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GOSPEL**St. Matthew 2:13–23 (NKJV)**

Now when they [the wise men] had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, “Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him.”

When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, “Out of Egypt I called My Son.”

Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying: *“A voice was heard in Ramah, Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, Refusing to be comforted, Because they are no more.”*

But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, “Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child’s life are dead.”

Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the region of Galilee. And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, “He shall be called a Nazarene.”

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.

How is it that undershepherds can expect worldly wealth, peace, and security, even at the expense of the flock’s well-being, when even Christ Himself was “sold out” and afflicted because of God’s truth?

In spite of all that Judas Iscariot had seen and heard from the Lord, he still sought after a sense of financial gain in exchange for Christ. History has shown many times those who “give up” the Word of God so they might gain money or some other idea of wealth. There is no prestige or sense of security or accomplishment that can be adequate compensation for compromising the truth of Christ: as Jesus asks, “what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, but loses his soul?”

Our Lord was broken and killed so that we might be truly rich and blessed. Our Shepherd gave up His life so that He could save ours from Satan who would devour us. And those whom He calls to feed His sheep are to keep them safe in His Word of redemption. Our help is not in gold or silver, insurance plans, or institutions, or health and comfort. Our help is in the name of the Lord, Jesus Christ!

The blessings of His truth and peace, which only come from the whole and pure Word and teaching of Christ, are worth infinitely more than thirty pieces of silver or any other price tag that man might try to put on it. The Lord is our Shepherd, and we shall not want for any good thing. His goodness and mercy come abundantly through His Word in Christ, and by our crucified and risen Lord we are made to dwell in His house forever.

False teachers are a danger to Christ's flock. Even though a group may abide by God's Word in some ways, their other teachings, where the wicked shepherds teach idolatrous delusions, are a poison to Christ's lambs.

It is good for the Lord to come with the strength of His Word and chastise those shepherds who neglect the truth. It is better for these flocks to be called back to the full counsel of God before they stray too far and lose even the most basic truths so that they die from lack of the green pastures and still water of the Gospel.

It is a testament to the Lord's mercy that He desires wicked shepherds to be held accountable for their mistreatment of His flocks. The Lord Himself is not negligent towards His lambs; neither should His undershepherds be allowed to trouble them. This is why discipline and doctrinal scrutiny are so important in the Church. It is dangerous and unkind to turn a blind eye toward those who let Christ's sheep wander into the trouble of false doctrine and practice. The sheep may be all right for a time, subsisting on dried stubble and muddy water, but that is not the Lord's will for them! He does not want them to risk becoming sick or to wander wherever they please. Satan's poison and deadly cliffs are everywhere.

Thanks be to God for His zeal for the welfare of His flocks. May He keep us truly steadfast in all that Christ Jesus has commanded us, focused squarely on the Gospel and all His blessings that come will it through His Word. Amen.

Have you noticed how Law and Gospel pervade Holy Scripture? Again and again God speaks to people in terms of Law and Gospel.

As the prophet Isaiah concludes his writing to the children of Israel he is moved by the Holy Spirit to clearly proclaim the gospel of God's love to the one "who is poor and of a contrite spirit," and the law to those whose "soul delights in their abominations." Though Isaiah's message was directed to the children of Israel, it clearly speaks to us today. Just as God's faithful people suffered at the hands of the evil, so we today will suffer for the sake of God's name.

The pains, sufferings, heartaches and sorrows that accompany the Christian life may give one the impression that we Christians live a rather morbid life. But we who are "poor and of a contrite spirit" are not left desolate by God. He has chosen us to be His own. As His own we are given the privilege to share in Christ's suffering. And just as we share in His suffering and death, we too will share in His resurrection. Therein lies our hope and our joy, joy in the midst of suffering.

Every Lord's Day God brings to us His message of love and forgiveness. In His Supper Christ bids us to "taste and see that the Lord is Good" (Psalm 34:8), for in Christ we receive everything for this life and the life to come.

The text for today's devotion tells us, "the Word of the Lord came expressly to Ezekiel the priest." Ezekiel was chosen by God for the special purpose of bringing His word to His people.

