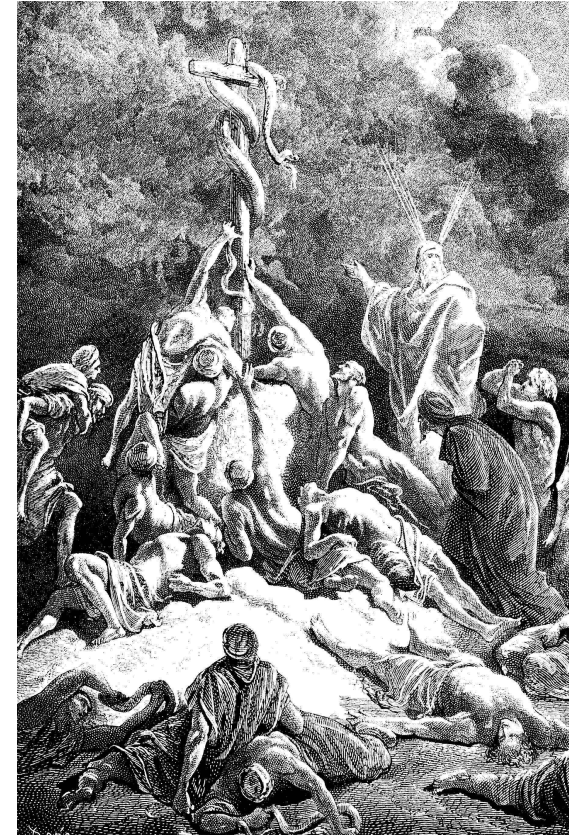


As Elihu continues his lengthy treatise on Job's suffering, he takes the spotlight away from Job's actions and puts the focus on God: "Surely God will never do wickedly, nor will the Almighty pervert justice. Who gave Him charge over the earth? Or who appointed Him over the whole world?" (34:12-13). Using the technique of rhetorical questioning in verse 13, Elihu makes the emphatic point that God stands over all. No one could ever "assign" God a task. He is before all things, in all things, and above all things. Later in chapter 41, God will say the same as He addresses Job directly.

But God is no heartless bulldozer, Who goes and does whatever suits Him. Elihu proclaims God's mercy and grace in the next two verses: "If He should set His heart on it, if He should gather to Himself His Spirit and His breath, all flesh would perish together, and man would return to dust" (34:14-15). God is sovereign, that is true. But it's just as true that the Creator cares for His creation. His ongoing care and intervening providence grant us our daily existence—our every breath. God can only act out of love for us, therefore we must trust that He's working all things together for our good (Rm 8:28).

Prayer: "I leave all things to God's direction, He loveth me in weal and woe; His will is good, true His affection, with tender love His heart doth glow. My fortress and my Rock is He; what pleaseth God, that pleaseth me." (TLH 529:1)

# THE LUTHERAN HERALD



**AUGUST 7–SEPTEMBER 2, 2017**

**A PUBLICATION OF  
THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN DIOCESE OF  
NORTH AMERICA**

## *The Calendar*

August 6	Trinity 8
August 13	Trinity 9
August 20	Trinity 10
August 24 (Th)	St. Bartholomew, Apostle
August 27	Trinity 11

### ***ELDoNA Summer Camp 2017***

Trinity Lutheran Church (Herrin, IL) was the host for this year's Summer Camp, which was held at Dixon Springs State Park. The teaching focus this year was Lutheran Church History from 1517 through 1817. Six pastors of the diocese were present, and the total attendance at the camp was approximately 40. Plans are being made for next Summer's camp. Our thanks to Pastor Henson, Deacon Harroun and all the members of Trinity for hosting a wonderful camp!

## **FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 1: JOB 31-33**

## **TRINITY 11**

In chapter 32, a new character is introduced—a man named Elihu. After the first three “friends” have failed to convince Job of his guilt, Elihu engages Job with his own thoughts. Elihu not only disagrees with the theology of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, who claimed Job's troubles were proportional to his sin, but he disagrees with Job himself. Verse 2 declares: “his wrath was aroused because he justified himself rather than God.”

