

# THE LUTHERAN HERALD



**REMINISCERE—HOLY WEEK**  
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Cyril of Alexandria, in the early fifth century, said that the “fig tree” in this passage represents the “synagogue of the Jews,” and this is pretty much the standard interpretation of the parable. The “certain man” who had planted the fig tree in his vineyard, was God the Father, and “the keeper” of the vineyard was His Son, Jesus. The Father had become tired of waiting for the Jews to produce a crop of repentance and faith, and so is about to uproot them as His people. Jesus pleads for the fig tree, for the Jews, that they be given a little more time, that is, that they be given the chance to embrace the gospel that He is bringing.

Of course, from history we see that the extra year and the fertilizing did not have the desired effect. Cyril of Alexandria said, “The Israelites, after our Savior’s crucifixion, were doomed to fall into the miseries they deserved, Jerusalem being captured, and its inhabitants slaughtered by the enemy’s sword. Their houses would be burned with fire, and even the temple of God demolished.” Cyril, was, of course, referring to the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

But our Lord still forgives. Our Lord forgives the Jew and the non-Jew. He forgives the murderer, the homosexual, and the idolater. He forgives the hypocrite, the arrogant, and the self-righteous. He forgives all who come, repent and believe. In what seems to be our very law-oriented gospel reading today, Jesus says; “unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” But the good news for us, and the whole world, is that the inverse is true as well. If you repent you will all likewise live, live forever. Amen.

The closeness of the tomb to the place of crucifixion was important because the fast approaching sunset brought with it the beginning of the Sabbath day so the body had to be interred before sunset, when the Sabbath would start and no work could be done. Thus the third day of Jesus’ entombment begins with sundown on Saturday.

John in verse 38 references all that had taken place during Friday which closed with the crowds in Jerusalem fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah: “And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.” and “On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness.”

Sadly, Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, and even the disciples cowering in the upper room—do not fully appreciate that this second prophecy has been graciously fulfilled with the sacrificing of the Lamb of God for the sin of the world. We unlike these first century believers look to the sunrise of Sunday with great hope and joy for we already “know the tomb cannot restrain” the Christ of God, for He is the “Holy One” of God Who shall not see decay in the grave nor languish in Sheol. This reality makes this day indeed a Holy Saturday, for the sunrise of our Lord and Redeemer fast approaches.

**FRIDAY, APRIL 3: JOHN 19:25-37**

**GOOD FRIDAY**

Jesus completed what He came to do, as evidenced by His final loud cry of “It is finished!” As further proof of God’s providential control over all things the Christ “gave up His spirit.” Suggesting an act of will on His part as opposed to being “overtaken” by death.

The Passover meal had been on Thursday evening, the day of Preparation is Friday, and the approaching Sabbath is the special high holy Sabbath of Passover. The Jews do not want bodies hanging on crosses on this day so they ask to have the legs broken to hasten death. Blood and water flow from Jesus’ pierced side as solemn testimony that Jesus is already dead, the result of the spear piercing the pericardium (the sac that surrounds the heart) and the heart itself. In this blood and water some see symbolism pointing to the Lord’s Supper and Baptism. John obviously considered the incident important, and comments that it was well attested. John is divinely inspired to record God’s ruling over of these events as the fulfillment of Scripture.

It was extraordinary that Jesus was the only one of the three whose legs were not broken and that He suffered an unusual spear thrust that did not break a bone. John tells us that all of this takes place that the Scripture might be fulfilled. This reference to fulfillment of Scripture is either to the Passover lamb of Exodus and/or to Psalm 34, which speaks of God’s care for the righteous in delivering him out of his afflictions: “He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken.” For Jesus is the Holy (Righteous) One of God Who is also the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world.

**TUESDAY, MARCH 3: LUKE 14:25-35**

**REMINISCERE**

Jesus talks about “hating” your family and carrying a cross, counting the cost and forsaking everything. “Hating” here means not loving your family more than loving Jesus but, Luke maintains an old term here in order to keep the “hardness” of it. Unless you do these things you are not worthy to be His disciple. You don’t make the cut. This is hard stuff, not for the faint of heart. We have to be willing to lose or alienate our family and friends for the sake of the Gospel.

Most people don’t mind if their worldly possessions are taken so long as the family is safe and together. But, Jesus says that we must be willing even to forsake our families for Him. It’s not easy to be abandoned or hated by our family and friends but, this is part of being the Church militant. And there is no option. There is no other kind of Church than the Church militant. Loyalty to our country cannot come before Christ.

