

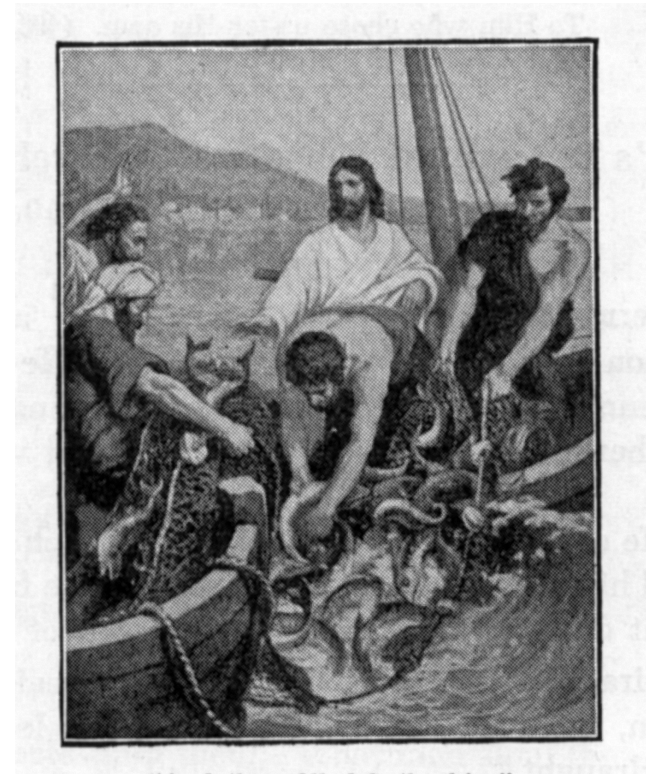
How do we know God's will? When King Saul wandered into the very cave where David and his men were hiding, it seemed to David's men like a sign of God's will, that God wanted David to kill his enemy. After all, Saul was defying God and acting wickedly by chasing David and seeking his life. How much easier David's life would be without Saul in it!

But David knew better. He knew that the word of the Lord alone revealed the will of God, and the word of God was clear: "You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people" (Ex. 22:28). Saul, wicked as he was, was still the ruler of Israel. David had no God-given authority to lift his hand against Saul, even though Saul, for his part, was acting lawlessly and was seeking to harm David unjustly.

David's righteous behavior toward Saul and his trust in God serve as an example for all Christians not to take justice into our own hands, but to "wait on the Lord and keep His way," for "the salvation of the righteous is from the Lord; He is their strength in the time of trouble. And the Lord shall help them and deliver them; He shall deliver them from the wicked, and save them, because they trust in Him" (Ps. 37:34, 39-40).

A prayer from Psalm 36: How precious is Your loving-kindness, O God! Therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of Your wings. They are abundantly satisfied with the fullness of Your house, and You give them drink from the river of Your pleasures. For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light. Amen.

THE LUTHERAN HERALD



TRINITY 1—TRINITY 5
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“And the Lord said to Joshua, ‘Do not fear them, for I have delivered them into your hand; not a man of them shall stand before you’.”

The Lord had given the Promised Land to Israel. It was more than just the gift of some real estate. It was intended to be a place of redeemed holiness in this fallen world. And though Israel failed miserably to be the holy vessel of God in the world, nevertheless, by means of them He gave the world Christ Jesus, “Israel reduced to One,” and by means of Him and His “Twelve”, He gave the Church to be the New Israel.

He gives us an even better Promised Land: the Promised Land of heaven. Just as nothing could stop the hand of God from giving Canaan to Israel of old, so nothing will stop Him from giving heaven to His faithful ones. Do not fear the devil, the world, your own sinful flesh, or any other enemy that is arrayed against you. In His death and resurrection our Lord has already defeated them all. Heaven is yours for the sake of Christ Jesus.

“Lord Jesus Christ, grant me ever Your Holy Spirit, to keep me in the one true Faith, and in due course to see me into the promised land of heaven. In Your dear Name I pray. Amen.”

It’s not only David who suffers at the hand of Saul. It’s also those who give aid and support to David—the priests of the Lord. It’s painful even to read about the vicious slaughter of the priests and their families. They didn’t deserve to die. They didn’t even know they were harboring a fugitive by helping David, since David had lied to them about his business there and didn’t tell them he was hiding from Saul.

Whether David lied to the priests to insure their help or to protect them from Saul, his lie put their lives at risk, without giving them a chance to decide for themselves whether to defend him against Saul or not. Saul and the Edomite were the ones responsible for the murder of the priests, but David’s deception forced them to become unwilling martyrs.