At first, Elihu is respectful and courteous, having waited to speak since he was the youngest of the group. But after hearing the long speeches that went nowhere, he felt the urge to speak—and then it all spills out at once. Although Elihu is impetuous, his words are true: “Look, in this you are not righteous. I will answer you, For God is greater than man. Why do you contend with Him? For He does not give an accounting of any of His words” (33:12-13).

Job had expected, even demanded, a one-on-one conversation with God. But God is not bound by such communication. As Elihu continues, God can speak through dreams, visions, and even human suffering. Through such means, God can bring us to realize our helplessness and great need for God. Indeed, as the wise Solomon said: “My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor detest His correction; for whom the Lord loves He corrects, just as a father the son in whom he delights.” (Prov 3:11-12).

Prayer: Dear God, let us always be open to Your will, and the means You use to guide and curb us in our daily lives. Let us never doubt that, regardless of circumstance, You love us with an everlasting love; In Jesus' Name. Amen.

In chapter 28, Job discusses wisdom: “From where then does wisdom come? And where is the place of understanding? It is hidden from the eyes of all living, and concealed from the birds of the air” (28:20-21). So what really is wisdom? Some say that mere knowledge is wisdom. It’s knowing all the facts. Others say it involves more—that we must be able to apply those facts to a given situation. For instance, it’s not enough to know it’s cold outside, we must prepare ourselves to accommodate the cold weather.

But true wisdom is far more than facts and their application. For true wisdom is found in God Himself. God speaks in Job 28:28: “And to man He said, ‘Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding.’” In the book of Proverbs, wisdom is personified as God Himself. In the New Testament, St. Paul writes: “But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption...” (1 Cor 1:30).

Many people clamor for our attention claiming to be wise, both in the physical world as well as the spiritual. Their salesmanship can make their wisdom appealing—“pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise” (Gen 3:6). But our only source for wisdom must be found in God alone, as revealed in His Holy Word.

Prayer: Dear Father in Heaven, let us never trust in our own wisdom or in the things of this world. Rather, let us trust in the Wisdom from on high, that we may know what is right and pleasing in Your sight, and be enabled to follow through on such wisdom in our words and actions; In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

## Lesson from the Book of Concord The Eighth Sunday after Trinity

### Article XIV. Of Monastic Vows

As monastic vows directly conflict with the first chief article, they ought to be absolutely abolished. For it is of them that Christ says (Matt. 24:5, 23 sqq.): “I am Christ,” etc. For he who makes a vow to live in a monastery believes that he will enter upon a mode of life holier than the ordinary Christians, and by his own works wishes to earn heaven not only for himself, but also for others; this is to deny Christ. And they boast from their St. Thomas that a monastic vow is on an equality with baptism. This is blasphemy against God.

### Article XV. Of Human Traditions

The declaration of the Papists that human traditions serve for the remission of sins, or merit salvation, is altogether unchristian and condemned, as Christ says (Matt. 15:9): “In vain they do worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.” And Titus 1:14: “That turn from the truth.” Also their declaration that it is a mortal sin if one do not observe these statutes, is not right.

These are the articles on which I must stand; and if God so will I shall stand even to my death. And I do not know how to change or to concede anything in them. If anyone else will concede anything, he will do it at the expense of his conscience.

Lastly, the Pope’s bundle of impostures still remains, concerning foolish and childish articles, as the dedication of churches, the baptism of bells, the baptism of the altar-stone, with its godfathers to pray and offer gifts. Such baptism is administered to the reproach and mockery of holy baptism, and should not be tolerated. Afterwards, concerning the consecration of wax tapers, palm-branches, cakes, spices, oats, etc., which nevertheless cannot be called consecrations, but are nothing but mockery and fraud. There are infinite other such deceptions, which we commit to their god, and which may be adored by them, until they are weary of them. We will not be confused by them.

—The Smalcald Articles, Part III

From the beginning God has set people in order and hierarchies for the good of mankind. Some are appointed to lead, others are appointed to obey and help. This distinction only becomes a problem when people listen to Satan and ignore God's Words. Then helpers think they are leaders, leaders think they are gods, and the people in general are turned in on themselves so they forget that all power and glory belongs to God alone.

Throughout the Scriptures we see the ordering of kingdoms, but that order is only truly successful when it is faithful to God as their help. It is according to His wisdom and mercy that peoples achieve victory over their enemies or see prosperity in their society. But when they turn from God's kingdom of righteousness they end up experiencing the consequences of sin.

