

THE LUTHERAN HERALD



CHRISTMAS 1—EPIPHANY 3
(JANUARY 4—31, 2015)

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FROM THE PROPERS FOR CHRISTMAS 2

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.”

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.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 31: MATTHEW 10:17—11:1 EPIPHANY 3

“Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword.”

World peace will not happen as long as there is sin in the world. Selfish faithlessness fights against peace and harmony. Christ comes to bring peace to men, but for the whole world there will still be evil discord because the sinful hearts of men wage war against God and His righteousness.

It is a dangerous lie when people boast about peace and unity when there is none. And it is especially dangerous when this lie is spread among Christians to cover up the presence of poisonous false doctrine. Superficial peace is dangerous because it lulls people into a false sense of security. They can forget that the devil and his workers are constantly at war against Jesus Christ, and that Jesus Himself said He brings the sword. That sword is His Word. His true, uncompromised Word is the only thing that will bring peace among men.

His Law brings wisdom and repentance so that we can recognize the dangers of sin and flee from it by the power of His Spirit. His Gospel brings us the truth about our forgiveness in Jesus Christ and the life that comes to us through the faith that His Spirit works in us. With the sword of His Word He conquers sin, death, and the devil and gives us a peace with eternal significance. While world peace is a kind wish in the interest of loving our neighbors, we must help them to see the true peace in Christ first.

We pray: Lord God, heavenly Father, grant us Your Spirit so that we may know and seek true peace according to Your true and perfect Word in Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand in the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ! The servants of God are sent to proclaim this, and the Word of God is sufficient for this labor. Some would turn it into a business or an opportunity for self promotion, but the labor of God's Kingdom is simply the work of remaining steadfast in His Law and Gospel.

The Gospel is not an "item" to be sold with gimmicks and worldly advertising. It does not depend on bloated institutions or grand buildings. It is simply the power of God to make us whole and bring us forgiveness and eternal life in the blood of Jesus Christ.

However, we also live in a world of flesh-and-blood needs. It is a foolish and sinful thing for God's people to withhold support for those who do the work of teaching, preaching, and administering God's Word and Sacraments. The blessings of His Kingdom are eternal and spiritual, but they come to us in this created world.

It is always important for us to be mindful of these realities. We cannot treat the Word of God as a commodity, but neither can we ignore the support that faithful laborers need in the work of spreading the Word.

We pray: Lord God, give us all our daily bread, and help us to be a source of help and comfort to those who faithfully labor in Your fields; and keep us from mishandling the blessings that are entrusted to Your Church here on Earth so that we may also be a source of help and blessing to all who still need to hear the Gospel of forgiveness in our crucified Lord, Jesus Christ; In His Name. Amen.

Wrath is coming. St. John the Baptist tells us so. The Lord describes this day in Malachi 4:1, "For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up." On the Last Day the wicked, all the unbelieving, and the faithless will suffer the consequences for their sin.

There are two responses to the Baptist's preaching. We can, like some of the multitude at the Jordan, rely upon our ancestry, our heritage, and our imagined identity. We may not be "children of Abraham" genetically, but the flesh tempts us to rely upon our church attendance, our churchly upbringing, or our outwardly good civil life. When we respond to the news of the day of wrath to come with our own merits and worthiness, the Baptist's preaching condemns us for relying upon ourselves.

The only way to properly prepare for the coming day of wrath is to "bear fruits worthy of repentance." Bearing fruit worthy of repentance means that repentance is present to bear those fruits. John presents us with this message: Turn from trusting your own intellect, cunning, reputation, or worthiness. Turn from these and receive baptism for the remission of all your sins. Believe the Gospel and receive its benefits.

Only in repentance and faith is a person truly prepared for the day of wrath. To the faithful baptized the day of wrath becomes the day of our redemption, in which our Lord Jesus Christ will fulfill all the promises He makes to us in His Gospel, completing our salvation.

When Christ arrives He will separate the wheat from the chaff. The wheat are those who are penitent and believing the Gospel. The chaff are those who reject repentance, choosing to remain in their sins. Herod serves as an example of chaff. He is fruitless, lacking the fruits of repentance because he has no repentance. He bristles at John's rebuke. He chooses to remain in his sins and then begins to pile more sin upon himself by imprisoning John and beheading him.