Our Lord, the Son of David, has not deceived His people in this way. On the contrary, He has told us openly that believing in Him and confessing Him before men will most certainly bring with it a painful cross, and even death. He has warned us ahead of time to count the cost of being His disciple.

Even with that warning, countless thousands have gladly and willingly borne the name of Christ and suffered loss on His account, because in Him we have the anointed Savior, sent from God, who didn’t hide from His enemies, but allowed them to kill Him to pay for our sins. He is able to deliver us from death, even as He will also deliver those faithful priests who died long ago at the hand of Saul.

A prayer from Psalm 7: O Lord my God, in You I put my trust; save me from all those who persecute me; and deliver me. Amen.

While the Lord uses many different means to support and protect His children, one of the most pleasant is a godly and faithful friend. “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity” (Prov. 17:17).

Jonathan is an example to us of what that looks like. He selflessly supported and defended David, even though it meant driving a wedge between him and his father, putting his own life in jeopardy, and relinquishing the throne. Jonathan loved David, because he knew David was righteous, and more than that, he knew that God had chosen David to be king. Surely Jonathan’s faithful friendship must have come to mind when David penned Psalm 133: “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down on the beard, the beard of Aaron, running down on the edge of his garments.”

Such friends are rare these days. When the moment of truth comes, many “friends” turn out to be fickle and won’t stand by you, even if they know you are in the right, even if they know you are serving God, because “they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God” (John 12:43). In such times, take comfort in the faithful friendship of Jesus Himself. “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you” (John 15:13-14).

From Psalm 5: But let all those rejoice who put their trust in You, O Lord. Let them ever shout for joy, because You defend them. For You, O Lord, will bless the righteous; with favor You will surround him as with a shield. Amen.

“So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the Lord had said to Moses; and Joshua gave it as an inheritance to Israel according to their divisions by their tribes. Then the land rested from war.”

Our Lord is pleased to give us the Kingdom. It is easy to be focused on the struggles we face in this world, for they are real and often consume our attention. But the battle isn’t really the point. The victory is the point.

The Lord gave Israel rest in the Promised Land after her warfare was ended. The Lord will give us the Promised Land of heaven too, after the trials and tribulations and struggles--the “spiritual warfare”--of this life is behind us.

As we engage those struggles, what joy to know that the war is really already over. Our Lord’s perfect life, innocent death, and glorious resurrection have already defeated sin, death, and the devil. The saving work is done; what remains is the last gasp and desperate guerilla warfare of our already defeated enemy. “Although we are attacked by these things, we pray that we may finally overcome them and win the victory.” And by the Holy Spirit, we will!

“Lord Jesus Christ, ever renew unto me the gift of your Holy Spirit, that repenting I may have the full joy of forgiveness of sins, and with His help overcome the devil’s temptations. Amen.”

“One man of you shall chase a thousand, for the Lord your God is He who fights for you, as He promised you.”

Our Lord entrusts us with holiness of life. In the Old Testament, that holiness sometimes entailed being His instruments for cleansing the land of unholy religion and those who adhered to it. This was, once again, partly done to point us forward to the Promised Land of heaven, where “no unclean thing will ever enter it,” as we read in Revelation. But the enemies of the Old Testament faith were numerous, and sometimes more technologically advanced! How did the people of God stand a chance? Well, simple, really: when they went into battle, they weren’t really the ones fighting it. “God is He who fights for you.”

So too today. As those redeemed by grace alone, through faith alone, for Christ’s sake alone, we now gladly and willingly put forth effort to speak the truth of Christ against the mountains of lies that are out there. But how do we stand a chance against so many? “God is He who fights for you.” Take heart. The Holy Spirit can, and will, have use of the words of our mouths, when and where it pleases Him, to turn hearts to the Lord Jesus Christ.

“Lord God, heavenly Father, open my lips, that my mouth may declare your praise. And have Your use of those words, that others would also come to saving faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.”

Saul tried multiple times to kill David. But the Lord was faithful to His promise to protect David and eventually make Him king. He worked to shield David in various ways: through Jonathan’s defense of his friend, through Michal’s deceit, through the sanctuary that Samuel provided, and even directly as His Holy Spirit took control of Saul and his messengers, shaming them and forcing them by divine power to leave David alone. In His own mysterious ways, the Lord watched over David, training him and us to trust and to say, “The Lord also will be a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble. And those who know Your name will put their trust in You; for You, Lord, have not forsaken those who seek You” (Psalm 9:9-10).

There will always be wicked men who will attack the righteous without cause, people in this world who will seek to harm Christians, whether in big or small ways. But God will also provide just the right people at just the right time to support the righteous in just the right way. He’ll work through believers, through unbelievers, through people you know, through people you don’t know, and even directly, if necessary, causing all things to work together for good to those who love Him. “Cast your burden on the Lord, and He shall sustain you; He shall never permit the righteous to be moved” (Psalm 55:22).