Leaders must understand that their power belongs first and foremost to God and the service of His kingdom and righteousness. If leaders serve themselves, or even serve the unrighteous whims of the people in the hopes of keeping their favor, such leaders face the consequences of misusing such power. God's Word shows us many instances, in both the Old and New Testaments, that leaders are held accountable, and sometimes even made examples in their consequences so that those under them may understand that we should all seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

We pray: Grant to us, Lord, we beseech Thee, the Spirit to think and do always such things as are right, that we, who cannot do anything that is good without Thee, may by Thee be enabled to live according to Thy will; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, Who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

After Bildad's third and final speech, Job seems to have had enough of his "friends": "How have you helped him who is without power? How have you saved the arm that has no strength? How have you counseled one who has no wisdom? And how have you declared sound advice to many? To whom have you uttered words? And whose spirit came from you?" (26:2-4). Job mocks their advice, and the inherent weakness in man's thinking. By contrast, Job knows that God holds all the cards: "By His Spirit He adorned the heavens; His hand pierced the fleeing serpent. Indeed these are the mere edges of His ways, and how small a whisper we hear of Him! But the thunder of His power who can understand?" (26:13-14).

Our God stands alone. He is unlike any man or false god. As Job freely admits, He is without comparison. Are we as convinced as Job—to confess the majesty of our God in the midst of the hardships we face? Satan has many cards to play. Certainly the difficult times challenge us—as we feel God has perhaps abandoned us. But we also face challenges when times go well—when we feel no need for God—when we are tempted to abandon Him.

We pray: Dear Father in Heaven, thank You calling us to faith through the means of Holy Baptism. As that faith is challenged by the many methods of Satan, keep us firm in our Baptismal faith through Your Word and Supper, that we may be called Your worthy servants; In Jesus' Name. Amen.

During the terrible struggles of Job, he found himself on a seemingly endless roller coaster between belief and doubt. Soon after his victorious confession in chapter 19, he once again found himself struggling with his faith. Chapter 23 records the inner struggles of Job: “Even today my complaint is bitter; my hand is listless because of my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find Him, that I might come to His seat! I would present my case before Him, and fill my mouth with arguments” (23:2-4).

Since Job was getting nowhere with his friends, he longed to plead his case directly with God. He’s confident that he’s innocent of his friend’s charges, and that God should not only hear his side but clear him of any wrongdoing. But in spite of his confidence, Job doesn’t know how to arrange a meeting with God: “Look, I go forward, but He is not there, and backward, but I cannot perceive Him; when He works on the left hand, I cannot behold Him; when He turns to the right hand, I cannot see Him” (23:8-9).

Though Job is convinced of his innocence, he fears the meeting to come: “Therefore I am terrified at His presence; when I consider this, I am afraid of Him” (23:15). Regardless of all Job has suffered, he is most concerned about his relationship with God. Job knows that his troubles are confined to the earthly realm, and therefore have limits in both scope and time. God knows no such bounds. Spiritual judgment, and the eternity over which such judgment presides, should be our ultimate concern.

We pray: Dear God, we thank You for calling us to faith. Direct our hearts and minds to jealously guard this great gift, lest it be wrested from us through the wiles of the devil; In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

In 2 Chronicles 24 there was an effort to collect money and repair the house of God. Such an effort is familiar to most of us as we try to maintain proper places and items for faithful worship. A recurring problem with the kings of God’s people was that they would often act unfaithfully and squander the wealth and gifts that the Lord had entrusted to them. Whether it is money, property, or power, all such things should be used to serve the Lord, especially if it is designated for the place where He is worshiped.

Abuses of wealth and power continue to happen in Christendom in our age too. But this does not give us the excuse to ignore or despise contributing to the faithful work of the Church. Sometimes it is good for us to use our wealth and gifts to help individuals, other times it is good to contribute to the upkeep of those things that are used specifically for public worship. It is important that we do that work of love to help provide a place that is readily identified as a faithful house of God!

So few places and things are considered truly sacred in our society. It is important that we show others that the truly sacred is that which is faithfully used to proclaim forgiveness and life in Jesus Christ, our crucified Lord and Savior!