Opposite of Herod are those who receive John's preaching of repentance and regeneration which the Holy Ghost works in that baptism. Those who hear the message of repentance and baptism and believe are fruitful wheat. Though they may be threshed in this life by trials and tribulations, they are precious to the Lord of the Harvest and He will prosper them by gathering them into His storehouse on the Last Day. "The Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish" (Psalm 1:6).

The imagery of wheat and chaff should remind us to be mindful of our own repentance, lest we reject repentance as Herod did and become secure in our sins. By daily contrition and faith in the Gospel of the forgiveness of our sins we remain the wholesome grain of the Lord. Lamenting our sins and temptations in this life we sing, "Even so, Lord, quickly come to Thy final harvest-home; gather Thou Thy people in, free from sorrow, free from sin, there forever purified, in Thy garner to abide. Come with all Thine angels come, raise the glorious harvest home. Amen" (TLH 574:4).

"But when [Jesus] saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, 'The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.'"

The people had men who pretended to be teachers, laborers, and shepherds according to God's Word. But they were false teachers, and they brought the people more burden than help. They created heavy burdens for the people with false works of the Law and offered no comfort in the holy blessings that would come from God's anointed Good Shepherd.

This problem continues to plague the multitudes to this day. The Word of God is widely available for all nations to hear, but too many of the so-called-laborers have twisted the Law and the Gospel into a message that brings weariness and disorder rather than repentance and peace in Christ crucified.

Such false laborers should not be seen as "better than nothing." They harm God's sheep. They starve His lambs. As our Lord says, we are to pray for faithful laborers who come from the Lord of the harvest and bring His true blessings. He has established faithful pastors and orthodox congregations in this world, and His gifts of faithful preaching, Baptism, and the rightly administered Lord's Supper are made available to God's lambs!

We pray: Heavenly Father, Lord of the harvest, continue to send faithful laborers who rightly teach our need to repent according to Your holy Law, and who faithfully feed us on the gifts of Your Gospel and Sacraments, unto forgiveness and everlasting life in Christ Jesus. Amen.

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.”

Everyone feels the sickness of sin within them; unfortunately some just hide it or suppress it better than others. But we are all plagued with the illness of selfishness, inappropriate desires, and hurtful carelessness toward others.

It is a poor physician who says to one who is gravely sick, “You’re fine, just get up and get back to work. Suck it up and earn your keep...” Christ shows mercy to those who are sick. He calls our illness what it is by the wisdom of His Law and teachings. His Word and Spirit make us humble and discerning so that we can faithfully understand that we are sick and dying because of those sins. And then He makes us whole and renews our spirit through the merciful gift of His body, His blood, and His forgiveness.

Furthermore, it is His teaching, wisdom, and Spirit that make us well enough to truly rise up and serve Him, not merely the treating of symptoms with feelings or entertainment. It is dangerous malpractice on the part of His servants who ignore the Word and tell dying sinners that they are not really sick. Others carelessly focus on the symptoms, trying to make people feel better with superficial things like hollow entertainment-worship or self-help placebos.

It is far more beneficial to us, and far more important, that we receive the truly substantial blessing of His whole Word, rightly applied, and His Sacraments of Baptism and the Supper. These are the things that truly make us well and give us everlasting life.

We pray: Lord God, always grant us Your Word and Sacraments so that we may be strengthened and preserved in saving faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.

John is not comparing his baptism to the baptism that Jesus will command. They are the same. John is comparing his office to the office of Jesus when he says, “I indeed baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” John’s baptism certainly gave the Holy Spirit because it was a baptism “of repentance for the remission of sins.” Repentance and the remission of sins are both gifts of Christ as St. Peter says in Acts 5:31, “Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.” Whether Jesus gives these gifts through John’s baptism or the baptism administered by His apostles matters not. What matters is Jesus giving His gifts through baptism.