Ezekiel sees "the likeness of four living creatures." Here we must be careful to understand that Ezekiel is trying to describe something no one had seen before. He goes on to describe "the likeness of the throne," which is also beyond what anyone had seen on earth. Finally, he tries to describe "the appearance of a man high above it." He tries with simple words to describe the indescribable "glory of the Lord."

So what are we to make of this great vision of God given to Ezekiel? One must be careful not to miss the point of the vision while pondering the details. Ezekiel did not miss the point: "So when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of One speaking." Such imagery serves to teach us and remind us that the Lord comes to us by His holy Word with great glory and power. Thanks be to God that that same Word makes us wise in His will and assures us of our salvation in Christ Jesus. Even though the visions of His prophets may be hard to understand in all their details, it is very clear from God's Word that we are sinners according to the Law, but we are also redeemed by the Gospel of His Son!

Today's reading uses much imagery of a king going to war, with violence and bloodshed. But in the middle of the chapter is the familiar prophesy of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem lead to a warfare that was very different from the typical battles into which a king rides. Our Lord's battle was with Satan, the ancient enemy of God and man, and the violence and bloodshed that would win the victory would be done to the King Himself, rather than the enemy!

The Devil was defeated and his power over the nations was destroyed. By the shedding of God the Son's own blood, the sins of all mankind were paid for so that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life! We are liberated from slavery to the evil ruler Satan and we are given a glorious life under our righteous Lord, Jesus Christ.

The kingdom of God is not won by carnal violence, and the Gospel is not spread by means of the sword. Earthly kingdoms are protected by such means and justice is maintained through the reality of the sword, but our Lord goes forth with the power of His Word. His Word strikes down the false words of the enemy and it pierces the consciences of the wicked. But it also is the means by which God raises us up to renewed life and freedom as He works faith in us. His Spirit moves us to repentance and trust in Christ crucified, as the prophet says: "The LORD their God will save them in that day, as the flock of His people." Amen!

God's Word teaches us to love truth and peace. But these two things must go together. If one strives for a peace that comes at the expense of the truth, then that is not a peace worth having. False teachers are often seduced by a desire for peace and they find themselves tolerating—or even teaching—blatant lies to obtain a superficial peace. The truth of our Lord's Word brings real peace, if not to our outward situation, at least to our souls!

The truth of God's holy Law exposes the sin that plagues our hearts and minds. It stirs our conscience and reveals our need for peace. But if false teachers water down or relax the full truth of God's Law, then they cause those who hear to be in danger of complacency in their sins, failing to see their peril and need for salvation. One might gain a type of temporary peace from Satan's attacks by sacrificing the truth, but the eternal destruction of one's soul is a very poor trade-off.

God uses the power of His true Word to help us and bless us. It is a wicked thing for us to mock His power and truth by compromising that Word. It is by His Word that His Holy Spirit works faith and repentance in us at the warnings of the Law...and it is by the glorious Word of His Gospel in Christ Jesus that the Spirit makes us to trust in our crucified Lord of forgiveness and life! Even if His truth brings some trials in this life, the everlasting peace of our salvation in Christ is a far better thing.

Our text for today's devotion picks up where yesterday's left off. Ezekiel now hears God speak to him. Ezekiel is addressed as "Son of man." This reminds us of Psalm 8: "What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him?" Ezekiel was just a man, to be sure, but that is the beauty of how God deals with us. He sends men to preach His Word. Lowly though they be, the lowliness of the messenger does not diminish the message.

Ezekiel would go to a "rebellious people" with God's Word. Some would heed God's call to repentance and others would not. Either way, the message was to remain the same and not be altered to appease the listener.

Sadly, many who claim to be speaking for God have changed the message. This is done in an effort to "reach the lost," however, the question they fail to answer is: What good is accomplished if the lost are not really hearing God's Word?

God was very clear on how Ezekiel was to speak, "Speak with My words to them." Ezekiel was not to change what had been given to him. Even though many of the children of Israel would not listen, Ezekiel was to speak the Word of God. These "impudent and hard-hearted people" were going to be dashed against the Word.

So we, too, are daily broken by the Law as the Holy Spirit works to bring us to repentance. But we are not left broken, for He has healed us by forgiving our sins.