We pray: Grant to us, Lord, we beseech Thee, the Spirit to think and do always such things as are right, that we, who cannot do anything that is good without Thee, may by Thee be enabled to live according to Thy will; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, Who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Pride is a serious problem that seems to be overlooked frequently in our society. The devil puffs us up with pride and convinces us that we have a right to commit the sins that we do. We pridefully assure ourselves that we have the best intentions, or that we must do it because others failed in their responsibilities. But these are often lies that Satan uses to lead us into unrighteousness.

King Uzziah acted pridefully when he took it upon himself to function as a priest when he had no such calling from God. He felt that his success in his other vocation meant that God would favor him in whatever he chose to do. But the Lord made it clear to him that this was not so. The priests tried to stop him from this unfaithfulness, but Uzziah became marked with leprosy, which was a sign of the uncleanness that was on his heart.

Just because we have God's blessings in one area of life it does not mean that we can do whatever we want. True righteousness is serving God and His righteousness. No matter what our vocation is, we are not to serve our own pride, but we are to serve the Gospel of man's salvation in Christ crucified. Jesus Christ is our only true priest Who makes us able to approach God in righteousness. Without Him we are trespassers.

We pray: Grant to us, Lord, we beseech Thee, the Spirit to think and do always such things as are right, that we, who cannot do anything that is good without Thee, may by Thee be enabled to live according to Thy will; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, Who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

In response to Bildad's accusations, Job again turned to blaming God for his misery. He didn't know that it was Satan who was behind the torment. The combination of Job's misery and the constant needling of his "friends" was wearing down God's faithful servant. Job laments: "How long will you torment my soul, and break me in pieces with words? These ten times you have reproached me; You are not ashamed that you have wronged me" (19:2-3).

But then Job turns again, as believers often do, from doubt to certainty: "Oh, that my words were written! Oh, that they were inscribed in a book! That they were engraved on a rock with an iron pen and lead, forever! For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!" (19:23-27).

God had revealed enough of His plan of salvation to give Job the strength and courage to stand up to the challenges of his devastating circumstances and the accusations of his friends. As miserable as his life was, on all fronts, it could only be the comfort found in the resurrection that could sustain Job. In the midst of our darkest hours, these words are just as powerful to us. No wonder that Job's words would not only be preserved in Scripture but also in our hymnody.

We pray: "He lives, all glory to His name! He lives, my Jesus, still the same. Oh, the sweet joy this sentence gives, 'I know that my Redeemer lives!'" (TLH 200:4)

Today's text opens with Job's demands that God withdraw His punishment and answer his challenge to a tribunal discourse. Job does not know the folly of such demands, for his words are based on the three counselors' point that suffering always implies sinfulness. He does not yet understand that God has a higher purpose in his suffering.

As we progress into chapter 14, Job's spirit appears to rise above the despair and anger caused by his festering ulcerated body. Job boldly confesses that, if God so desires, He is able to hide Job in the grave, then raise him back to life at a time when the divine anger is past. Viewing this passage through the lens of the New Testament we cannot help but see an image of the Resurrection promise secured for us by Christ. Even this bright image is overwhelmed in Job's mind by his present situation and God's apparent unwillingness to deliver him.

Eliphaz now comes at Job with all his fury, and condemns Job for questioning God and His wisdom. He bolsters his earlier advice with the observation that the wicked man (a caricature of Job) can never escape the suffering he deserves. All three counselors are guilty of cruel insinuation, with the other two counselors being the most malicious. Genuine words of comfort for Job have been few, and he begins to weary of his very existence because he and his counselors fail to acknowledge the biblical truth that God is always gracious, long suffering, and abundant in mercy—in spite of earthly appearance to the contrary.

We pray: Lord Jesus, multiply Your mercy on us that, with You as our Teacher and Redeemer, we may so pass through things temporal that we lose not the things eternal. Amen.

Hezekiah was faithful and had the house of the Lord restored. Once again, it is a good work and a valuable pursuit to support the establishment of a particular place that is consecrated for faithful worship to the one, true God. This was an important event in the reign of Hezekiah.

He also urged the people to keep the Passover once again. And even though things were not all in order according to the Law of Moses, Hezekiah prayed for the people that God might have mercy on them and provide atonement for them. Unlike Uzziah, Hezekiah was not ignoring God's commands or usurping the responsibilities of another vocation. He was acknowledging the shortcomings of the people and, as it was his responsibility to care for those under his rule, he was faithfully appealing to God to show mercy as they sought to worship Him sincerely.

