

SATURDAY, JANUARY 4: ISAIAH 63:15—65:5 11TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS

Isaiah prays the prayer that all those who are trapped in the darkness of sin and dwell in the shadow of death desire to pray to the Triune God. It is a prayer requesting salvation from all the hardship and persecution that comes about from sin. St. Augustine once asked the question, “Is not sin, also a punishment for sin?” That is, the consequences of sin are a punishment for sin. Even if there are no outward punishments for our sin—disdain from our neighbors, loss of material things, imprisonment, and the like—there is always internal punishments from sin. There is the guilt, shame and despair that are a result of the realization of the horribleness of our sinful thoughts, words and deeds.

Our Lord, in time, exiled Judah to Babylon and destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, the place that was the embodiment of the Lord’s presence among His people. All this was on account of their sinfulness and unfaithfulness to the Lord God. When we sin the same thing happens to our soul. We are, in a sense, exiled from God’s presence and our soul, which is the Temple of the Holy Ghost, is destroyed so that we are left with nothing but guilt and shame.

It is here that we cry out like the prophet Isaiah, that our Lord would “rend the heavens” and “come down” fix the mess that we made through our sin. Our Lord Jesus Christ answered that prayer when He was incarnated into our flesh, fulfilled the Law perfectly for us, and suffered and died on the Cross so that we might receive forgiveness from our sins.

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FROM THE PROPERs FOR ADVENT 1

THE GOSPEL

St. Matthew 21:1-8 (NKJV)

Now when they drew near Jerusalem, and came to Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Loose them and bring them to Me. And if anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and immediately he will send them." All this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying:

"Tell the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your King is coming to you, Lowly, and sitting on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey.'"

So the disciples went and did as Jesus commanded them. They brought the donkey and the colt, laid their clothes on them, and set Him on them. And a very great multitude spread their clothes on the road; others cut down branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

THE COLLECT

Stir up, we beseech You, Your power, O Lord, and come, that by Your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Your mighty deliverance; who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 3: ISAIAH 63:1-14 10TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS

Edom was the region where the descendants of Jacob's brother Esau resided. Edom means "red," for we are told that Esau had red hair. Therefore the prophet Isaiah, by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, uses the association with the color red of Edom to the garments of one who treads in the winepress, and to the blood. We have three things that are red. This serves to place in our minds a picture of the color red. So, when we are given the image of a Man Whose garments are red it is easy for us to picture that Man soaked in blood. This is an image of our dear Lord Jesus Christ on the holy Cross. The garment of our flesh, which He took upon Himself at His Incarnation, is now bloodied from scourging and beating, and is nailed to the holy Cross for our atonement.

The Lamb of God is sacrificed on the holy altar of the Cross. His sacrifice atones for the sins of the whole world. His blood is poured out into the Cup of salvation, which through faith we drink in, with, and under wine. On the holy Cross, our Lord defeated our enemies of sin, death and the devil. Now, by His sacrifice the power of sin, death and the devil are destroyed, and whenever we eat His Body and drink His Blood under bread and wine the Holy Ghost makes us to remember we are rescued from them.

In this pericope we find another reference to the Gentiles. This is to be understood as all the nations. The Word of the Lord's salvation will be preached to all nations by the Apostles, pastors and teachers, evangelists, and all those rightly called and ordained to preach the Gospel and administer the blessed Sacraments, through the out-pouring of the Holy Ghost. This preaching and administering takes place in the Church—in Zion, the spiritual Jerusalem. We are promised in this reading that the Gentiles shall see the Lord's righteousness—His perfect obedience to the Law for them and His sacrifice on the holy Cross for their atonement. This salvation won on the holy Cross shines in all the world “as a lamp that burns.” It destroys the darkness of sin and death, and brightens our sin-sick souls with the light of the knowledge that our sins have been forgiven.

For this reason we are called by a new name. According to Isaiah we are called “Hephzibah,” and the Church is called “Beulah.” Hephzibah means “my delight is in her,” and Beulah means “to be married.” The Church has often been called the Bride of Christ, and we are her children, those who are born of the water and spirit of Holy Baptism and who are fed with the Body and Blood of our Lord in bread and wine. Our Lord delights in us, for we have been united to Him in such a way that now our reality is under one Lord, in one faith, on account of one Holy Baptism. These wonderful things are accomplished through the Holy Ministry, the work of the Holy Ghost.