From Psalm 9: Arise, O Lord, do not let man prevail; let the nations be judged in Your sight. Put them in fear, O Lord, that the nations may know themselves to be but men. Amen.

David did all things well as he led Israel in battle against their enemies. The Lord was blessing His people and delivering them through His humble servant. The people of God rejoiced in David's faith-filled leadership and in the freedom that resulted from his victories. But Saul was jealous. He despised David's wisdom. He despised David's victories. He preferred that he and his people live under the tyranny of the Philistines rather than be delivered through David.

David's greater Son Jesus did nothing but help people, healing their infirmities and teaching them the Good News of how God had sent Him to deliver them from sin, death, and the power of the devil. The crowds loved Him for it. Everyone could see that the Lord was with Him. But, like Saul, the rulers of Israel were jealous of Jesus and despised Him. They preferred to live under the tyranny of sin rather than to be delivered by Jesus.

When you seek to help the world by confessing Christ as the only Deliverer from sin, death, and the devil; when you live faithfully in your vocation as a Christian, serving your neighbor in love; when you dare to speak the truth of God's Word, don't be surprised if the world around you becomes jealous of you and hates you. It hated David without cause, and it certainly hated Jesus without cause. The Lord Himself will be your Deliverer!

From Psalm 35: Plead my cause, O Lord, with those who strive with me; fight against those who fight against me. Take hold of shield and buckler, and stand up for my help. Also draw out the spear, and stop those who pursue me. Say to my soul, "I am your salvation." Amen.

"And if it seems evil to you to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

The prophet commands the people, in the stead and by the command of the Lord: Serve the Lord. He doesn't give them a choice, because faith isn't a choice. It is something the Lord creates in our hearts, by the power of the Holy Spirit, through the Word: words like, "Believe," or "Come, follow me." Words like "serve the Lord."

The only choice you have comes when you refuse to serve the Lord. Then you have all kinds of choices! You can choose this kind of wrong, that kind of wrong, some other kind of wrong, or yet another sort of wrong still. Don't be wrong. Don't choose for yourself. Receive God's saving choice of you, and so dwell in the Promised Land of His kingdom forever, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.

"Lord Jesus Christ, when I am tempted to 'choose for myself a way,' grant me to remember that, by grace, I am your chosen child, and keep me in Your saving grace. Amen."

“Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, and served the Baals.”

The Lord had been so gracious in saving Israel. One wonders why they repeatedly insisted on flirting with paganism! But there is a fairly simple explanation: these pagan Canaanite religions were fertility cult religions. The worship in their temples often involved activities of a sexual nature, activities that made Baal worship “fun church,” although not “saving church.”

We face the same thing today. People will be drawn in huge numbers to churches that provide “awesome” youth events, rock concert church services, and all kinds of other opportunities for worldly fun. They hardly even notice that the message of repentance and forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ Jesus is missing! Dear ones in Christ, be not like unto them. Instead, hold fast the saving message of Jesus, crucified and risen again, and speak into the ears of those who have been seduced into the lust for fun that wonderful message of saving substance, repentance and forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

“Lord Jesus Christ, keep my faith strong and steady, and have Your use of me to speak faith encouraging words to those who have wandered from it. In Your dear Name, Amen.”

When David went out to meet Goliath, he was well-armed—not with sword and spear, but with a clear promise from God, and faith in that promise. Moses had instructed the people of Israel: “So it shall be, when you are on the verge of battle, that the priest shall approach and speak to the people: ‘Hear, O Israel: Today you are on the verge of battle with your enemies. Do not be afraid, and do not tremble or be terrified because of them; for the Lord your God is He who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.’” (Deut. 20:2-4). Armed with faith in God’s promise to Israel, David was bold to challenge Goliath.

God has not made such promises of salvation to any army or to any nation but to the army and nation of Old Testament Israel. But He has made many promises to His Church which we can and should believe in the face of all our enemies: the devil, the world, and our flesh. “In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:37-39).

Armed with faith in promises such as these, we will prevail against every enemy, for surely “the battle is the LORD’S.”

From Psalm 56: Be merciful to me, O God, for man would swallow me up; fighting all day he oppresses me. Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in You. Amen.

Lesson from the Book of Concord

The Fifth Sunday after Trinity

X. Of Ordination and the Call.

If the bishops were true bishops, and would devote themselves to the Church and the Gospel, they might be allowed, for the sake of love and unity, and not from necessity, to ordain and confirm us and our preachers; nevertheless, under the condition that all masks and phantoms of unchristian nature and display be laid aside. Yet because they neither are nor wish to be true bishops, but worldly lords and princes, who will neither preach, nor teach, nor baptize, nor administer the Lord's Supper, nor perform any work or office of the Church, but persecute and condemn those who being called discharge this duty; for their sake the Church ought not to remain without ministers.