None of us are pure or cleansed enough to worship God, yet our Prophet, Priest, and King, Jesus Christ, intercedes for us and provides atonement for us. It is by Him alone, through the faith that His Spirit works in us, that we are truly made holy and able to worship the Lord in all sincerity and truth!

We pray: Grant to us, Lord, we beseech Thee, the Spirit to think and do always such things as are right, that we, who cannot do anything that is good without Thee, may by Thee be enabled to live according to Thy will; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, Who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Satan tempts God's people with two extremes. One is the temptation to delusions about the Law. We are led to believe that God is pleased by our token works, or else that God is to be despised because it is impossible to keep His Laws. The other temptation, to the other extreme, is a twisted use of the Gospel. Satan would have us think that the Gospel is God's way of saying that righteousness doesn't matter, so go ahead and do whatever you want and you'll be forgiven. Both extremes are dangerous.

The truth of God's Word is that His Law does demand perfect righteousness, but mankind fails at it often, being sinful from birth because of Adam's fall. However, the Gospel of God's Word says that where His Holy Spirit works faith and repentance, there He will forgive our sins and bless us with His righteousness.

This is proclaimed throughout the Scriptures, not just in the New Testament. We see it in the Old Testament in the examples of the kings who are made to faithfully repent of their evil pride and rebellion against God. God shows them mercy and they are blessed according to His will. This is the common theme through God's Word that always testifies to man's salvation and life that is ultimately accomplished for the whole world by Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection!

We pray: Grant to us, Lord, we beseech Thee, the Spirit to think and do always such things as are right, that we, who cannot do anything that is good without Thee, may by Thee be enabled to live according to Thy will; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, Who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Job appears to have hit rock bottom in chapter 10, for out of his bitterness and self-loathing the entire text consists of his conjured-up false picture of God as a cruel and unjust tyrant. Sadly, how many of us have fallen into the same dark mire when our lives have gone in a direction contrary to our hopes and dreams—often in response to much less than Job is dealing with.

Zophar responds to Job's cry of deep despair with accusations that show a lack of compassion, and put every word of Job in the worst light. How easy it is for us to judge other's motives and lives while being abundantly gracious toward our own shortcomings. Zophar thinks Job is shallow and lacks an understanding of the true nature of God. He thinks God should put Job in his place by speaking out against him. Zophar assumes that Job's problems are rooted in his sin, and all Job has to do is to repent, then his life will become blessed and happy. But God nowhere guarantees a life "brighter than noonday" (Job 11:17) simply because we are his children. He has higher purposes for us than our physical prosperity.

We pray: Lord, may we always cling to You in faith through grace, and be ever ready to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to You, which is our spiritual worship, through Jesus Christ. Amen.



In chapter 7 we see Job turn his complaint toward God, whom he feels is judging too harshly. Job is determined to cry out against this perceived injustice of God who, it seems, will not leave him alone. We all would like to believe that we are more deserving of God's favor than we truly are, because all are guilty of breaking the Lord's commands far more than we care to confess. We often forget that only through repentance and confession is true peace found, for God will not despise a broken and contrite heart. We are quick to claim, "I have not been perfect, but what terrible sin have I committed that deserves this kind of suffering? There are many worse than me!"

How convenient it is to judge others rather than ourselves, or at least use a different standard. Bildad is quick to take this approach toward Job and use human reason to claim he would not be suffering so severely if he were not deserving of such punishment. The world, our own flesh, and the Devil torment, but God does no injustice or evil. In his despair, Job answers Bildad's accusations with awful complaints against God. We all are far too quick to blame God for our hardships, and far too slow to offer thanks and praise to Him for our boundless, unmerited blessings!

We pray: Almighty God, all that we possess is from Your loving hand. Give us grace that we may live our lives totally ruled by Your holy righteous will and word. Grant that our numerous sins may be drowned through daily repentance; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

God's children will experience ups and downs. That is an ever-present theme in the story of His people throughout the Scriptures. Things will go well for a time, then they will go badly because of sin. The devil tempts us to blame God when things are going badly, but the Lord does not cause sin. Sin is the twisting and abusing of His good creation and order. If things are going badly, it is because powers and gifts that were made by Him are being neglected or misdirected for man's selfish ends.