As a spokesman for God, Ezekiel had an awesome responsibility. He was a “watchman for the house of Israel.” Many businesses employ watchmen. Some will sit in front of screens and watch images from numerous cameras. Other watchmen walk around buildings or grounds and look for potential problems. Either way, their job is to watch, and in watching they protect their employer’s property. Ezekiel’s duty was far more important than just watching buildings and property. He watched over men’s souls. He was to warn the wicked people against their wicked ways, and the righteous whenever the righteous fell into sin.

Likewise, your pastor is to watch over your soul. When he confronts you with your sin he is to speak what God says in His Law. Though such confrontation is painful, for the Law of God crushes us under its weight, your pastor is not doing this because he dislikes you. Quite the contrary. The pastor confronts you with your sin out of love for you in Christ. The most unloving thing a pastor can do is remain silent concerning sin.

Therefore we are to thank God for those to whom He has given the charge of watching over the souls of His people. It is a monumental task, and one that no man can ever do perfectly, except for one Man, Jesus. You can rest assured that Christ will never fail in caring for you, though your pastor may falter at times. That wonderful Gospel message of forgiveness of sins is not only for you, but also for your pastor.

False teachers serve themselves. They may even try to serve the Lord in ways, but if they carelessly handle God’s Word or ignore it, these teachers’ good intentions are worthless because they still only serve their reckless assumptions. More, their false teaching still brings desolation, whether they intend it to or not.

The people and the priests were admonished by God in today’s text. But they refused to listen and shrugged off the wisdom of the Lord as though it were unimportant. They thought their token acts and hollow institutions were righteous works, but they lacked the Holy Spirit. They served themselves rather than God. True faithfulness—created by trust in His promises in Christ—obeys God’s teaching and serves our neighbors according to it. But self-centeredness ignores this, and by tolerating or promoting teaching that is contrary to the Lord’s our neighbors are harmed and our society is damaged. Faithfulness is weakened by error, and selfishness consumes and leaves little or nothing for others. The end result of this is impoverished and disjointed communities and the spiritual death that comes from faithlessness.

We cannot just shrug at wickedness. We must always seek the wisdom of our Lord and ask ourselves, “Does this truly and faithfully serve Christ and our neighbor?” He gives us His clear Word, and His Spirit is poured out on us so that we may know and understand it. May the Lord keep us steadfast in these things so that all who hear may be eternally blessed and Christ Jesus our Lord be glorified for the life He gives us all!

The Lord has done profound and wondrous acts throughout history. Some are more easily understood than others, but all of them are accomplished, and understood, by the power of His Spirit. Without His Spirit we fail to see the point of His works. That is why those who reject His Spirit offer up all sorts of explanations of their own, from the random occurrences of meaningless chance to the capricious designs of gods or spirits that are more selfish than holy. But by the power of God's Spirit we are enlightened and blessed with the one true faith by which we are made able to see that everything the Lord does points to Jesus Christ crucified!

The Word and Spirit of God give life and salvation to us, but those who reject His Spirit are the thieves and liars that plunder and corrupt His Church on earth and receive instead the curse. They stand condemned by the Law of God and they will suffer the consequences of their wickedness. They will be cast out and lose every blessing that the Lord has accomplished for them.

No might or power of mankind is capable of doing what His Holy Spirit does, nor what the Father and the Son do! It is only by His profound and wondrous power that faith and grace come to us so that we may believe Jesus Christ is our Lord, promised to us through the ages and revealed to us from the cross. Thanks be to God, Who truly gives us life and salvation in His Son!

After reading today's lesson one might be a bit confused. One must be careful to distinguish original sin, which we inherit from our fathers, from the sins we commit. With original sin we do, in a sense, "bear the guilt of our father." Because Adam sinned all his offspring are sinners.

Yet, Adam's guilt is his own and we do not bear his guilt. Instead, we bear our own guilt and are responsible for our actions. We dare not lay blame for our sins at anyone's doorstep but our own. This is the point God is making with Ezekiel: We are personally responsible for our sins.