The Lord warns the children of Israel of the “darkness and fearful gloom” that will come upon them because of their faithlessness. “Therefore we should fear God's wrath, and not do anything contrary to them (His Commandments). Nor is it just a matter of “doing better” at not sinning. The real issue was the absence of desire to obey the commandments, the lack of passion for holiness...in short, the problem was faithlessness.

Darkness and gloom would come. They would be overrun by a foreign nation and suffer the hardship of a life of subjugation to this foreign power. They would weep and lament; lose possessions, loved ones, and the temple. But the Law is only God's alien work—His “drastic mercy”—His “tough love.” In their lives and in ours, when hardship comes, we go to our knees, repentant, seeking God's mercies.

That is where God really wants us! There, helpless and crying out to Him, His alien work gives way to His proper work: forgiving of sins in Christ Jesus. So it was prophesied to the Israelites that the Christ Child would be born, the Son of God would be given. Looking forward to the celebration of His birth, we rejoice that He has, in fact, been given to us. Though life leads us to weep and cry out for God's mercy, His mercies are always there for us, on account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Savior.

The nation of Judah believed that, because they had the temple and the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem, they were untouchable. It's "*ex opere operato*," it's automatic: no matter how evil they are, God will never let them fall! But the Lord's "real presence" had been given to them to *strengthen* their faith, not to embolden them in faithlessness! Their faithless abuse of this great gift would result in God's punishment, not His protection.

We see the same thing today. Some imagine that America lives under God's special protection and blessing. As this nation becomes increasingly faithless and wicked, we should learn a lesson from history! More to the point, in our own lives, we can start to turn a tolerant eye toward some of our sins: "I'm Baptized; I'm Communed; this much sin is probably okay."

None of it is "okay!" That is why we need Baptism, the Holy Supper, Holy Absolution and the preaching of the Word! These are gifts, not that make sin tolerable, but that take our intolerable sins away! So throw away your idols—your idolatry of Nation, your idolatries of wealth or pleasure, your idolatry of self. In the day of trouble, no idol will save you. Instead, cling to your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, as He comes to you in Word and Sacrament. There, you have forgiveness of sins, life and salvation.

The prophet Isaiah preaches that the "Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me." This is not just a reference to Isaiah's preaching, but these words (and the words of the entire pericope) are to be understood as our dear Lord Jesus Christ's words. The Spirit of the Lord God is upon our dear Lord Christ. The Son of God sent us the Holy Ghost, and with the Holy Ghost the Son of God comes "to preach good tidings," "to heal the brokenhearted," "to proclaim liberty to the captives" of sin and iniquity. He was sent to open the prison of "those who are bound," "to proclaim the acceptable year" of our Lord's crucifixion for the atonement of the whole world, and "to comfort all who mourn" in Zion—that is, the Church—that we may be called "the planting of the Lord" so that His merits and works of salvation are praised and glorified, not our own.

Our dear Lord Jesus Christ was incarnated into the world to fulfill all these things so that we might no longer be in darkness, but live in light. He came so that we might continue to be reminded of the Light of our dear Lord Christ. And having come with the Holy Ghost, He in turn sent His Holy Spirit upon the Apostles, who through their pure preaching of the Gospel and their administration of the Holy Sacraments according to Christ's institution, lead many souls out of darkness into Christ's light. Today the Holy Ghost continues to be poured out abundantly upon those who in faith receive the pure preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments for their forgiveness.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 31: ISAIAH 60:1-22 7TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS

“Darkness shall cover the whole earth, and deep darkness the people.” As we heard yesterday, this darkness is the result of sin. It pervades our homes, our thoughts, our actions, our words, and this darkness has filled the whole Earth. Everybody, from the newborn babe to the person on his death bed, is consumed with this darkness of sin and iniquity.

But the prophet Isaiah preaches good news to us today! “Arise, shine; for your light has come! And the glory of the LORD is risen upon you.” Our dear Lord Jesus Christ has come into the world—come into our flesh—to redeem us from sin, death and the devil. He has redeemed all of us, from the newborn to the person on his death bed, with His precious Blood poured out on the altar of the holy Cross for our atonement. And through the faith that we receive from the Holy Ghost through the means of grace we, in repentance, cling to the throne of our Lord’s grace—the holy Cross—and are justified on account of our dear Lord’s once and for all sacrifice, and His perfect obedience to the Law.