Even when things are going badly and Satan would have us believe God has forsaken us, God still desires to show mercy. His promises of deliverance and help are steadfast. Mankind is only at its most desperate state when it ignores His Words of blessing and help.

Even if the Lord's people are carried off into captivity by evil kingdoms or the abusive powers of sinful men, that is not the end of all hope for God's children. He has promised to crush our greatest enemy, the devil, and He provided the fulfillment of that promise in Jesus Christ!

So when we have times of blessings and good leaders, let us praise the Lord! And when things look bad and we seem to be under the oppression of sin and wicked men, let us trust in the Lord, for He has given us the true victory in Christ Jesus the crucified.

We pray: Lord God, heavenly Father, grant us Your Spirit so that we may faithfully trust in Your help and blessing in all circumstances; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

# Lesson from the Book of Concord

## The Ninth Sunday after Trinity

### **The Seventh Commandment. Thou shalt not steal.**

After our person and wife or husband, temporal property is the nearest good. That also God wishes to have secure, and has commanded that no one shall damage or injure his neighbor in his possessions. For to steal is nothing else than to get another's property wrongfully into our possession. This comprehends all kinds of advantage in all kinds of trade to the disadvantage of our neighbor. This is indeed such a widespread and common crime, but so little regarded and observed, that it exceeds all measure, so that if all thieves—who nevertheless do not wish to be considered such—were to be hanged to the gallows, the world would soon be desolate and would be without both executioners and gallows. For as we have just said to steal is not only to rob our neighbors' coffers and pockets, but to be too far-reaching in the market, in all stores and shops, wine- and beer-cellars, workshops, and in short whenever we trade or take or give money, goods or work.

As, for instance, to explain this somewhat roughly for the common mass of people, so that it may be seen how godly we are: When a man-servant or maid-servant does not serve faithfully, and does damage, or at least allows it to occur when it could be prevented, or otherwise from indolence, idleness or malice neglects the goods entrusted to him, to the spite and vexation of master and mistress. And when this is done purposely (for I do not speak of unavoidable casualties), you can dispose of thirty, forty dollars a year, which if another had taken secretly he would be hung by the rope. But you even bid defiance and make your boast of it, and no one dare call you a thief! ... Likewise also in the market and in common trade this course prevails to the greatest extent, where one openly defrauds another with defective goods, false measures, weights, coins, and by taking advantage by expert arts and uncommon transactions or dexterous inventions, in short by getting the best of the bargain and wantonly oppressing and distressing him. And who indeed can even recount or imagine it all?—The Large Catechism, ¶223-225, 227

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 23: JOB 4-6

TRINITY 10

The greatest challenge for Job's friends, and us, is not what we know, but what we do not know. Often what we believe to be our best and wisest thoughts are in reality based on horrible ignorance because we know not the Scriptures or the power of God. God is all knowing, and nothing escapes His control, so we must be careful not to judge earthly circumstances by our fallen, imperfect senses and human logic.

God's inspired Word reveals that the Lord works good in all things for those who love Him (Romans 8:28). Neither Job, nor Eliphaz the Temanite speak untruths. But both fail to perceive the circumstances of life through the lens of the heavenly Father's promised grace found in the Redeemer. The reality escapes both of them that every person, as a sinner, deserves exactly what Job is experiencing, plus vastly more misery. Man is spared any of it only because of unmerited grace. We should never judge our relationship with God or our eternal situation by what our senses tell us, but only by what His holy, precious Means of Grace promise.

We pray: Almighty God, You bless us abundantly through our Redeemer Jesus Christ and His most holy ministry of grace. Show us by that grace, through faith, those things that can only be seen and understood through the power of Your Spirit working Your will in us; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

Martin Luther writes: “The book of Job deals with the question, whether misfortune comes from God even to the righteous. Job stands firm and contends that God torments even the righteous without cause other than that this be to God’s praise, as Christ also testifies in John nine of the man who was born blind” (LW 35:251).