Jesus’ earthly ministry began with baptism and concluded with His baptismal command to teach all nations, baptize them, and teach them to observe all the things He had taught them. As baptism serves as bookends for Jesus’ earthly ministry, so baptism serves as bookends for our life with Christ in the world. Our life in Christ begins at Holy Baptism, where we are saved from our sins, cleansed of our hereditary curse, and named with the name of the Triune God, becoming His sons and daughters. All our life is lived in the baptismal promises, promises that God made to us in those waters, not promises that we made to Him. For we rely on those promises of forgiveness, life, and salvation every day. As we close our eyes in death, we die still treasuring those baptismal promises, for they never fail and remain forever.

Does Jesus give us the Holy Spirit in baptism, or ought we to expect another? We must be on guard against those who teach us to seek the Holy Spirit apart from the means of grace. The flesh is always tempted to separate God from His Word, so there are some who teach that water baptism symbolizes one thing, but the true Christian is ‘baptized with the spirit’ apart from water and the Word of God. But there is no use separating God from His Word and the Holy Spirit from Baptism, for the two go together as we see in today’s reading. Jesus is baptized and “the Spirit descends upon Him like a dove.” No waiting. No second baptism. No mere symbolism. Water plus Word and Spirit, that’s Holy Baptism.

It is important to remember that in our baptism we receive the Holy Spirit with all His gifts. If we think we have to *feel* the Spirit’s presence we will only get caught up in navel-gazing and assessing our emotions. But when we consider that the Spirit gives us the things of Jesus--His Word, His forgiveness, His life, and all His promises--then our hearts are truly blessed. In water combined with God’s Word we receive the Holy Spirit to give us faith, to strengthen that faith, and keep us steadfast in it unto life everlasting. This can only be accomplished by the Holy Spirit.

The idea of demon possession is not merely the stuff of Hollywood horror films or ghost stories. The work of Satan, the great liar, is very real. We do not see many “traditional” cases of demon possession in our day and age. However, it is very common to see poor, tormented souls who seem physically normal and healthy, but are clearly troubled by dark influences on their spirit.

In the Lord’s Prayer we pray to be delivered from evil, from the power of the Evil One. That is because everyone in this life is a target for his wicked efforts. He seeks to hurt and confuse everyone. He works to keep the unbelievers in their ignorance and loneliness, and to keep Christians off balance and misdirected. The seriousness of this work against us all is not to be underestimated. It should never be dismissed as fiction. If the father of lies can make us believe that he is not a real threat, then our peril is even greater.

It is only by the Word of God and the work of our Lord Jesus that drives out the demons and cleanses our spirit. The Truth sets us free from the influence of “the father of lies.” The Truth tells us that the enemy has been overcome, and that there is life and forgiveness for those who believe and are baptized. The dangers of demonic lies are real, but the reality of our salvation in Jesus Christ crucified is even greater!

We pray: Lord God, forgive us our sins and deliver from evil; through Your merciful grace in Christ Jesus. Amen.

The life of Christ is about service and sacrifice. It is about the crown of thorns. Most importantly, it is about *His* service and sacrifice for us. Christians often want to make their worship about what *they* do towards God. Their focus is mistakenly on their own service, their own little sacrifices, and their own suffering for the faith. But all these things are worthless if the true focus is not on the deeds of Jesus Christ.

Our Lord is the one who took on our infirmities and bore our sicknesses. He made the holy sacrifice that is the only thing able to truly heal the multitudes. His sinless life and guiltless execution on the cross made eternal life and salvation possible for all of us. And His Holy Spirit gives us the true faith to live and serve according to that life in Him.

Sin cripples us all. The selfishness and the demons that cling to us make us unable to truly love God and one another. But it is by the Word of God, the Gospel of our forgiveness in the blood of Christ crucified that makes us well, drives out the demons, and makes us able to rise up and serve in true love. So it is never about our work or efforts. Even our best works only find meaning in relation to Christ's mercy and truth.

We pray: Lord God, heavenly Father, make us well through the Word of Your Son's holy life and death for us. Keep us steadfast in this faith by Your Holy Spirit, and make us to always serve You in love and diligence; In Christ's name. Amen.

