mouths from Him receive The bread of immortality. (LSB 624:3,5)

Good Friday

MARCH 29, 2024

Today's Reading: John 18:1–19:42, John 19:17-37

Daily Lectionary: Exodus 12:29-32; 13:1-16; Lamentations 5:1-22, Hebrews 6:1-20

*When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also his tunic. The tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom, so they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be."
(John 19:23-24a)*

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Have you ever thought about what happened to that seamless tunic? ... One of those soldiers went home with it that day and wore it as his own. Ponder that for a moment: This sinner's nakedness is now covered by the literal clothes of Christ. ... Sure that sounds strange, but isn't that exactly what Jesus does for the sinner? Isn't that the whole reason why Jesus came into our flesh: to take away our sin and guilt and shame and replace it with something else, something of His, something that would turn us from shameful sinners into righteous and shameless saints?

Jesus' cross comes to you. It already has. It continually does. And that means the forgiveness of sins here in time and space. That means the righteousness of Jesus given for you right here and right now where you need it the most. On the cross we see a perfect God, who is perfect no longer. He is sin. He is your sin. He is a sinner. He is you. And so He wears the clothes of a sinner: shameful nakedness. He takes upon Himself your clothing, your sin, your guilt, your shame, your nakedness. And then He exchanges it with His own righteousness: a seamless tunic, not ripped apart, one whole piece from top to bottom, clothing your sinful shame, making you righteous and perfect.

In a watery grave you put on the seamless tunic of Christ's righteousness, you put on Christ Himself. That is your baptism: the cross for you. And there God exchanged your clothes for His, there you put on the robe of righteousness, never to be taken off, never to be exchanged for another. On the cross Jesus declared, "It is finished!" Nothing more needed to be done. He put on your sin and hangs naked on the cross. And now in time and space, to last unto eternity, you wear His seamless robe of righteousness to cover your nakedness. It is the blessed exchange! It is Jesus for you! It is always Jesus for you. Even in the smallest of details. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

*Be Thou my consolation, My shield, when I must die; Remind me of Thy passion
When my last hour draws nigh. Mine eyes shall then behold Thee, Upon Thy
cross shall dwell, My heart by faith enfold Thee. Who dieth thus dies well.
(LSB 450:7)*

Saturday in Holy Week

MARCH 30, 2024

Today's Reading: John 19: 38-42

Daily Lectionary: Exodus 13:17-14:9, Hebrews 7:1-22

Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there. (John 19:41-42)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. As Jesus' body is laid to rest all the world can see is defeat. That is what the grave shouts from the cemetery. You can't see victory at a funeral. You can't see victory in the tomb. You can't see victory in death.

Harken back to the days of Genesis where God caps off creation with a resounding, "It is very good!" because it is. There is only life at creation, pure and perfect life in God. Fast forward to Good Friday and God says something, too, "It is finished!" But in saying these words it is like He is saying, "It is very good!" because once again there is life. It seems strange to say, I know, when staring at death's pale face, but this death, Christ's death, is good. It is good in the sense that it is of God and is of the Gospel. For the death of God in the flesh can only mean one thing: Life and salvation for all those to whom death draws near.

And so as God rests in peaceful slumber this Holy Saturday, His work of salvation is finished. It is good. It is very good! And this is a sermon that needs to be preached. We will hear that sermon tomorrow, but Satan will hear it tonight! ... In the darkest pits of hell Satan is found cowering in the corner as the Lord of Life comes bursting through its shadowy gates, trampling underfoot any power the demons thought they had. And Jesus preaches, oh He preaches! He preaches of His victory! He preaches of sins forgiven. He preaches of the Garden where He promised that a serpent's head would be crushed, and He preaches of the cross where that promise was kept. He preaches to death itself, that it is dead. He preaches, "It is finished!" and all our enemies know it to be true.

So rest in peaceful sleep tonight, Jesus. Your work is now finished. And we will see you once again in the morning, Easter Sunday, when the stone is rolled away and the tomb is left empty forever. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

O darkest woe! Ye tears, forth flow! Has earth so sad a wonder? God the Father's only Son Now is buried yonder. Thy Bridegroom dead! God's Lamb has bled Upon thy sin forever, Pouring out His sinless self In this vast endeavor. (LSB 448:1,4)

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Morning and Evening Prayers by Lutheran Service Builder © 2023 Concordia Publishing House.

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

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

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

(Donations are also accepted at www.higherthings.org/giving via credit card or Venmo @HigherThings)

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