“But this is written for our comfort, that God allows even His great saints to falter, especially in adversity. For before Job comes into fear of death, he praises God at the theft of his goods and the death of his children. But when death is in prospect and God withdraws Himself, Job’s words show what kind of thoughts a man—however holy he may be—holds toward God: he thinks that God is not God, but only a judge and wrathful tyrant, who storms ahead and cares nothing about the goodness of a person’s life. This is the finest part of this book. It is understood only by those who also experience and feel what it is to suffer the wrath and judgment of God, and to have His grace hidden” (LW 35:252).

We pray: O God, the protector of all who trust in You, without whom none is strong and nothing is holy, multiply Your mercy on us that we may be found to have faith, and preserve our souls even in severe adversity, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

“O Lord God of Israel, You are righteous, for we are left as a remnant, as it is this day. Here we are before You, in our guilt, though no one can stand before You because of this!” Ezra 9:15.

How dare they come into the presence of the Lord? “Here we are before you,” Ezra says. In an impressive array of numbers? Oh no...they are just a small remnant. Judah was decimated by conquest and exile, and of the survivors, those who returned to the Promised Land were only a minority.

Well, dare they to come before the Lord by virtue of their great holiness? No, Ezra sees that clearly too...“here we are before You, in our guilt.” There is really no reason the Lord should care about them, at least in themselves. Their only hope is that the God of Israel is righteous!

And this too is our only hope. Of the minority of the Church that confessed the Gospel with clarity (Lutherans), only a small minority of them have remained faithful to the Gospel. And even we must confess that we are ever “in our guilt.” Our only hope is the righteousness of the God of Israel, the righteousness of Christ. Thanks be to God, we are clothed with the righteousness of Christ, our sin is atoned for by His crucifixion, and our guilt is taken away by Word and Sacrament.

We pray: “Oh Lord, grant us never to trust in the arm of flesh, not even in our own, but ever in repentant faith to trust in the righteousness of Christ alone. Amen.”

“So they said, ‘Let us rise up and build.’ Then they set their hands to this good work.” Neh. 2:18b.

Jerusalem was in shambles...buildings ruined, and most critically, the city walls destroyed. A city had to have walls, or it could be overrun and looted by any gang of sword-wielding troublemakers to come along. But Nehemiah believed that the Lord had blessed this undertaking, and he had government permission to engage it.

But what an undertaking! Just repairing the walls was a huge task, let alone rebuilding the whole city. And they were so few in number. It would have been so easy to brush it off as too big, too great a task, too much to ask of so few. But they were who was there. They were who the Lord had. It was them or nobody.

So they rose up and built! We too are few, and we could easily dismiss the work of spreading the Gospel in its truth and purity as too big for us. Let us look to Nehemiah's Jews and be inspired. Do not concern yourself about what you cannot do... do what you can. Let us set our hands to this good work. May the Lord have great use of our humble but faithful labors as well!

We pray: “Lord Jesus Christ, You have entrusted Your Church with making disciples of all nations. In whatever way You would, have Your use of me, and grant me the courage to will and to do that which You lay before me; In your saving Name I pray. Amen.”

In today's text we see the gracious and mighty hand of God working through His people, and through those outside the circle of believers, to defend and ultimately bring about the redemption of His elect. In this respect the central character is clearly Esther, but Mordecai plays a key role, and God's omnipotent hand cannot be ignored in King Ahasuerus' actions leading to the delivery of the Jews.

The book has two main themes: God's omnipresent care, and His elect's joyful commitment to always remember His loving care and offer Him praise through their daily lives and worship. These reach their apex in the chapters before us today. Though God and those He has chosen will always face threats from the world and those who crave the rewards of earthly life, it cannot be forgotten that the omniscient Lord is always in control of events. The enemies of God and His people can only accomplish what the Lord allows in order to fulfill His purpose. As God's people, we do not live our lives by what we see, hear, and feel, but by what we know to be divine truth, revealed through God's inspired Word.

We pray: Lord of all power and might, giver of all good things, create in our hearts a love of Your Word and will, nourishing us through Your holy Means of Grace that we may love and serve only You; through Jesus Christ, Your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

“The king loved Esther more than all the other women,...so he set the royal crown upon her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.” Esther 2:17

Her name was not really Esther. It was Hadasseh. Her uncle was named Mordecai, likely from Marduk, the Babylonian God. When the king of Persia summoned his first wife to display her beauty before himself and his intoxicated officials, she refused, and so was dethroned. The Persian king then basically had a beauty contest to replace her, and Hadasseh-Esther “won.”