“Jesus was also baptized; and while He prayed, heaven was opened.” Since the fall into sin, heaven has remained shut tight against sinners. When Adam and Eve were evicted from Eden, the Lord “placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life” (Genesis 3:24). Heaven has no vacancy for any of the descendants of Adam since “all mankind fell in Adam's fall and one common sin infects us all” (TLH 369). Humanity cannot pry the door of heaven open with moral strivings, good works, or the best intentions. The way is shut to sinners.

But now heaven is opened for Jesus at His baptism. He is the only man who does not need baptism since He is the sinless son of God, even God Himself. Yet Jesus stands in the place of sinners. He stands in the place where sinners have been confessing their sins. He is waist deep in the Jordan as our substitute and representative before God the Father. He takes upon Himself all the sins shed there in the Jordan so that He might die with them on Calvary's cross, atoning for them. He takes upon Himself all our sins, and the sins of the whole world, so that all who believe and are baptized in the name of the Triune God might stand there with Jesus as heaven is opened to sinners now absolved by God. By ourselves, the way is shut. But Baptism connects us to Christ and clothes us with Him, so that, wearing Christ by faith, heaven opens for us as well.

St. Luke traces Jesus' earthly lineage all the way to the first man, Adam, who is called "the son of God" because the Lord God brought him forth to live as God's son amongst the creation, caring for it, naming it, and filling it with little Adams. He failed to live by every word that proceeded from the mouth of the Lord, so He lost His title "son of God" and the image of God with which He was created. Moses shows us this in Adam's genealogy in Genesis 5:3, how Adam "begot a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth." Gone was the brilliant image of God in man. Gone was our noble birthright and all the blessings that came along with that sonship.

It is important that Jesus be the Son of God in a way that Adam was not. Jesus is the Only-Begotten Son of God from all eternity and becomes man so that man might be restored to his first position of being sons of God. Christ lives the life Adam failed to live. Whereas Adam failed to live by every Word of God, Christ Jesus lived faithfully under all God's Word, fulfilling every letter. Jesus takes Adam's place in His baptism in the Jordan so that He might walk Adam's path faithfully, enduring Adam's temptations triumphantly and atoning for the sins of Adam and all Adam's descendants. Because of that atoning death, all who believe and are baptized into that death and resurrection become sons of God by faith, enjoying all the blessings and benefits of being sons and daughters of God.

THE HOLY 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.

Following Christ's doctrine makes one wise for this life and for the life of the world to come. Believing the Gospel and then living according to His Word (by the power of the Holy Ghost) is how we build our house on the established, unmov- ing rock of Christ, the Word of God Incarnate. This is how we hallow God's name, namely that "the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity, and we as the children of God also lead holy lives in accordance with it" (Small Catechism). Living according to Christ's teachings are the best way to live with our neighbors in our vocations, because it is a life lived in line with the will of God. This godliness has benefits in this life and the next.

On the other hand, if we ignore Christ's teachings, then we are building our houses on treacherous sand which will sift underneath us during adversity. Sand is any foundation for life other than Christ. This includes the ways of the world, the spirit of our age, popular opinion and convention, and our own sinful desires. This house will not stand.

Christ says that rains will descend, floods will come, and winds will blow and beat on both houses. The rains, floods, and winds are the trials and adversities of life. Those who build their house on the sure foundation of Christ will not be spared trial and suffering. But they will endure it and overcome it, gaining the victory over it by faith in Christ, who is their founda- tion and their rock, who promises to be with them in adver- sity and work all things for good.

THE 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 23: MATTHEW 7:1-14

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.

Your Father in heaven promises to give you good things. We are always tempted to doubt this and think that God gives us evil things. We fear that prayers will go unanswered, that God does not hear us, or that our guilt is blocking our prayer's access to our Father's ears. What we truly fear is that God is against us and not for us, that He wants our downfall and punishment. This is having a false version of the true God, which is an idol. The Lord God wants to give good things to His baptized children in this life, physically and spiritually.

Jesus points us to earthly fathers. Jesus tells us that even earthly fathers, who are evil by nature, know how to give their children good gifts. When his children sit at table for supper, what father would place rocks on their plates? When they ask for a fish for dinner, what father would give his children a serpent? So your Father in heaven will not give you inedible stones in place of daily bread. Neither will He give you anything evil, for the serpent is not only physically dangerous, but it reminds us of the devil's ways from the beginning. So the Lord does not give us evil things of body or of soul. It is the Serpent's work to teach us that God wants to give us evil things.