This message was first proclaimed to the Jews, but has now been preached to the whole Gentile world. Therefore, all nations now approach our Lord’s mercy seat—His holy Cross—to receive forgiveness from their sins, so that they might be taken out of the darkness of sin and death, and brought into the marvelous light of eternal life. Therefore, rejoice that you have been redeemed from darkness and now live in light.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 4: ISA. 10:12-27A, 33-34 AD TE LEVAVI

The nation of Judah had reason to be afraid, you know. The Assyrians were the ones who had overrun the northern kingdom of Israel. They are still called “the lost ten tribes.” They disappeared from the pages of history! And the Assyrians had overrun other nations too. Their reputation for hostility to foreigners was probably part of why, when God told Jonah to go preach to Nineveh (the capital of Assyria), the first thing Jonah did was catch a boat heading the opposite direction!

There are many things we, too, fear: Islamo-fascist terrorism, a weak economy, the degeneracy of society around us, our own frailty and impending death. Call it “sin, death, and the devil.” And many of these forces seem very ominous to us, as the Assyrians did to Judah. But just as God promised, He brought the Assyrian threat to nothing.

In the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, He has brought all that threatens us to nothing too. When we look at the threat, we tremble, because that is all that we see. But when we look to our Savior Jesus Christ, fear subsides. Yes, bad things can still happen. But in Christ, sin, death, and the devil have been defeated, and all that now deigns to threaten us will give way to eternal pleasures at the right hand of God. Be not afraid!

The Lord's people would be reduced to a "remnant." Because of their ancient faithlessness, when Israel was overrun, they all too easily blended in with the pagan practices of their conquerors, and disappeared as a separate and distinct people. When Judah was overrun, the same thing happened with many, and only relatively few (think of Daniel in the lion's den, or Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) stood their ground and refused to compromise the faith. God did not forget them! On the contrary, His grace was upon them, and He even protected them in miraculous ways.

Is it any surprise that the same is true in our day? In many "Christian" congregations, the services and the morality and the lifestyles that are tolerated and even embraced are so similar to that of the unbelieving world, it can be hard to see a distinction! And it is hardly a surprise: the pressure to "compromise" tempts us too!

Yet the Lord promises to preserve and protect His remnant. Be faithful, and other faithful ones will be gathered to you. There is no point to "playing church." Artificial Christianity will not save anyone. We are called to faith in the God-Man Jesus Christ, Who came to us so that we could have forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. He has delivered us. And no matter how dark the picture may look for Christianity in general, we have the promise that our Lord, in our day also, will indeed set His hand to recover the remnant of His people.

The world lives in darkness and in the shadow of death. This darkness and shadow is our sin, which has caused a rift between us and God. "Your iniquities have separated you from your God; And your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear." Our sins cause God not to listen to us. And why should He listen? For our "hands are defiled with [the] blood" of our hatred and disregard for our neighbor and our "fingers with iniquity." Our lips "have spoken lies" and our "tongues [have] muttered perversity." On account of our sins we have sat in darkness and the shadow of death with no hope of rescuing ourselves.

"Then the LORD saw it, and it displeased Him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor; therefore His own arm brought salvation for Him; and His own righteousness, it sustained Him. For He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on His head; He put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, and was clad with zeal as a cloak." Into this darkness came the Light of the World, our Lord Jesus Christ. Our dear Lord put on our flesh so that He might make it righteous. With our flesh He bore the "garment of vengeance" to destroy darkness and the shadow of death on the holy Cross. In our flesh He bore the zeal of our salvation as a cloak. And now we no longer sit in darkness and the shadow of death, but dwell in the light of Christ's salvation.

THE GOSPEL

St. Luke 2:33–40 (NKJV)

And Joseph and His mother marveled at those things which were spoken of Him. Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, “Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”

Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phannuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; and this woman was a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

So when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth. And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him.

THE COLLECT

Almighty and everlasting God, direct our actions according to Your good pleasure, that in the name of Your beloved Son we may be made to abound in good works; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

The Lord’s judgment would fall upon Judah. Isaiah makes that clear! One cannot take the faith for granted; one cannot deliberately and continually defy the Lord without incurring His wrath! As we are believing ones, we too must also continually be repentant, for we too daily sin much and deserve nothing but punishment.

Yet even when the Lord punishes, He punishes with purpose. His punishments are always meant for our good. He is a Father Who loves us enough to chasten and reprove us. But the goal is always to show us mercy. The Lord yet chooses Israel. When the captivity is over, some of the Jews return “to their own land.” And in one of their sons, God assumes human flesh, and is given the Name of Jesus. He is Israel reduced to One. As He calls the Twelve, He has a New Israel.