It would seem that these were far too paganized people. We saw in yesterday’s devotion that Jews were not supposed to give their daughters to foreigners, but here is Esther, competing for and winning the place of queen of Persia, married to the Persian king.

And yet, we will soon see the great use the Lord had of this woman to spare the lives of His people. The take-away is simple: no matter what we have done, no matter how many ways we can be accused of faithless living, we can always repent, and do the right thing. The forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus means that we need never stay stuck in old sinful ruts. Every morning, we can drown the old sinful Adam afresh, and rejoice to live new, Christ-like lives.

We pray: “Lord Jesus Christ, as You have graciously cleansed me of all of the sins of all of my yesterdays, grant me with boldness this day to live according to the new creation which You have made me in Holy Baptism. Amen.”

“So the wall was finished...this work was done by our God.” Neh. 6:15a, 16b.

These people had worked hard. They had resisted devious strategies of enemies to stop the work. They had used their bodies and they had used their brains to get the wall of the city built. And now, Nehemiah says “this work was done by our God”?

Nehemiah teaches us something very important. God works through means...often human means. The Lord, through His Word, implants in our hearts the desire to do the right thing in service to the Gospel of forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus Christ. He gives us the brains to figure out how, and the strength to make it happen. But we are the work of His hands, and ultimately, it’s all His doing.

Whether it’s building a wall or building a church, preaching a sermon or talking to a friend about Jesus over coffee, baptizing a child or saying table prayers with your family, God has His use of each of us according to His good purposes. And when something wonderful happens, like Nehemiah, we give all the glory to God.

We pray: “Heavenly Father, we are the work of Your hands. Have Your use of us according to Your good purposes, that Your Name may be praised and Your purposes accomplished by way of us. And to You be all the glory; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.”

“So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading.” Neh. 8:8

When the southern kingdom of Judah was overrun by Babylon, the people spoke Hebrew. Seventy years later, coming back to the promised land, many no longer spoke Hebrew, or at least no longer spoke it well. So, the readers read the Law of God slowly, “distinctly,” our text says, to make it as easy as possible for people to understand. Those who could handle the Hebrew better “gave the sense, and helped them to understand.” The whole reason God gave us His word is so that we would understand it, and believe what it says!

Today, we expect our pastors to have some ability to work with God’s Word in the original languages. Beyond that, the liturgy is also, for many visitors to our churches, a “foreign language.” We can help them to understand what is being said, and what it means. We can help them follow the liturgy, so they don’t feel lost, shut out, unable to understand.

God grant us, as He granted people of old, not to feel burdened by those less knowledgeable than ourselves, but rather to take joy in helping them, that they with us may understand and believe the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ!

We pray: “Dear heavenly Father, we thank You for Your patience with us in our many frailties and weaknesses. Grant us also to be patient with others, helping them to understand and so to share with us the saving words of the Holy Scriptures; In Jesus’ Name. Amen.”

“We would not give our daughters as wives to the peoples of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons.” Neh. 10:30

Intermarriage with unbelieving foreigners was forbidden by the Lord in the Old Testament, and Nehemiah insisted that this regulation be observed. It was not a matter of God’s people thinking that they were a “superior race” or anything like that. God Himself had made it clear to them that He chose them by His grace, not because of any intrinsic greatness in them.

The Lord had given this commandment because He wanted homes where children would be brought up “in the fear and admonition of the Lord.” And the same is true today. For young people who are dating, a big question to ask about any potential spouse is, “is this person someone who would work with me to build an outpost of the kingdom of God on Earth?” And for those who are married, we must ever ask, “are we being faithful as a family, that our young ones also may grow to trust in the promises of forgiveness and eternal life through faith in Jesus?” In many ways, we all fall short. But all is not lost. Even there, we may role model “repentance and forgiveness of sins” through faith in Christ Jesus. In faithful repentance and in faithful devotions, God grant us all to have homes where the Name of the Lord is praised.

We pray: “Lord Jesus Christ, for faithfulness in devotions, praise be to You. For failings, have mercy on me, forgive me, and restore me for the sake of Your holy sacrifice on the cross. In Your mercy, cause faithfulness to grow and flourish in my home; In Your saving Name I pray. Amen.”