Another point that God is showing Ezekiel is that faithful people can fall from faith. Anyone who "commits iniquity, and dies in it, it is because of the iniquity which he has done that he dies." It is clear that God is not responsible for the death of any sinner, whether the person was always "wicked" or "a righteous man" who falls away. Indeed, God takes "no pleasure in the death of one who dies."

One last point to be made is that we see who is the active agent in bringing about repentance. If people repented of their own accord, there would be no need for God to send Ezekiel or the other prophets, nor preachers today. Repentance only takes place as the Holy Spirit works through the proclamation of the Law to crush "hard-hearted people." Only then can they be restored through the Gospel.

As we read today's lesson we hear echoes of what the Lord had spoken to Ezekiel in previous chapters. It is important for us to remember that God is interested in the salvation of all people, both the wicked and the righteous, and that God's means of salvation is the same for all people.

So why does God repeat this message to Ezekiel, and through Ezekiel to the Children of Israel? They, like we, keep forgetting what God says. All people, except for Jesus, are alike in the fact that we are by nature sinful and unclean. Because we are sinners we sin, and because we are sinners we cannot hear what God says unless God opens our ears to hear. In addition, if God did not continually repeat the message, our ears would turn deaf to His Word. It is His Word that creates hearing, and with hearing, faith. It is also through the same Word that He sustains our hearing and our faith.

Throughout the course of time God has never ceased to call out to people to repent of their sins. Even though the people at the time of Ezekiel said, "The way of the Lord is not fair," God did not change the way He dealt with His people. All who are saved are saved by God's grace through the faith He creates within them. Those who reject God's grace, thinking that God "is not fair," will be judged as they wish, on the basis of their own works. As such, their works will judge them unworthy of the kingdom of God.

GOSPEL

St. Matthew 8:1-13 (NKJV)

When He had come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed Him. And behold, a leper came and worshiped Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean."

Then Jesus put out His hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." Immediately his leprosy was cleansed.

And Jesus said to him, "See that you tell no one; but go your way, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."

Now when Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, pleading with Him, saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, dreadfully tormented."

And Jesus said to him, "I will come and heal him."

The centurion answered and said, "Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

When Jesus heard it, He marveled, and said to those who followed, "Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel! And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go your way; and as you have believed, so let it be done for you." And his servant was healed that same hour.

The Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities, and in all our dangers and necessities stretch forth the right hand of Thy majesty to help and defend us; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son our Lord, who liveth and reigneth, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

Zechariah and Haggai were both prophets sent to God's people in the time immediately following their return from the Babylonian captivity. The word of the Lord came to Haggai in the sixth month of the second year of Darius' rule, and it came to Zechariah two months later. Both prophets were sent with a call to repentance, and both were also sent to encourage a demoralized nation that had seen the glory of Solomon's temple swept away.

Even though the people had only recently returned from their time of exile, nevertheless it was necessary that the Lord call to mind again why the Babylonian captivity had transpired: "The Lord has been very angry with your fathers. Therefore say to them, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts: "Return to Me," says the Lord of hosts, "and I will return to you," says the Lord of hosts. Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets preached, saying, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts: "Turn now from your evil ways and your evil deeds."' But they did not hear nor heed Me," says the Lord.

St. Paul teaches the Church in 1 Corinthians 10:11 to receive the history of God's people as an admonition to repentance and faith: "Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come." So, too, the words of comfort and consolation that the Lord gave to His repentant people in ages past speak peace to us, for the Lord does not change, and His mercies endure forever.

GOSPEL**St. Luke 2:41-52 (NKJV)**

His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. And when He was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem according to the custom of the feast.

When they had finished the days, as they returned, the Boy Jesus lingered behind in Jerusalem. And Joseph and His mother did not know it; but supposing Him to have been in the company, they went a day's journey, and sought Him among their relatives and acquaintances. So when they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking Him.

Now so it was that after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard Him were astonished at His understanding and answers.

So when they saw Him, they were amazed; and His mother said to Him, "Son, why have You done this to us? Look, Your father and I have sought You anxiously."

And He said to them, "Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" But they did not understand the statement which He spoke to them.

Then He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them.

But His mother kept all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

The Collect

O Lord, we beseech You mercifully to receive the prayers of Your people who call upon You; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfill the same; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

Lesson from the Book of Concord

The First Sunday after the Epiphany

FRIDAY, JANUARY 24: JOEL 3:1-21

EPIPHANY 2

THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT.