Therefore, as the ancient example of the Church and the Fathers teach us, we ourselves will and ought to ordain suitable persons to this office; and (even according to their own laws) they have not the right to forbid or prevent us. For their laws say that those ordained even by heretics should be regarded and remain as ordained, as St. Jerome writes of the Church at Alexandria, that at first was governed in common by the bishops through the priests and preachers.

—The Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article X

SATURDAY, JUNE 4: JUDGES 6:1-40

TRINITY 1

“Then the Lord said to him, ‘Peace be with you; do not fear, you shall not die’.”

Gideon fears for his life, as later Isaiah would, and as any number of others. To see the living God or this “Angel of the Lord” was to come face to face with pure holiness and to be made horribly aware of one's own unholiness. Gideon feared.

But the Lord reassures: “Peace be with you, do not fear, you shall not die.” Literally hundreds of times in the Bible we hear the Lord saying “be not afraid” or some variant thereof. He does not want to destroy, but to save.

And so we too gather in the presence of the Holy One of Israel. We too hear Him proclaim “the peace of the Lord be with you always.” And we too receive from the altar the gifts which take away death and nourish us unto eternal life, the fear removing and faith strengthening gifts of the body and blood of Jesus Christ Himself.

“Lord Jesus Christ, through repentance and faith in Your holy sacrifice on the cross, prepare my heart to receive tomorrow Your body and blood, for the forgiveness of my sins. Amen.”

As supreme commander of Israel, the Lord reduced the army so that Israel would know that the victory was by His power, not theirs. This is an important lesson for us to learn as well since man is quick to think of himself as greater than he is, and discount the Lord's gracious blessing in every aspect of this earthly life. In addition to reinforcing from Whom every victory comes, this reduction of forces allowed those who were afraid to fight the Lord's battle to remove themselves from His army so that they would not demoralize the others.

The Lord further reduced the faithful remnant so that there could be no doubt Who brought about the victory. The Lord provided Gideon with encouraging intelligence information for the battle because the Lord expects us to use our God given earthly talents and abilities in the performance of His appointed tasks. The fact that three hundred trumpets sounded from all around the Midianite camp in the middle of the night would have been terrifying because normally only a comparatively small number of men in an army carried trumpets. In the ensuing God-ordained, panicked chaos among the Midianites, they turned on each other within their darkened camp. God granted Israel victory in such a way as to impress on the people and their leader that they could not ascribe their liberation to their own strength.

The Lord never is at a loss for means to grant victory to those who act through faith.

We pray: Almighty heavenly Father, allow us to see Your abundantly gracious hand in all things. Amen.

Samuel does not look at martyrdom as something to be sought after, nor persecution as some necessary part of valor. God gives Samuel a way to carry out the task He now commands him with neither death nor deceit: he is to go to Bethlehem for worship, to go forth so that he and his people might receive the bounty of God's own hand.

The elders at Bethlehem were wary of Samuel. He spoke for the Lord and executed the Lord's vengeance. And just like us, each of them knew that if he were judged on his own works and merit, he would be worthy of being disowned like Saul and hacked to pieces like Agag. Yet, Samuel came to worship in peace—to sacrifice, and to pour out the Lord's blessings upon those who would trust in the Promised One who would be sacrificed for all—so he invited them to be set apart from their sins and worship with him.

In this context, God would have Samuel anoint a new king. Yet Samuel seems to start with the same mindset as these elders of Bethlehem: searching based on sight, what the human mind and heart would suggest. This man must be God's king first and foremost, and the Lord would pick him not on outward appearance, but on his heart. David was the youngest, humbly watching the sheep, yet bravely fighting their enemies. His faithfully living within his humble vocation would be a good foreshadowing of how his Descendant, Jesus, God's Son, would be—and all the more as he would end up serving King Saul faithfully, even though Saul hated and feared him.

Almighty God, grant us wisdom and strength for Jesus' sake, that we might hold fast Your Word in all of our endeavors. Amen.

“Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft; stubbornness as iniquity and idolatry.”

Clinging to one’s own wisdom instead of trusting the Lord’s promises or commands as the best course is no less serious than practicing sorcery. In every wavering from what He has spoken, we set something up as feared, loved, or trusted more than Him. Every sin is rebellion, and every rebellion is a transgression of the First Commandment. Such transgression left unchecked leads to idolatry as the mark of one’s life; while Christians find themselves sinning every day, the difference is that the Christian recognizes his sin for the affront to the Lord that it is. He lives out his Baptism by daily drowning the Old Adam through contrition and repentance so that the New Man in Christ may arise to walk righteously.