Jesus gives the mandate to “make disciples of all nations.” That is us! We are the strangers who are joined with those of the house of Jacob through faith in their Messiah and the salvation He brings! What great joy, as we celebrate the coming of the “King of the Jews,” that this same Jesus is also the “Savior of the Nations.” Blessed are we, for in Christ, we are grafted into the Israel of God!

The destructive consequences of sin go well beyond personal unworthiness and a guilty conscience. We are warned by the Lord that He “punishes the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.” Now, Scripture makes it clear that this is not inevitable: if the children repent of the sins handed down from their parents, they too will be forgiven and shown mercy. But our sins have destructive consequences, not only for ourselves, but for those around us as well. Repent, not only for your sake, but for theirs!

And here in Isaiah, we see that the earth itself is defiled because of the wickedness of man. It has been so from the beginning...the sin of man means the ground now bears thorns and thistles, and tilling it is hard work. Judgment comes upon man, the earth is burned, and Isaiah tells us “few are left.”

When horrors are reported in the news, do not be surprised. Have not the Scriptures in many places warned us that it would be so? Has not the mouth of the Lord Jesus Himself spoken it? But always, there is the gracious promise. There may be few left, but there will be a few. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ, God grant us His Holy Spirit that we may ever repent of our sins, ever remain forgiven in Christ Jesus, and so ever be numbered among the “few.”

Today’s reading depicts the manner in which the King and Savior sets man free from sin, death, and the devil: by being a servant, Who sacrifices His life so that mankind might live for all eternity. Yes, Jesus is a King like no other King and Savior! Isaiah writes, “Behold, My Servant shall deal prudently; He shall be exalted and extolled and be very high.” Luther says, “He shall prosper, be exalted and lifted up,” meaning, His reign does not begin until after His death.

Yes, we’ve just celebrated another Christmas remembering the prophesied Jesus born in a manger, yet remembering, He was born the God/man in order that He might die. No, not everyone believes this report! But for those who by faith believe in the Word made flesh are able to rejoice in knowing that a great and marvelous sacrifice has been made for them to live in eternity.

Yes, it is a bittersweet to rejoice each year at the birth of Christ, and yet hear the descriptive suffering and agony as described by Isaiah; and yet we know it was necessary that sin was atoned for by Christ; because mankind does not exist without the sin.

Tomorrow we enter into His presence on yet another Sabbath and receive the Word made flesh in Word and Sacrament as our celebration continues.

Let us pray: O’er every foe victorious, He on His throne shall rest, from age to age more glorious, all blessing and all-blest. The tide of time shall never His covenant remove; His Name shall stand forever,—that name to us is Love. Amen.

In our reading for today we are reminded of the early persecution which has plagued the church with the continued attacks by both the uncircumcised tyrant and unclean hypocrite, or as Luther states, “uncircumcised Gentiles and unclean Pharisees.”

We see that persecution still today by those who reject the true joy of knowing the purpose of Christ being born; how it was the beginning of God freeing man from the curse of the law which is death, the bondage sin, and restoring the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth until He returns; and the hypocrite Pharisee who never saw the person of Jesus Christ anything more than Joseph’s son.

We are told of the coming of the One who will restore the Church where there is that peace that surpasses all understanding; it is the peace that comes from hearing the Word of God proclaimed in its truth and purity. And that Word is Christ! It is a Word that says depart from the ways of the world, depart from the realm of sin and conscience.; In other words, embrace the Gospel, and walk in the Light while we have the opportunity.

This is the true joy of the Christmas Season which we are now in, enjoying that message of the peace that comes from believing that God is revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ, who has attained mercy and grace for all who by faith believe in His saving name.

Let us pray: Kings shall bow down before Him And gold and incense bring; All nations shall adore Him, His praise all peoples sing; To Him shall prayer unceasing And daily vows ascend, His kingdom still increasing, A kingdom without end.

THE GOSPEL

St. Luke 21:25-36 (NKJV)

“And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men’s hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of heaven will be shaken.

“Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

“Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near.”

Then He spoke to them a parable: “Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. When they are already budding, you see and know for yourselves that summer is now near. So you also, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near.”

“Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.

“But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

THE COLLECT

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Thine only-begotten Son, so that by His coming we may be enabled to serve Thee with pure minds; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth, and reigneth, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

In the Gospel reading for the First Sunday in Advent, Matthew 21:9 we read: “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He Who comes in the Name of the LORD! Hosanna in the highest!” These words were spoken by the multitude on Palm Sunday.