The parental estate God has especially honored above estates that are beneath Him, so that He not only commands us to love our parents, but to honor them. For with respect to brothers, sisters and neighbors in general He commands nothing higher than that we love them; so that He separates and distinguishes father and mother above all other persons upon earth, and places them next to Himself. For to honor is far higher than to love, inasmuch as it comprehends not only love, but also modesty, humility and deference as though to a majesty there hidden, and requires not only that they be addressed kindly and with reverence, but most of all that both in heart and with the body we so act as to show that we esteem them very highly, and that, next to God, we regard them the very highest. For one whom we honor from the heart we must truly regard as high and great.

We must, therefore, impress it upon the young that they should regard their parents in God's stead, and remember that however lowly, poor, frail and strange they may be, nevertheless they are father and mother given them by God. And they are not to be deprived of their honor because of their mode of life or their failings. Therefore we are not to regard their persons, how they may be, but the will of God who has thus appointed and ordained. In other respects we are, indeed, all alike in the eyes of God; but among us there must necessarily be such inequality and distinction with respect to order, and therefore God commands that you be careful to obey me as your father, and that I have the precedence. ...

God knows very well this perverseness of the world; therefore He admonishes and urges by commandments that every one consider what parents have done for him, and he will find that he owes to them body and life, as well as sustenance, support and rearing, since otherwise he would have perished a hundred times in his own filth. Therefore it is a true and good saying of old and wise men: *Deo, parentibus et magistris non potest satis gratiae rependi*, that is, to God, to parents and to teachers we can never render sufficient gratitude and compensation. He that regards and considers this will indeed without compulsion do all honor to his parents and cherish them as those through whom God has done him all good.

Following those verses in Joel 2, which St. Peter declared fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost, we read of the promise that the remnant would be gathered from the nations, and we read of the coming judgment that will attend the end of the age.

In the words of Joel 3:1–2: “For behold, in those days and at that time, when I bring back the captives of Judah and Jerusalem, I will also gather all nations, and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat; and I will enter into judgment with them there on account of My people, My heritage Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations; they have also divided up My land.” Joel concludes with images of the coming judgment of the nations. While Isaiah wrote of the coming Day of the Lord when “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (Isaiah 2:4), Joel wrote of that which comes before: “Proclaim this among the nations: ... ‘Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weak say, “I am strong.”””

The peace of the coming Kingdom of God is not something accomplished by the efforts of men. Throughout the days in which God's people await the return of Christ in glory, there will be wars and rumors of wars. Nevertheless, the kingdom will endure forever: “But Judah shall abide forever, and Jerusalem from generation to generation. For I will acquit them of the guilt of bloodshed, whom I had not acquitted; for the Lord dwells in Zion.”

The Lord had led the people to repentance and the “locusts” were taken away; thus the Lord promised: “I will no longer make you a reproach among the nations.” The “northern army” was thus driven toward the Dead Sea, “. . . With his face toward the eastern sea and his back toward the western sea; his stench will come up, and his foul odor will rise, because he has done monstrous things.” The invader is destroyed, and his destruction is linked to the Dead Sea, recalling the destruction that the Lord rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah.

On Pentecost St. Peter quoted verses from Joel, proclaiming that the time of which the prophet has prophesied had come at last; when he and the other apostles spoke with “other tongues” (Acts 2:4), and were understood by all men in Jerusalem, this was the fulfillment of the promise that the Spirit would be poured out on all flesh. The miracle that Peter declares fulfilled is the sign that comes after the shame of God’s people has been taken away.

If we are looking for the fulfillment of that which the Lord had promised, we need look no further than the Incarnation of the Son of God and the victory over all our enemies that was accomplished in His life, death and resurrection for us. “Then you shall know that I am in the midst of Israel: I am the Lord your God and there is no other. My people shall never be put to shame.”

Besides all this, it should be a great inducement to influence us the more to obedience to this commandment, that God adds to the same a temporal promise and says: “*That thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.*” ...