Part of bearing our cross is to be a fool in the world’s eyes and to speak openly and militantly about the faith. This is giving up everything, forsaking everything for Christ. Giving up your reputation as a reasonable, balanced person. Allowing your family and friends and co-workers to think of you as obsessed because you ask them if they know the Gospel, if they know how to be saved. This reputation that we lose here because of our devotion to Christ will be replaced someday with a reputation for having been a loyal and devoted son and brother. You will be looked on as a strong and courageous sister or brother in the heavenly kingdom. Amen.

The real core of God's being, the real center of His heart is what we see here in this parable. The father in this parable represents God, and so we see how God really acts. It says the father gave the son food and clothing and celebrated, and most of all, made him his son again. The father didn't care what the son had done. He didn't care about all the sorted details, the humiliating and pathetic things the son had done. I'm sure that the father didn't even want to hear about them, not that he wouldn't if the son needed to confess each one of them, but that the father did not see it as necessary.

The son whom he had loved had come back to him. All was forgiven. The father would never bring it up again. As far as he was concerned, that person who went off and lived that sinful life was another person.

And this is really the way God feels about us when we come to Him in repentance. The difference, of course, is that God really knows all of your sins. He knows about everything you try so desperately to hide. But, God does not care what the sin is. He forgives it all. He buries it and never brings it up again. With God there really is always a fresh start. He doesn't grudgingly forgive. He doesn't say, "alright, you messed up again. I suppose I have to take you back." No. God is the father in this parable, embracing us, kissing us, restoring us as if nothing had ever happened. That is what our God is really like. That is the core of Who He really is. Amen.

The opening verse of today's text refers to the Jews' threatening of Pilate with the taunt that if he does not condemn Jesus he is no friend or supporter of Roman authority. Pilate tests their resolve to reject God and His chosen Christ with the proclamation of "Behold your King!" With this challenge Pilate speaks more truly than he, by his mocking words, intends. The Jewish leaders and the crowd show their resolve to resist God and His word with "We have no king but Caesar." The powerfully ironic truth expressed in this exchange is that they have rejected the true heavenly God of their fathers in favor of the earthly idol of the pagan world around them. This is the sad rebellious confession that continues among so many outside (and ironically within) the organized "church" today.

The worshiping of the golden calf continues as will the judgment of God upon such idolatry. They rejected any suggestion that they were rebels against Rome, but freely expressed the truth of their true spiritual condition. The Christ stands in stark contrast to this heterodoxy that wants to claim to be orthodoxy. Jesus dies, as He has lived, fulfilling His Father's will according to the Scriptures; He dies a real human death, mindful of the parental ties that bind Him to humanity, suffering human pain—but He dies as the divine Good Shepherd Who lays down His life of His own accord.

Pilate's "What I have written I have written" presents God's governance of history as the stubbornness of the Roman governor, weary of altercations with a people he does not respect and cannot understand, ensures the proclamation of the truth. Nathanael's confession at the beginning of Jesus' ministry finds a strange echo at its close: "You are the King of Israel!"

Jew and Gentile both take part (arguably become allies) in the struggle against God and share the guilt and condemnation of rejecting God's Christ. Pilate, representative of the Gentile world, holder of a power given him from above, chosen to be custodian of God's wrath upon the wrongdoer, will not use that power to protect the Man whose innocence he has thrice attested. The divinely appointed guardian of truth and justice shrugs off his responsibility with a skeptical, "What is truth?" and consents to the unjustified crucifixion of the incarnate grace and truth of God. In doing this he aligns himself with the Jewish religious authorities and their rejection of their duty to proclaim and uphold God's truth before the world.

Verse 11 presents Jesus' last words to Pilate which divinely confess that all power comes from God. All earthly authority comes ultimately from God. Judas and/or Caiaphas carried the greater sin than Pilate, but "greater" implies that there was a lesser sin, so Pilate's sin was also real. Sin is sin, and no amount of symbolic hand washing or rationalizing can wash away its stain—only repentance and faith by grace can offer absolution and deliverance from its judgment.

The world united in a sinful attempt to overcome the Light, and Pilate spoke far "truer" than he knew when he presented the scourged and thorn-crowned King of the Jews, robed in purple, with the words, "Behold the man." He is indeed the man, not the Jew merely, but the Man on Whom the sin of mankind is visited, in Whom the hope of the world lies hid.

The main theme of this passage is the assessment of priorities for the believer. As we know, possessions are not wicked of themselves, but what is important is the use we make of them. To squander possessions that are yours and ultimately God's, is not just to waste those things but also to be unfaithful to God. It is also failing to discipline oneself to be the best disciple one can be. People like this display a pattern of behavior. Those who tend to misuse little things or earthly things tend to do so with heavenly treasures.