But God tempts no one, and every good gift and perfect gift comes from Him alone. He will not give you indigestible stones. He gives you His Only-Begotten Son as your Bread of Life. He who gives you His Son will graciously give you every good thing!

The hypocrites Jesus describes several times in today's reading have their directions mixed up. They assume that acts of charity are multidirectional, that these acts can be for the benefit of others *and* the one giving the charity. They view their piety towards God the same way. It is for God, but it can also be self-promotion as well. But charity that is done for self-promotion and piety that is performed for public recognition are not really charity and piety. These acts of Christian faith and love are not multidirectional. Charity is for our neighbor, not us. Piety is for God, not us. So we are not to help our neighbor in need with the hopes that that act will make us feel better about ourselves. Nor are we to pray and fast openly to make ourselves look good in front of others.

The acts of faith are to be done toward God, while acts of love are to be done for the benefit of neighbor, with no thought of repayment or reward from God or man. The Christian does these things because that is what Christians do. God commands us to pray and promises to hear us. He even gives us the words to pray since we do not, by nature, know how to pray. He commands us to love one another because He has loved us and has demonstrated that in His Gospel. When we do our acts of charity and piety for the right reasons, faith and love, then the Lord promises to reward us openly with heavenly treasure which does not rust, fail, or fade.

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 sham 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, 158–159

Almost immediately after the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ we are transported forward to the holy Cross and our Lord's death. We have just witnessed the arrival and worship of the magi, and seen the wisdom of our young Savior before the teachers of Israel. Now we are taken to the beginning of our Lord's ministry where St. John the Baptist calls Him the sacrificial Lamb Who takes away sin, and the Holy Ghost descends upon Him.

The image of the Holy Ghost resting on our Lord Jesus is an image of our Lord's Body, that is, His holy Church. All those who have been baptized have the Holy Ghost descending and remaining on them on account of their faith in Christ Jesus. And this faith is begun and nurtured by the Holy Ghost through the means of grace; indeed through Holy Baptism, but also the Lord's Supper and Absolution, and the preaching of the Gospel.

Our Lord baptizes all believers in Christ with the Holy Ghost. They are now pure and holy, just as He is pure and holy. They are cleansed of their sins, for He clothes them with His righteousness and He credits them with His works—His perfect obedience to the Law and His punishment on our behalf. All those who are baptized and cling to their Holy Baptism in faith are now judged by God according to what our Lord has done. In the Lord God's eyes we have fulfilled the Law perfectly, and we have suffered the punishment for our sins, because our Lord Jesus has done this for us and given us the benefits of His work. It is for this reason that the Evangelist transports us quickly to the place of our redemption.

“You have heard that it was said,” do not commit adultery, do not swear falsely, retaliation is acceptable, love your neighbor but hate those who hate you. Jesus teaches that these ideas are about far more than external actions. They involve the impulses of the heart. So, do not use your eyes for lust. Do not use your mouth for falsehood. Do not retaliate, but endure hatred from your neighbor. In fact, love your neighbor and love your enemy. The commandments are more about what goes on in the heart than what goes on with your bodily members.

But we fail so miserably and grievously at these things. Eyes wander. The truth is stretched. Retaliation comes naturally. Enemies are hated in the heart while we speak politely to them. By showing us the true extent of the Law, Jesus shows us how impossible it is for us and how inescapable are its demands. There is not one among us who can love his neighbors in such a way all of the time.

There is only Jesus. Jesus loves sinners as He loves Himself, and He loves us perfectly. He lived life under Mosaic Law perfectly, from the heart. We receive that merit by faith in Christ so that Christ's merits are applied to us before God the Father in heaven. Faith changes the heart, making it righteous so that it now wants to love neighbor as it loves itself. By faith we begin to love our neighbors and live chastely towards ourselves. That love and chastity will never be perfect in this life, so we rely solely on Christ's merits for our righteousness.