In connection with this commandment it is proper to speak further of all kinds of obedience to persons in authority who have to command and to govern. For all authority flows and is propagated from the authority of parents. For where a father is unable alone to educate his child, he employs a schoolmaster that he may instruct it; if he be too weak, he obtains the assistance of his friends and neighbors; if he depart, he confers and delegates his authority and government to others who are appointed for the purpose. Likewise he must have domestics, man-servants and maid-servants, under him for the management of the household, so that all whom we call masters are in the place of parents and must derive their power and authority to govern from them. Hence also they are all called fathers in the Scripture, as those who in their government perform the functions of the office of a father, and should have a paternal heart toward their subordinates. As also from antiquity the Romans and other nations called the masters and mistresses of the household *patres et matres familiae*, that is housefathers and housemothers. So also they called their national rulers and chiefs *patres patriae*, that is fathers of the country, for a great shame to us, who would be Christians that we do not call them so, or, at least, do not esteem and honor them as such. ...

Thus we have two kinds of fathers presented in this commandment, fathers in blood and fathers in office, or those to whom belongs the care of the family, and those to whom belongs the care of the nation. Besides these there are spiritual fathers; not like those in the Papacy, who have indeed caused themselves to be so designated, but have not performed the functions of the paternal office. For those are to be called spiritual fathers who govern and guide us by the Word of God. Of this name St. Paul boasts (1 Cor. 4:15), where he says: “In Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the Gospel.” Because they are fathers indeed they are entitled to honor above all others.

—Large Catechism, the Book of Concord, §105–8, 129–131, 141–142,

We hear the Lord's ringing indictment of Israel, and we know that we stand guilty just as they. We have not valued our neighbors' lives as we ought, much less valued God's honor as their Creator. The heathen speak evil of our God because of us, because we have profaned His name.

We see so many churches that claim to follow Christ, but do nothing of the kind. We wonder how we might stop them...or at least stop them from claiming to be "Christian" and "Lutheran." Yet, their profaning of the name of the holy Triune God will continue as long as ours does, and we will profane His name until we are removed from this vale of tears and stand finally sinless before Him in Heaven.

What are we to do then, give up? Certainly not, but understand that we are profaners *and* hallowers of God's holy name at the same time. Because the only one to hallow God's name did His fulfilling of all righteousness in our place, we may confess our failure to hallow His name. Likewise, we are made able to trust in the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus on the cross and the promise of forgiveness attached to it. In so trusting, in confessing and being absolved, we are returned to what He gave us in Holy Baptism, to the new heart and spirit that He gave us in places of our hearts of stone.

Our flesh often does not display our re-creation in Christ, but such is not our assurance. Our assurance is in Christ Jesus, in whom we are clean and by whom the true God is our God.

The nature of the "army" of locusts that afflicts the nation becomes more clear as we continue to hear the Word of the Lord. Already in the first chapter one can readily understand that the "locusts" were something more terrible in their devastating effects than the affliction of the devouring swarms that periodically plagued the people. We read in Joel 1:6, "For a nation has come up against My land..." Now the prophet records: "A people come, great and strong, the like of whom has never been; nor will there ever be any such after them, even for many successive generations." Though they devour like the locust, consuming everything, the invading army is something more terrible as it serves as the chastening rod of the Lord.

The words of today's reading should seem familiar, for a portion of them are used during the Church Year as the Epistle reading for Ash Wednesday. The call to repentance comes to the Church throughout the generations; affliction—whether from men or from 'nature'—all must serve the Lord as an opportunity for God's people to repent. The priests appeal to the mercy of the Lord for deliverance of God's people from the might of the nations: "Let the priests, who minister to the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar; let them say, 'Spare Your people, O Lord, and do not give Your heritage to reproach, that the nations should rule over them. Why should they say among the peoples, "Where is their God?"'"

The first chapter of Joel sets forth images of a divine judgment so profound that it would be told to the coming generations. Images of death, destruction and starvation predominate as the prophet recounted that which came upon the people through an innumerable swarm of “locusts” (v.4), but the judgment is the Lord’s upon the sin of the people: “Alas for the day! For the day of the Lord is at hand; it shall come as destruction from the Almighty.” The destruction was so great that it is simply summarized: “Surely joy has withered away from the sons of men.”