These words are actually the fulfillment of our reading from Isaiah for today. The word “Hosanna” means “the LORD saves.” Isaiah’s song of praise to the Lord proclaims the salvation of the LORD. These words are explained by Luther’s explanation of the Second Article of the Apostle’s Creed: “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, 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, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity.”

Every time we go to the Baptismal font, every time we receive the Body and Blood in the Sacrament; every time we hear the absolution, this text is fulfilled in us. “We trust in the Lord forever, for in YAH, the LORD, is everlasting strength.” (vs 4)

It’s the day after Christmas. The world only sees a struggle that has come to an abrupt halt and says, “I’m so glad Christmas is over!” Sadly the world cannot wait to toss the tree out to the curb! The festivities are over! But that’s just it! For them, Christmas is only another festivity which is all about their family and love—their life.

For the faithful, Christmas always has been about Christ! That means Christmas is always about the love and life of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, as prophesied by the prophets how Almighty God would reveal Himself in the flesh, and His Servant attitude would make a way whereby sinful man might be rescued from the world.

This process unfolded through His humble sacrifice of being born of a Virgin in a manger, to where He grew to be a man as He kept the Law perfectly in our place, to where finally, He willingly and humbly sacrificed His own life on a denigrating Cross that we deserve.

The reading of our texts today are an encouragement for each of us as we continue to live by faith, trusting that the words of the prophets has been fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ, the Word, Whose birth we continue to celebrate throughout the Christmas Season.

Let us Pray: Arabia’s desert ranger, to Him shall bow the knee, the Ethiopian stranger His glory come to see; With offerings of devotion ships from the isles shall meet to pour the wealth of ocean in tribute at His feet. Amen.

Today we celebrate the birth of the promised Messiah, Jesus the Christ, the Anointed One, Who is God revealed in the flesh; the very same One of whom Isaiah foretold in today's reading; Whose Name, work and purpose was not only to be for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles.

Today we focus our full attention on the birth of Jesus Christ, and remember how His Name, work, and purpose are most beautifully spelled out for us in Luther's meaning of the Second Article of the Apostles Creed: "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, Who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won [delivered] 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, in order that I may be [wholly] His own, and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true."

Let us pray: He shall come down like showers upon the fruitful earth, and joy and hope, like flowers, spring in His path to birth. Before Him on the mountains shall peace, the herald, go and righteousness, in fountains, from hill to valley flow. Amen.

The Book of Isaiah is often referred to as the Fifth Gospel because it contains so many prophecies of Christ and His New Testament Church. In our reading for today Isaiah is writing of the Lord's mercy on His people, both after the exile and in His Church. What is written is true for the Church, both after the restoration and in these latter days.

In Luke 2 we find Simeon, on the day Mary and Joseph bring the infant Jesus to the temple, saying: "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your Word; For my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel."

Simeon was brought to the Temple by the Holy Spirit. You and I also have been brought into the Church by the Holy Spirit. In the waters of Holy Baptism God worked "forgiveness of sins, (He) rescues us from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare." (S.C., p. 22)

St. Paul says in Romans 6:4: "We were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."

Christ has made our peace before the Father. Isaiah 27:12 says: "And you will be gathered one by one, O you children of Israel." Thanks be to God that we have been gathered one by one to worship the Lord eternally.

In Luther's Small Catechism the fourth question about Holy Baptism asks: "What does such baptizing with water indicate?" Answer: "It indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever."

In the Book of Isaiah, God, through Isaiah, constantly tells the Jews that they have sinned against God and need to return in contrition and repentance to Him. If they didn't the nation would be destroyed. However, God also assures them that even though they will not return to Him until it is too late, that He, Himself, will provide and establish a solid foundation for His people, His Church, and their future. He says, "Behold, I lay in Zion a stone for a foundation, a tried stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation; Whoever believes will not act hastily." (vs 16)

Isaiah goes on to warn His people, "Give ear and hear my voice, listen and hear my speech." (vs 23) Don't ignore God when He speaks.

In 1 Peter 2, St. Peter tells us that this Stone is Christ and that we who hear and believe in Him are "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy" in Christ. Thanks be to God!

Our reading for today reminds us just how almighty is the One True God!

We turn on the TV, the radio, or read in the newspaper about some heartache, some terrorist attack, or another disease that has hit somewhere on the face of the Earth. How many times have you heard someone say, "I never really thought something like this would hit so close to home."? It's almost like people today somehow have the idea that these types of events are only suppose to hit other people, in another place!