You see how seriously Samuel deals with Saul—and how only his initial refusal to go with Saul to worship (excommunicating him, as it were) finally woke Saul up to how serious his sin was. Samuel hacks to pieces the one whose political alliances, power, wealth, and prestige had led Saul again into sin, so that Saul would be encouraged no longer to cling to the things of this world.

Your pastor must stand strong like Samuel, too. Sometimes he must stand against the members of your own (or even his own) family. Speaking the painful words needed in church discipline has to be done, so that we might never lose sight of our need for the blood and righteousness of Jesus and end up losing the blessings of God’s Kingdom.

God grant us, to Your glory and our good, that we accord Your Word its proper priority over our own thoughts, that we may ever trust in our Lord Jesus alone. Amen.

With the simple phrase of “when Your words come true,” Manoah is making a confession of faith that we should all strive for. Manoah did not see it as a matter of whether these events would occur, but of when. Samson, the last of the line of men on record in the book of who judged Israel, differs from his predecessors in a number of respects; nevertheless, Samson’s life story is but another chapter in the basic theme that the Book of Judges develops. His accomplishments are not recorded in order to entertain the reader with tales of human prowess, they are designed to reveal how God’s strength is made perfect in weak vessels of clay.

Nowhere is Samson depicted as a superman, endowed by nature with bulging muscles and a huge frame. His strength comes from the Lord: God’s word of promise and the Lord’s gracious working in Samson’s life for the sake of God’s people and the sake of God’s name. The entirety of Scripture pulses with this theme of God graciously using ordinary human beings to achieve His acts of redemptive mercy. Through these acts of grace toward those He has chosen to be His own, the Lord draws us back from our error and rebellion. The Lord uses flawed human beings, even today, to help accomplish His will among those He has redeemed.

May we be so blessed as to recognize this merciful working in our own lives, and be used by the Lord to do His will in the lives of others, that we too boldly confess “when Your words come true.” Amen.

The impulse to contract a forbidden marriage came from Samson's disobedient heart and not from the Lord. Nevertheless, the Lord in His omnipotence used this act of human self-will to serve His good and gracious will: He made it an occasion for challenging the Philistine Empire's subjugation of Israel.

The Lord is determined to see His promise fulfilled and His kingdom come despite the repeated apostasy of His chosen people, and despite the failings of the men whom He chooses to be the bearers of His promise. This chapter is where we first see how the Spirit of the Lord works through Samson for the benefit of God's people. Previous judges became successful leaders in military campaigns when "the Spirit of the Lord came upon" them or "took possession of" them. When the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon Samson, he was able to perform feats of great physical strength. Neither man nor beast, not even vast numerical superiority, could defeat Samson when it was the Lord's will that was being fulfilled through the mighty working of the Spirit of the Lord in him.

Even though Samson erred with his desire for a pagan wife and his coming near a dead animal, the Lord mercifully showed him grace in using him to punish those who oppressed God's chosen people.

We pray: Almighty heavenly Father, allow us to see Your abundantly gracious hand in all things, and that we allow it to guide our lives through Your chosen Means of Grace. Amen.

Impatience leads to so many foolish actions every day, from risky driving to athletes taking steroids, to pre-marital sex, to cheating in business. The flesh wants its desires met NOW!

Saul's impatience with the Lord's servant leads him to do what God had not given him to do. Instead of reckoning that the prophet would be there for the pre-battle sacrifice whenever the Lord so willed it, he caved in to his own fear and that of the people. So that there might be a sacrifice in accord with his timetable, Saul goes through the correct motions, as if it were that outward display that ought to bring Yahweh's blessing. Samuel makes it clear that Saul's actions exalted him over the Lord and His commands, so that his attempted theft of God's kingship would now deprive him and his family from remaining on Israel's throne.

Many Lutherans in the United States have developed traditions that are after the pattern of Saul: if a pastor isn't available (or, they think, "affordable"), they enlist others to preach and teach, and even to administer the sacraments. Or they simply go to a less faithful parish, or one that is affiliated with false teachers, because they think it is better, apparently, to be served refuse every week than to receive the healthy and wholesome nourishment of God's pure Word, however often the Lord would present it. Such, though, is not sanctifying, but profaning the name of our Father in Heaven!

Lord grant us patience in the name of Jesus, the trust that You provide always what is best for us, so that our only consideration in all things is faithfulness to You, even as You are always faithful to us. Amen.