In the midst of such destruction there was still cause for hope because the way of repentance remained. The Levites were instructed: “Gird yourselves and lament, you priests; wail, you who minister before the altar; come, lie all night in sackcloth, you who minister to my God.” But repentance was not restricted to the priesthood: “Consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord.”

Destruction had come upon the nation on account of sin, therefore the whole nation was called to repent. But the call to repentance should never be considered a reason to despair! With the call to repent is the hope of forgiveness. The Lord calls us to repentance because there is forgiveness for those who repent and believe in the Christ. Though the method of the Lord may fill our hearts with fear, our peace rests not on ourselves, but in Christ Jesus, whose death atoned for all sin.

As He did yesterday, the Holy Spirit has Ezekiel continue to enrich the Festival of the Baptism of Our Lord by showing what His baptizing us has accomplished. Cleansed from our iniquities, we are made to dwell in the Kingdom of God, even as the exiles were returned to their home cities in Israel. Such is not to our glory, but to the glory of our God who builds His Kingdom and gives us life with Him purely by His grace in Christ.

Truly, there is nothing we could do to restore ourselves to God. We were just as the exiled ones of Israel saw themselves: as bones lying—disjointed and dried out—on the floor of a waterless valley.

The Word of the Lord through Ezekiel to the dry bones is a word that not only brings the bones together and clothes them with flesh, but it actually puts life and breath in them. The Lord is not wanting mere outward observances and the appearance of Christianity, whether by the individual bones or by the whole group of flesh-covered bodies. God’s Word does not lead merely to outwardly righteous conduct or some sort of moral social club called ‘church’.

Instead, it restores the sinner to God and makes him alive in this world, and for all eternity, showing forth the glory of God: that He has spoken His promise and He has performed it exactly as He said. He has raised us up as a mighty army, armed not with fleshly weapons to do battle against flesh and blood, but with the righteousness of God the Son going forth before us and conquering, even as it conquers us.

What a beautiful prophecy of the New Testament Church we have before us today! The New David—our Lord Jesus, the Son of David who is the Son of God—shall unite the scattered remnant of the Church and shepherd them forever, and this New Israel shall walk before Him sinless forever!

Consider the state of Judah and Israel at the time of Jesus. What had been Israel—that is, the northern tribes—had been scattered because of their sin. They intermarried with unbelievers, and came back to the land with a religion that perverted God’s Word (even more than Judah’s did under the leadership of the Sadducees and Pharisees!), settling in Samaria and being in continual conflict with those of Judea. The shock of Ezekiel’s prophecy of their being joined together once again, shown by the miraculous joining of the sticks, would have been overwhelming. Yet, it showed something that would be even more startling: the gentiles, too, would be joined to them, like a wild olive branch grafted into a cultivated olive tree! (See Romans 11:17.)

All would be joined into one Kingdom under the Son of David to whom all the people would cry out, “Hosanna in the Highest!” As He, the Word of God, dwelt among us as the true Tabernacle of God in the flesh, so He continues among us here to dispense His blessings, just as He promised at the end of St. Matthew’s Gospel, fulfilling His promise to dwell with us forever in today’s reading.

Consider where these healing waters went: “This water flows toward the eastern region, goes down into the valley, and enters the sea. When it reaches the sea, its waters are healed. And it shall be that every living thing that moves, wherever the rivers go, will live. There will be a very great multitude of fish, because these waters go there; for they will be healed, and everything will live wherever the river goes.”

The sea is the Dead Sea. No fish are found there because of the salinity of its waters. But the concern here is not for life that might be found in the Dead Sea, but for the living water that the Lord sends forth to give life where death once reigned.

In Revelation 22, John appears to use Ezekiel’s imagery: “And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations” (v. 1–2). Here is the same imagery of the fruit which flourishes on account of the healing waters. As Ezekiel wrote: “They will bear fruit every month, because their water flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for medicine.” The Lord’s healing waters still bring life where once death reigned, and the fruit of the Lord’s mercy is manifest in those who have their life in Christ Jesus.

GOSPEL**St. John 2:1-11 (NKJV)**

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Now both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding. And when they ran out of wine, the mother of Jesus said to Him, "They have no wine."

Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come."

His mother said to the servants, "Whatever He says to you, do it."

Now there were set there six waterpots of stone, according to the manner of purification of the Jews, containing twenty or thirty gallons apiece. Jesus said to them, "Fill the waterpots with water." And they filled them up to the brim. And He said to them, "Draw some out now, and take it to the master of the feast." And they took it. When the master of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom. And he said to him, "Every man at the beginning sets out the good wine, and when the guests have well drunk, then the inferior. You have kept the good wine until now!"

This beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory; and His disciples believed in Him.

The Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, who does govern all things in heaven and earth, mercifully hear the supplications of Your people and grant us Your peace all the days of our life; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

Why do bad things happen to God's people? In short, they don't!

What does this mean? Whatever 'bad' happens to the Christian cannot *end* bad. The Lord brings every evil counsel and purpose of the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh to naught, no matter how ferocious their attack may be.

The description of God's People in today's reading is enlightening: those gathered from all the nations (verses 8 and 12) and who live "without walls," having no need of physical boundaries or protective armaments to keep their faith pure. Thus, the battle to be waged will not be against a physical Israel, but against Christ and His Church, which lives in the midst of every nation—and it is the very war that has been waged since His incarnation.

Consider the description of the day of Gog's attack and the Lord's counter to it. The very things that you were called upon to do during Advent are accomplished at the time of the earth's quaking. And recall that the earth quaked at the death of our Lord (Matthew 27:51) as the veil of the Temple was torn in two to show that the entire sacrifice had been made. The mountains fell in the crucifixion, all being made a smooth path, no matter how insurmountable they had seemed before, as now the Lord's holy mountain is lifted up above all others so that the nations may flow to it.

In this way, the Lord truly magnifies and sanctifies Himself in our midst: He allows us enemies only so that he may slay them for us!

The Lord has Ezekiel paint a vivid picture of retribution today. Those who have come against His nation, the Church, will lose all they have to Her. In complete judgment (as indicated by the symbol “seven years” in verse 9), all with which they attacked Her shall be utterly consumed, and all the riches they thought they had will revert to Her, to whom the Lord promised that the meek shall inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5).

As we saw on Monday, the profaning of the Lord by those who were supposed to be Israel will be brought to an end, by virtue of the fact that Israel in the New Testament is not a matter of natural birth or of physical borders, but of having our profanity covered by the hallowing done by Christ. So, too, the Church shall “eat the flesh” and “drink the blood” of the mighty ones who came against Her, not by slaughtering them and showing victory by such actions, but by eating the body and drinking the blood of the One who won the victory over them by means of sacrifice. By consuming the Conqueror, the Church consumes not only those whose conquest is visible, but the One who is triumphant over all, seen and unseen, so that She may receive the absolute victory that Her bridegroom has won.

How gracious our God is, not confining this treasure to those who were His landed nation in the Old Testament, but setting the Christ and His Bride in the midst of all nations, so that all of us sinners may receive His sacrifice and rejoice in the victory He gives us!

Again we see the Lord declare to Ezekiel what the New Testament Israel is to be. The carcasses of the kings of old are to be abandoned along with the harlotry of Old Israel—that is, of the physical nation that was supposed to be the Church, but that only had the Church hidden within it. The true Israel of the New Testament is without harlotry—without its members being wholly given over to the worship of false gods.

While it is true that even Christians do not always fully keep the First Commandment (which is broken in the breaking of any other Commandment), the New Testament Israel is only those who trust in Christ for salvation. When the “line of flax and measuring rod” are used to measure the Temple, it is this that is measured: whether there is faith in Christ. As St. Paul writes to the Galatians (6:16), those who know that the measure of the Church is the new creation in Christ—understanding that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails them any better standing before God—and are the Israel of God, upon whose peace and mercy ever dwells.

Thus, God’s holy nation is to follow the pattern of this Temple. It is to continue in this understanding of what true holiness is and is not. And it is to see the observances of the Church for what they are to be: opportunities to hear and learn the Word of God and to receive His grace and forgiveness through the Sacraments, not devices by which to try to placate His wrath, as the blood and righteousness of Christ already avail for us to that end.