Up is down. Right is left. Black is khaki. Jesus preaches one sermon and turns our world upside down. Everything the world believes about the good life is smothered. Everything the prosperity preachers preach is turned to ash. True blessedness is not in having money in your pocket, equity in your home, or a good reputation. True blessedness is not having a life free of anxieties, free from sorrow, and free from pain. Chasing after all these things will not get you true blessedness. It will only get you the opposite.

Instead, being poor and lowly, spiritually speaking, is true blessedness. Those who admit they have nothing to offer God because they are poor in spirit stand to gain everything from God, who graciously gives all good things. Those who know how to mourn this world will receive the comfort of the life of the world to come. The meek will rule with Christ, the ones that hunger for righteousness will be filled up with Christ's righteousness, and those who show mercy to their fellow man will receive God's mercy. The pure in heart will see God. The peacemakers will be called sons of God. They will share in the inheritance of Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, which on earth means trial, tribulation, betrayal, and loss, but in heaven means everlasting life without sin.

Everything is backwards in the kingdom of heaven. Do not be downhearted when life does not seem to be going your way. Do not be downcast when you suffer. For this is the way of Christ, the truly blessed one, who gives us all He has and makes us blessed ones as well.

“The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus.” Such it is with all believers in Christ. They hear the Word of God, and through the working of the Holy Ghost creating faith in them they follow the Lord Jesus. St. John the Baptist's sermon is quite simple and short, “Behold the Lamb of God.” The two disciples of St. John the Baptist knew what that meant; He was the Messiah, the Anointed One, Who was come into the world to redeem mankind from their sins. This is the One Whom St. John the Baptist had been preaching about from the beginning of his ministry at the Jordan River. It is the One Who the two disciples had been prepared to receive by the preaching of their master. And led by the Holy Ghost, they followed the Lord Jesus.

We see here the beginning of the New Testament Church, and the beginning of the Office of the Holy Ministry. For, our Lord begins to call those who would preach the Gospel concerning Him in truth and purity, and administer His sacraments according to His institution. The first to be named is St. Andrew, and we assume since he is not named that the other is the writer of the Gospel himself, St. John. We also have their brothers, St. Peter and St. James. This is why Sts. Peter, James and John are the ones who our Lord brings with Him when He does important things, because they were the first. And they are, in a sense, the replacements of St. John the Baptist. They would proclaim the Lord Jesus to the entire world and follow Him in faith until their deaths.

We can see several connections from the calling of the apostles. First, as we learned yesterday, the first were disciples of St. John the Baptist, and he was a relative of our Lord Jesus. Second, the next apostles were the brothers of Sts. Andrew and John—Sts. Peter and James. Third, we learn today that the next apostle, St. Philip, knew Sts. Andrew and Peter, being from the same city of Bethsaida. Fourth, St. Philip knew St. Nathanael.

But it is more than their connections that make the calling of the apostles a grand thing. It is in faith that they behold “Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote,” that is, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. They are made to see that He is the Anointed One, the Messiah come into the world to redeem mankind, and give forgiveness, life and salvation to all those who believe. These apostles would proclaim this message to the entire world.

As we saw yesterday, they already begin to preach the Lord Jesus as the Christ. St. Andrew preached Him to St. Peter, and in today’s devotion, St. Philip preached Him to St. Nathanael who was sitting under a fig tree. This is significant because fig leaves were the first clothes that Adam and Eve wore when they first sinned and revealed their shame.

St. Nathanael was under sin, but our Lord comes to Him and opens His eyes through His preaching to reveal to him that He is the Messiah, the Son of God, come to redeem His people. So too, we who are under sin are redeemed by the Lord and brought into the Church through the preaching and ministering of those called by our Lord.

Jesus calls Simon Peter and Andrew to be His apostles with the invitation, “Follow Me and I will make you fishers of men.” Being a fisher of men is very different from being a fisher of fish. The point of comparison between these two types of “fishing” is that both require an instrument. Fishing the waters of the Sea of Galilee required a fishing net which was cast into the water to gather as many fish as it could before being pulled out of the water. But this sort of thing would never work to fish for men. Men are not caught by nets. This is why “they immediately left their nets.”