“The Lord God was your King.” How great the indictment in those words! God Himself was your King, O Israel, but you wanted another! You wanted to be like everyone else, but every time you’ve acted like everyone else, you suffered: when you followed other gods, the Lord delivered you into the hand of your enemies. Now He has given you what you wanted: a dynasty like the other nations. Yet, remember that it is He who has brought this to pass, and the king’s place and the nation’s fortunes rest on the same thing as always: whether you and he are trusting in the Lord with all your heart. “If you still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king.”

Samuel first bade the people to bring any charge against him that they could, and they all declared that he was innocent of any attempt to fleece God’s flock. Then he makes this declaration to them from the Lord. They wanted a king who would be like them and went after what they wanted, not a prophet who kept telling them that what they wanted—and were doing—was going after vanity and turning their back on God. Now, Samuel makes it clear, God was giving them both! Having a king does not eliminate having God’s prophet; having a king who rules by his speaking does not end God’s ruling over all by His. At best, a king would do God’s will and the nation would be blest; but, if not, God would bless them by bringing their plans and desires to naught, so that they might repent.

O Triune God, keep us from the idolatry of trusting in princes, rather than having faith in Your will and works alone! Amen.

Sadly Samson’s brethren, rather than rally around the person who resisted their pagan oppressors, bound and delivered him into their hands. This treacherous action of “the men of Judah” was a pathetic demonstration that they had lost faith in the Lord. They had given up the will to resist the unbelieving world around them. Preferring comfort and safety, they were ready to submit to a peaceful coexistence with the infiltrating Philistines and eventual absorption by them—but God saved them from being Canaanized, as the Philistines themselves had been.

In spite of the people’s apathy and Samson’s moral weakness, God kept His promise to His chosen. Though the Israelites had fearfully chosen to be “of” the world rather than God’s confessing people “in” the world, the Lord delivered them from their unbelief through the less than perfect man Samson. It was the onrushing of the Spirit of God that caused Samson’s bonds to melt off his hands. Even though Samson was less than perfect, in his distress he professed his desire to be a servant of the Lord. Frequently disobedient and self-willed though he had been, he was willing to be the hand which God mercifully chose to use for His purpose.

May we avoid being fearful like “the men of Judah,” and instead strive to faithfully submit to God’s purpose for us in this world.

We pray: Lord, through Your Means may we always be drawn closer to You and ever thankful to come repentantly before You as Your servant, now and in eternity. Amen.

The mentioning of seven fresh cords is noteworthy because the number seven often has special significance in the scriptures since to the ancients it symbolizes completeness or fullness. Note that Samson's hair was divided into seven braids or locks. Evidently the Philistines believed that Samson was not endowed by nature with the necessary muscle and brawn to account for his superhuman feats of strength. They were convinced that he had a secret by which he could tap a supernatural source of power. He would be "like any other man" if they could solve this "secret of his strength."

Samson's defeat is announced with the words "But he did not know that the Lord had left him." His strength left him when the Lord had left him. The source of Samson's strength was ultimately God himself, just as all our strength is truly from the Lord and graciously bestowed through His chosen Means of Grace. The Philistines were not interested in killing him quickly; they sought revenge by a prolonged period of torture. Neither does the devil desire a quick end for us, but instead desires our eternal torment in hell.

When Samson called to the Lord and said, "O Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God," the Lord mercifully answered his prayer. Though Samson had often rebelled against the Lord in his life, when he faithfully returned to his Lord he was graciously received.

May we never be found without the Holy Spirit to strengthen our faith, for lacking Him is the only thing that will allow the sinful world to truly overpower us. Amen.

Samuel speaks to Saul at length, and the Word of God transforms him. Now Saul, too, is given to prophesy: he who was anointed by Samuel to be the commander of the Lord's people was given the gifts necessary to lead in God's own path, speaking His Word and carrying it out! While the establishment of a king was contrary to what the Lord desired, He would show them His wisdom and mercy, not by sabotaging the new king, but by making it absolutely clear that He would bless and back the one in this office by giving him His Word.

The very last verse of our reading shows that this did, indeed, have an effect upon Saul: when some spoke against him and brought him no coronation gifts, he did not have them executed, but held his peace. So, too, God gave Saul the added benefit of surrounding him with soldiers whose hearts he had also touched. At the same time, Samuel wrote in a book what he explained to the people about how kings behave, that it might bear witness in the future against the people's rash action of, as Samuel said, rejecting God to have a king. So, God gave Saul everything to succeed as a godly king, but the prophet must write how easily kings are led astray...something the nation would experience time and again until finally the King of Kings would come to fulfill Jacob's prophecy concerning Judah.