These things happen and will continue to happen because sin has been passed down from one generation to another; and where sin reigns, anything, anywhere not pleasing to the Lord our God is possible! Yet, we need not fear!

Our Lord reminds the faithful where to turn in the midst of unrest, "Assemble yourselves and come; Draw near together, You who have escaped from the nations...look to Me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. I have sworn by Myself; The word has gone out of My mouth in righteousness..." The faithful need to hear the Word of the Lord and how the Anointed One has defeated sin, death and the power of the devil forever.

Let us pray: He comes with succor speedy to those who suffer wrong; To help the poor and needy and bid the weak be strong; To give them songs for sighing, their darkness turn to light, whose souls, condemned and dying, were precious in His sight. Amen.

Today marks the last hours before we once again celebrate the coming forth of the promised Messiah; the Holy One of whom Holy Scripture reveals to all mankind, is none other than the One True God, Who has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ, as true man in order that He might be able to fulfill the Words of Isaiah, “I, *even I, am* He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; And I will not remember your sins.”

Throughout today’s reading from Isaiah we are urged, as were the Children of Israel, to stop and ponder our sinfulness and the need of hearing the merciful words of the One True God.

In all truthfulness many fall into the trap of Satan allying with man’s sinfulness while tempting us to believe we are so awesome in and of ourselves in all that we think we accomplish. Take for example, the person who proudly says, “I’ve got everything ready to have another joyous ole-timey Christmas like we had when we were kids?” And again, the birth of the Christ is met with opposition.

In the midst of all this, we should daily be reminded to ask ourselves, where would we be without the Almighty Triune God, Who has come to our rescue through His powerful means of grace in these last days made possible through the Lord’s Anointed One.

Let us pray: Hail to the Lord’s Anointed, Great David’s greater Son! Hail, in the time appointed, His reign on Earth begun! He comes to break oppression, to set the captive free, to take away transgression, and rule in equity. Amen.

Throughout the Book of Isaiah the Lord, through Isaiah, is calling Judah and Jerusalem back to faithfulness. He wants them to listen to His word given in the books of Moses and the prophets and spoken to them by Isaiah. Judah and Jerusalem have fallen away from the Lord! Punishment is coming upon them! They need to listen to God and repent! They cannot help themselves! “Woe to Ariel!”

More often than not you and I are like Judah and Jerusalem. We fail to listen to God when He speaks to us. We try to do “it” for ourselves. Then when things go bad we find we have no ability to change anything. Then we worry.

However, like the Israelites, the Lord calls us back too. Every time we go to the Divine Service or hear His Word, He is calling us back. He speaks to us: “Beloved in the Lord!... draw near...and confess your sins to God...and ask His help in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ.” By faith we ask and in His mercy He answers in the words of the Pastor: “I by virtue of my Office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word...I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.” He forgives and we are forgiven.

As St. Paul writes, “We were therefore buried with Him through Baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” (Rom 6:4)

Throughout the Book of Isaiah the prophet is trying to call God's people to repentance and return to the Lord. However, the people have their own plans and decided rather than turning in repentance to the Lord they would seek help from the nation of Egypt. They trusted in man and their own wisdom rather than God. This problem has been around since Adam and Eve had their own plan in the Garden and ate the forbidden fruit.

In fact, in Romans 3 St. Paul writes, "There is none righteous, no, not one; There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God." This is a terrifying statement. Sinful man always chooses to trust his own wisdom instead of God and His Word. St. Paul says there are no people who have their own righteousness. No one can save themselves.

We still have, however, a merciful God. When sin came into the world, so did God's promises. When the Israelites sin, God's promises come. When Paul declares all people to be sinners, God's promises come. Therefore, St. Paul concludes in Ephesians 2:5ff, "even when we were dead in trespasses, (He) made us alive together with Christ...For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His work of art, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which He prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."

Thanks be to God that He loves us enough to send His Son to save us from our own sinful plans.

THE GOSPEL

St. John 1:19–28 (NKJV)

Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."

And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?"

He said, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?"

And he answered, "No."

Then they said to him, "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?"

He said: "I am 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Make straight the way of the LORD,"" as the prophet Isaiah said."

Now those who were sent were from the Pharisees. And they asked him, saying, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

John answered them, saying, "I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. "It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose."