The instrument given to the apostles for catching men is the net of the Holy Gospel. The Gospel is “the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). The message of repentance and faith in Christ catches men in their sins, causing them to repent and believe the Gospel that forgives their sins. Since faith alone justifies, faith has to be created by the preaching of the Gospel.

Pastors still cast the net of the gospel wide into the sea of the world, trusting the Lord who gave them the net. We are to trust no other instrument for catching men because the Lord has promised to be present with His Word. Nor are we to despise the Word, think lightly of it, and put off its hearing for other activities. The Word of the Gospel is how Christ catches us daily, forgiving our sins by giving us faith in His promises.

THE HOLY 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.

The temptation of our Lord Jesus Christ parallels an earlier event in Holy Scripture—the fall and expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. In both events there is a temptation presented by that great deceiver, the devil. In the case of Adam and Eve, the temptation occurs in a paradise, which leads to their expulsion out of paradise into the wilderness. In the case of our Lord Jesus, the temptation occurs in the wilderness, so that He might recall us back into Paradise—into life everlasting.

As we know well, Adam and Eve succumbed to the temptation of the devil and ate the fruit of the tree that the Lord God forbade them to eat, and they, having placed themselves in the place of God, began to know right and wrong. Most pointedly they learned what it means to transgress the Law of God, and their children have borne the curse of this sin ever since.

The temptations offered to our Lord reflect the temptation of Adam and Eve, for they were tempted with food, and in disobeying God's command they submitted themselves to be under Satan's authority. In placing themselves under the devil's authority they were no longer under the protection of the Lord God, but now would be under the one who meant them every harm.

But ultimately our Lord Jesus Christ defeats the devil with the Word of God, fulfilling the Law that was broken by Adam and his family. Therefore, He has restored us to the life of paradise in Heaven.

Today's reading says more than just historical facts, for John the Baptist, the last of the Old Testament prophets, suffers the fate of all of those prophets. He suffers on account of his preaching. Once again the Word of God is despised and forsaken by those who have heard the faithful preaching of the Word.

This is why Mark tells us about the beginning of our Lord's ministry. Jesus began His ministry in Galilee. Why is this significant? Because Galilee was located in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, the northernmost part of the kingdom of Israel, and the farthest from the center of the Israelite religion—Jerusalem. This region was the first to be led into exile on account of their false worship and forsaking the command of God.

This is a region where the devil's influence is evident and powerful, so it is in this land that our Lord Jesus begins His ministry. He sets up shop in His enemy's backyard. Just like in His temptation, Christ meets the devil where he appears powerful so that His defeat of the deceiver is more glorious for Him and more shameful for the devil.

This is how the Lord works our salvation, by conquering the devil in his own kingdom, and making us the heirs of His kingdom. The One Who is God in the flesh sacrifices Himself and suffers for us, so that we might bear the crown of victory that He won. What love our God and Lord has for us! He redeems us who live in His enemy's land and who are under His enemy's authority, all so that He might turn our hearts and minds to believe on Him and cling to Him for our eternal salvation.

Today we hear what true preaching is to be. Our Lord Jesus begins His ministry preaching that "the kingdom of God is at hand." In other words, He preached Himself, that He was the Christ, the Messiah, come into the world to redeem mankind and give salvation to all those who believe. This is the same message that all true preachers are to preach—that the Lord Jesus is the Christ, Who fulfilled the Law perfectly and suffered the punishment of our sins on the tree of the holy Cross.

But the Lord Jesus does not just preach the Gospel; He also preaches, "Repent." That is to say, He preaches the Law. He preaches a return to the Law of God, a turning away from one's sin and disobedience to faith in God.

When the Law and Gospel are preached in its truth and purity, and the sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution, then it will be said of those who hear and believe that "the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death Light has dawned."

Our Lord came and began his preaching to those who sat in darkness, those in the region and shadow of death, that is, those in the devil's kingdom. The message was that the kingdom was at hand. God had come down from Heaven and had become incarnate with our flesh so that He might accomplish what we were unable to do—to free us from the bonds of Satan.

He has also sent to us faithful preachers into this wilderness world of darkness to continue to preach that the Lord Jesus has come and has defeated the devil, and given us the kingdom of Heaven.