O Lord, You have so richly blessed us in so many ways, grant that we would use all of Your gifts to Your glory and our neighbors' good, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Saul was an obvious choice to lead Israel. While he was of the least family of the smallest of all the tribes, he was the tallest and the most handsome. He was someone around whom all would rally. He appears obedient to his father and humble toward God's prophet, acting wisely. Upon his meeting Samuel he was immediately invited to eat the choice portion and sit in the seat of honor. Samuel would even speak God's Word directly to him. The Lord would give him every advantage and blessing. With such gifts, he was equipped to be a great king.

Then again, so was Adam. God made Adam in His own image—sinless and having a relationship with Him that was purest joy. The Lord set him over all of creation, ruling even the animals. The work he would do in the Garden would be no difficult labor, but the simple reaping of the fruits of God's work, where there were neither thorns nor thistles and neither plant, nor animal, nor human would be barren. Adam, though, did not intervene to save his wife from the serpent, nor was he willing to separate himself from the one with whom he was of one flesh and bone, so he plunged the world into sin and death by eating of the fruit with her.

Through the time of his regency Saul became wrapped up in his being king while forgetting whose king he was. It is easy to think that our physical gifts are something we earned or accomplished, and that our office and our successes are our own doing, as well.

Father, grant us humility, that we receive your gifts of talents and vocation as flowing from Your goodness alone, that we may ever use them to Your glory, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Today we are introduced to Samuel, who was dedicated from his youth to continuous service at the sanctuary all the days of his life. Hannah's son was to assume obligations that exceeded the normal Levitical duties, and in addition he was not to cut his hair as part of a Nazarite vow. Upon seeing Hannah in prayer Eli literally called her "a daughter of Belial" meaning "a daughter of worthlessness," thinking she was "filled with new wine" because her behavior aroused his suspicion. Instead of rejoicing before the Lord she "wept bitterly." She seemed to be mumbling incoherently, moving her lips but not praying audibly as was customary.

Samuel was faithfully delivered to the sanctuary once he was weaned. Women of this time period normally nursed their children two to three years. No figure is given for his age when he was left at the sanctuary, but it is likely he was three to four years of age.

In this text we are reminded to be careful about making spiritual judgments based on assumption, and shown the power of God to answer prayers. No matter how desperate our situation, the Lord has the ability and the inclination to comfort His penitent children.

We pray: Heavenly Father, through the faith bestowed by Your abundant grace, may we never hesitate to bring our Christ-centered prayers before You. Amen.

After being barren for so long, and God graciously giving her the son she'd prayed for, Hannah burst forth in praise: "My heart rejoices in the LORD; My horn is exalted in the LORD. I smile at my enemies, because I rejoice in Your salvation. No one is holy like the LORD, for there is none besides You, nor is there any rock like our God." She goes on to boast that the Lord humbles the proud and exalts the lowly. Close is the connection between her song and that of Mary's in Luke 1: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant . . . He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly" (verses 46-52).

In spite of Hannah's great words, however, the young Samuel would find himself in the midst of turmoil, as did His Savior many years later. It was the latter period of the Judges, where "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). Samuel was immediately put in the service of Eli, the High Priest, who had two wicked sons. Their abominations were well known, as their father, now advanced in years, did not discipline his sons. Nevertheless, Hannah and her husband Elkanah continued to support their young son and his calling, and, as the text reveals, the salutary nature of Samuel's upbringing.

Prayer: Dear God, may we always heed the warning and encouragement from Proverbs: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (22:6). Amen.

As Samuel grew in age he appointed his two sons, Joel and Abijah, to be his heirs as judges of Israel. How ironic, though, that the situation nearly repeated itself from the days of the High Priest Eli. Samuel had been called to serve in the tabernacle in place of Eli's two decadent sons Hophni and Phinehas. Now it would be Samuel's own two sons, Joel and Abijah, who were themselves corrupt and unfit to serve as judges. This time, however, the solution was not God pleasing. Instead of continuing the line of judges, the people sought a new kind of ruler--a king to match the powerful nations that threatened them. Although Samuel warned that a king would lead to a dictatorship, the people had already made up their minds. God assured Samuel their quarrel was not with him, but with the one true King, the Almighty God. Because they were insistent in their sin, God permitted them to learn from their errant choice.

How often we get ourselves into trouble by insisting on our own way. Sometimes the only way we can come to our senses is by God letting us play out our lives as we see fit so that we may see the folly of our ways, much like the Israelites of Samuel's day, or the Prodigal Son of Jesus' parable.

Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, let us see in You the only true Wisdom that comes down from above. May we abandon our earthly whims, and follow You in the way that leads to eternal life. Amen.