These things were done in Bethabara beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

THE COLLECT

Stir up O Lord, we beseech Thee, Thy power, and come and help us with Thy great might, that by Thy grace whatsoever is hindered by our sins may be speedily accomplished through Thy mercy and satisfaction; who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

There are times in which believers are called sons of God and Jesus is called the Son of God. Jesus is the eternal Son of God, begotten of the Father from eternity. According to Galatians 3:26-27, “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” Similarly, in Isaiah 41:8 God refers to the Israelite nation as His servant, “But you, Israel, are my servant.” However, beginning with Isaiah 42:1, the Father directs us to look at Jesus saying, “Behold! My Servant whom I uphold, My Elect One in whom My soul delights!” In Isaiah 42:6, the Father speaks directly to His Son saying, “I, the LORD, have called You in righteousness.”

This Servant, our Jesus, was called in righteousness, according to the strict observance of the Father’s will. Executing perfect obedience to the Law and with the Spirit resting upon Him, Jesus will bring forth “justice to the Gentiles.” (v. 1) Though sinners would normally run from getting the justice we deserve, Isaiah explains that this Jesus has not come to punish sinners. Isaiah describes Jesus in gentle terms of not breaking the bruised reed or snuffing out the smoking flax. Jesus was being sent to be a fulfilled “covenant [of peace] to the [Israelite] people, as a light [of salvation] to the Gentiles.” (v. 6) With the forgiveness of sins placed upon us, we learn that the “established justice in the earth” (v. 4) which His Servant is establishing is God’s “justice” according to the Gospel. God’s plan to save us through faith in Jesus Christ is His new judgment. (42:9)

In our readings for this past week we have heard the prophet tell God’s people to repent and return to Him. And in each reading the people have said, “No thanks, Lord, we’ll do it our way. We can take care of ourselves!”

The Israelites of Isaiah’s day could be compared with much of the Christian Church today. Many of the things they claimed to be their strength are the kinds of things the church uses today. For example, big buildings, big organs, a powerful preacher, creative worship, social programs, and acceptance of all lifestyles are all simply ways to make the church acceptable to society. But in all these programs is there any assurance from God that He wants to use them to make disciples of Jesus Christ?

In Matthew 28 Jesus tells His Apostles how to make disciples. He told them to baptize them “in the Name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you.” Then He tells them not to worry, “I am with you always.”

He doesn’t advocate for better and more popular programs, bigger parking lots, more attractive enticements. He simply wants the Pastor to be about preaching and teaching God’s Word in its truth and purity, and administering His Sacraments faithfully. There is where you will find God’s Church strong and confident, living in God’s grace. There is where God promises to be active and working, calling people into His eternal kingdom. Thanks be to God, we can trust Him to give the growth!

THE GOSPEL

St. Matthew 11:2–10 (NKJV)

And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, “Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?”

Jesus answered and said to them, “Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me.”

As they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. For this is he of whom it is written: ‘Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You.’”

THE COLLECT

Lord, we beseech You, give ear to our prayers and lighten the darkness of our hearts by Your visitation; who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

The Scriptures say that “men are without excuse” (Rom 1:19-20) concerning the existence of God’s eternal power and divine nature, because of the creation of the world. Similarly, Isaiah points us to the stars in the sky as proof of God’s power. (40:26) Isaiah says that God stretched out this magnificent stellar backdrop and sits well above these stars. (40:22) Our God is not a part of creation, like man-made idols, but He is “the Creator of the ends of the earth, [Who] neither faints nor is weary. His understanding is unsearchable.” (40:28)

You might think that this great Creator-God would care nothing about someone as small and weak as you. But that is not true. The creation teaches us that God exists, but it doesn’t reveal who He is and what He has done and is doing to save us. Isaiah 40 and 41 confidently teach us that the Triune God “gives power to the weak. And to those who have no might He increases strength.” (Is 40:29) God’s Word teaches that our God became weak so that He might save his weak and mightless creatures. The God-man Jesus Christ became the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 42) so that our sin would be forgiven. He places His seven-fold Spirit (Isaiah 33:6) in us.

Having begun with the description of idolatry, (40:18) we end with a description of the meaning of the 1st Commandment, (41:10) “Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.” Blessed are “those who wait on the LORD.” (40:31)

The Scriptures were written by many different men and in various times. They address vastly different situations. Nevertheless, the teachings of God's holy Word always speaks to our time and situation. Romans 15:4 says, "For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope."

Although Isaiah has already prophesied that Assyria's present offensive will fail, (ch. 37) he warns that Babylon is soon to rise and take Israel into exile. (ch. 39) And now, before any of that happens, Isaiah speaks the kindest words in chapters 40-66 saying that God will bring back the captives from Babylon. God is using Isaiah to bring comfort and hope to people who would live a hundred years in the future.

Though skeptics will ridicule Isaiah's predictive prophecy, beginning at verse 12, Isaiah asks questions they cannot answer about our omnipotent and omniscient God. We learn from Isaiah that God's control of the nations is considering by Him as "a very little thing" and "as a drop in a bucket." (v. 15)

If the Lord of all history controls nations, He can surely direct your life according to His plan. We can learn from Isaiah's comforting words, "that her iniquity is pardoned." Through Jesus Christ, our Lord God has come to "feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm." We dare not trust in the withering grass, but in "the word of our God [which] stands forever." (v. 8) We can and do trust in the living and enduring Word of God, "in hope of eternal life which God, Who cannot lie, promised before time began." (Titus 1:2)

In Isaiah 32:9-14, the Prophet Isaiah speaks to those Israelites who are secure in their sins. They are "at ease," "complacent," and untroubled. Isaiah rightly preaches harsh words of God's Law in order that they would realize their sin, become troubled over it and come to repentance.

The meaning to the Close of the Commandments in the Small Catechism says, "God threatens to punish all who break these commandments. Therefore, we should fear His wrath and not do anything against them." God's Word threatening punishment is sincere, but when the people's response is repentance, our merciful God does not give us what we deserve. We find out in Jeremiah 26:18-19, that Isaiah's word given during the first year of Hezekiah's reign was heeded, so that the Israelites did repent. In response, Jerusalem was not besieged, as was threatened, but the Lord defeated the Assyrians Himself. (Isa. 37:34-35)

The meaning of the Close continues, "But He promises grace and every blessing to all who keep these commandments. Therefore, we should also love and trust in Him and gladly do what He commands." The Gospel is spoken to the repentant. The Lord pours out His Spirit (v. 15) upon His believers so that they are declared righteous (v. 16) because of the coming King (v. 1) Jesus. With forgiveness upon them, they receive the fruits of righteousness: peace, quietness and assurance forever. (v. 17) Through the confession of our sin, God has promised mercy and good gifts.

1 John 1:9-10, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Fourteen years have passed between chapter 33 and 34. Isaiah is giving a 5th Woe against Assyria, who is returned to Judah and is threatening the city Jerusalem. Rather than trust in Him, God's people are sending ambassadors with gold and silver to Sennacherib, (2 Ki 18:14) the king of Assyria, asking him for help. His treacherous response was to take their goods, and then defeat Jerusalem. Isaiah says, "The ambassadors of peace shall weep bitterly" (v. 7) for their lack of trust in God.

Once the Assyrians had plundered Israel, then the true God would plunder the Assyrians for their treachery. They will not get ahead. Luther says, "In short, however much you steal, depend on it that just as much will be stolen from you. Anyone who robs and takes things by violence and dishonesty must put up with another who plays the same game. For God is a master of this art; since everyone robs and steals from the other, he punishes one thief by means of another. Otherwise, where would we find enough gallows and ropes?" (Large Catechism, 243)

In contrast to the treacherous, there were some in Zion who trusted in God. (v. 2-6) God was "their arm every morning." The strength of God's right arm, Jesus Christ, is "Our salvation also in the time of trouble." With verses 17-24, the Prophet Isaiah is giving a description of the New Testament Church saying, "Your eyes will see the King in His beauty." Jesus brings believers into His Church, a solid defense. Need we say more than Isaiah's last line, "The people who dwell in it will be forgiven their iniquity."

God "has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead." (Acts 17:31) That Man is the risen-from-the-dead Jesus Christ Who will return on the Last Day. "To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation." (Hebrews 9:28) For believers in Christ, the Day of the Lord will be a day of great joy to bring them salvation. Trusting in Jesus, the Way, (John 14:6) the redeemed shall walk in the highway of holiness. (35:8) With every sin forgiven by Christ, they are the clean ones, who will pass over to the everlasting Zion.

The Prophet Isaiah also prophesies, "For it is the day of the LORD's vengeance, the year of recompense for the cause of Zion." Vengeance will be dealt out to Christ's enemies, who caused suffering and death for Christ's believers. Jesus explained, "If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you." (John 15:19) For unbelievers, the Day of the Lord will be a day of great wrath. Isaiah speaks of his own prophecies saying, "Search from the book of the LORD, and read: Not one of these shall fail." (34:16)

As we live in this wilderness and wasteland of sin we are told, "Say to those *who are* fearful-hearted, "Be strong, do not fear! Behold, your God will come *with* vengeance, *with* the recompense of God; He will come and save you."