At last the ark is returned to Israel, and the people lament of their sins. Samuel makes it explicit what these lamentations should consist of: “Then Samuel spoke to all the house of Israel, saying, ‘If you return to the LORD with all your hearts, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths from among you, and prepare your hearts for the LORD, and serve Him only; and He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines.’” Returning to the Lord meant disposing of previous loyalties. Samuel was fully aware of the poisonous idolatry that had corrupted Israel. Symbolically, they poured out water to indicate they were ridding themselves of the sin that led them away from the Lord.

We do the same today. It’s called confession. In the weekly rhythm of the Divine Service, we say these words: “I, a poor miserable sinner, confess unto Thee all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended Thee and justly deserved Thy temporal and eternal punishment. But I am heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them...” We say the same words week after week, not because God hasn’t yet forgiven us, but because our sinful nature produces sin on a continual basis. We, like the Israelites of old, must take daily inventory of our many transgressions and pour them out before the altar of the Lord. There, before our merciful Lord, the pastor pronounces God’s forgiveness “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”

Prayer: Gracious God, let us consider daily our unworthiness before You. We thank You for Your righteousness and boundless mercy that forgives all these sins. Amen.

Our opening verse gives the sad context for the time in which Samuel lived: “And the word of the LORD was rare in those days.” Even though they had priests, a tabernacle, and the Books of Moses, there seemed to be little interest, even among the priests. The church of Samuel’s day was experiencing the worst kind of spiritual famine. But God would not let His people starve for lack of faithful prophets. Into the spiritual abyss came the call to Samuel, who heard the repeated call of God. His initial task could not have been more difficult: pronounce judgment on the house of Eli, the high priest. His two sons were guilty of repeated abominations within the tabernacle, and father Eli had permitted it to continue.

Fortunately for Samuel and his prophetic mission, Eli treated him like a son. When Samuel was hesitant to tell Eli of his call, Eli encouraged him. And upon hearing it, he put Samuel and his work in the Lord’s hands. Samuel proved faithful to the Lord’s calling: “So Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.”

It doesn’t take a lot of imagination to see that our day is similar to Samuel’s. We too live in a “spiritual famine,” where the number of places where the Word is faithfully proclaimed is small. Let us give thanks for the faithful few who continue to proclaim the riches of God’s forgiveness in the midst of spiritual poverty.

Prayer: Dear Lord, we give You thanks for the blessings of Your Church. Keep us always steadfast in Your Word. Amen.

Samuel's prophetic office functioned closely with the high priest and king. Today's reading finds the Israelite nation in great peril, as they're about to do battle against the Philistines. Things went badly, as 4000 Israelites lay dead in defeat. As the elders analyzed their loss, they concluded it was the Lord's doing: "And when the people had come into the camp, the elders of Israel said, 'Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD from Shiloh to us, that when it comes among us it may save us from the hand of our enemies.'" Their conclusion was based on the false premise that the ark of the covenant was their "good luck charm." They seemed to think if they just carried the ark into battle, they'd be victorious the next time around, just like the "good ol' days."

But the "good ol' days" were long gone. Even though the Philistines were aware of the power of Israel's God, it only encouraged them to fight harder. And they did, killing 30,000, along with Eli's two sons. To cap it off, the ark was taken as a war trophy. Surely many of the Israelites must have felt their God had abandoned them, or was not up to the challenge. Such was the reaction of Eli, who collapsed in death upon hearing the news. His daughter-in-law, in anguish over the cascade of tumultuous news, summed up the nation's feeling: "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured."

Prayer: Gracious God, during the dark times of our lives keep us mindful that You are our Help in times of trouble. Let us never doubt that You deal with Your people in ways You know to be best. Amen.

The Philistines must have been quite proud of their achievement in defeating the Israelites and capturing Israel's symbol of power, the ark of the covenant. They placed it next to their own idol of Dagon, but the very next morning the roles seem to have been reversed. God was up, while Dagon was down. After "re-spotting" their idol, it is likely the Philistines were curious, if not apprehensive, about what they would find the next morning. It was more than they expected. Not only was Dagon down again, his head and hands had been broken off. Sadly, instead of acknowledged the one true God who had shown His power, the Philistines simply became superstitious and refused to step on the threshold where they found their idol destroyed.

What the Philistines thought to be a great triumph turned into their own version of a "Trojan Horse," as the ark brought death into their camp. First, the host city of Ashdod was afflicted by tumors. Then they passed the ark to Gath, which was similarly afflicted. The third city, Ekron, was at least smart enough to deny its acceptance. Unfortunately, none of the cities reacted in a salutary way. To repent and embrace the one true God was the only solution that would have saved them. Instead, they put distance between them and the Lord, doing no different than Adam and Eve in the Garden, fleeing from the only God that could save them.

Prayer: Dear Lord, turn us always from the gods we unwittingly erect in our daily lives, that we may always dwell in Your gracious and omnipotent presence. Amen.