A man who loves his motorcycle or snowmobile or whatever out of propriety often will be neglectful with regard to the Word and Sacraments. The true treasures of this life are the mysteries of God, those things which give eternal life. Possessions can be used faithfully to advance the kingdom of God or they can become idols drawing us away from Christ, drawing us away from Word and Sacraments, drawing us away from Him Who should be the paramount focus of our lives.

God's calculus, His valuation of things is much different than the world's. We are to conform ourselves to His system of values so that we may share eternity's blessings with Him. "O children of Adam, buy for yourselves those things that do not pass away, by means of those temporary things that are not yours!"

Lord, God, help us to be faithful in all that we do and with all we possess that we may honor you each day of our lives. Amen.

**FRIDAY, MARCH 6: LUKE 17:1-10**

**REMINISCERE**

Aren't we supposed to be offensive in some ways to the world? Isn't Christianity itself an offence? Yes. And yes there are different ways in which people are offended. Offending others with our bad breath or lack of fashion style is certainly not what this passage is talking about. If people reject the Church because of some trivial point like that then the sin cannot be laid at our doorstep. But, these are not the types of offences that are here talked about by our Lord.

He's talking to his disciples about causing offence in what doctrines they teach or by what lifestyles they live or by lack of Christlike love. Jesus in the previous chapters had been hammering the Pharisees for these sorts of offences. Certain doctrines (or teachings) that they taught were preventing the sinners in their society from coming to repentance and faith. How do we as Lutherans avoid giving such offences? By not holding to false and innovative doctrines and practices. And not tolerating false teachings and practice among our fellow believers.

It is not alright if people hold different views on how somebody is saved, or whether the Holy Spirit is a person or not, or whether Jesus is really present in the Sacrament of the Altar or not. We cannot tolerate heresy in our midst. It is a deadly poison that will destroy the Church. We must gently and kindly restore our wayward brothers and sisters and, in this way we avoid being a party to the offence of schism or Church division. May our Lord grant us success. Amen.

**TUESDAY, MARCH 31: JOHN 18:19-40**

**HOLY TUESDAY**

Jesus answers questions about His doctrine and practice by simply pointing to those who have heard and seen Him as a clear testimony of His word and life—may we by God's grace be so steadfast in our walk and speech as His disciples that we can likewise point to our own life with such confidence of its confession. Even the kind of death he was going to die made a clear confession. Jewish execution was by stoning, but Jesus' death was to be by crucifixion, whereby he would bear the curse. The Romans, not the Jews, had to put Jesus to death. God was overruling in the whole process. The crucifixion fulfills His prediction that He would be "lifted up," for this was the Roman form of punishment, while stoning was the Jewish form of punishment for blasphemers.

In spite of Christ's unwavering life and doctrine Pilate asks "What is truth?" This is the same excuse the world still uses for its rejection of Christ. Pilate may have been jesting, and meant, "What does truth matter?" Or he may have been serious, and meant, "It is not easy to find truth. What is it?" Either way, it was clear to him that Jesus was no rebel and there was no basis for a charge against Him. Teaching the truth was not (and is not) a criminal offense.

It is not only His nation that seeks to kill the King and quench the Light: Judas, who became their willing tool, may have the greater sin, but the Gentile world, too, takes part in the struggle and shares the guilt. Jesus has come to bear witness to the truth of God that sets men free from the lust for being king or making kings—and for this goes to the cross.

**MONDAY, MARCH 30: JOHN 18:1-18**

**HOLY MONDAY**

In today's text we are subtly reminded that the Son of Mary is also the Son of God for our salvation when John under divine inspiration records that Jesus was not taken by surprise regarding any of the events presented. Thus Jesus is not surprised at being confronted by the betrayer in the flesh and seeing in the friend who ate His bread the incarnation of the will of Satan. The quiet majesty with which Christ takes the initiative, goes to meet His captors, questions them and gives Himself into their hands has a shattering effect on them. They came expecting to arrest a meek peasant and instead were met in the dim light by a majestic person.

He loves His own to the end; the Good Shepherd goes freely into death in order that His flock may live—and He remains to the end the obedient Son who cannot but drink the cup of suffering which the Father has given Him. Jesus, knowing all that would happen to Him, came forward and said to them, "Whom do you seek?" Judas and the mob have come to take the Lamb of God to His slaughter that will atone for sin. So Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given Me?"

Our gracious Lord's commitment to redeem us from our sin stands in stark contrast to Peter's denial of our Redeemer. Jesus continues to be denied by His called people even today, yet He as our long suffering Lord continues to be faithful in His redemptive work as our Mediator unto eternity.

**SATURDAY, MARCH 7: LUKE 18:1-8**

**REMINISCERE**

Persistent, resilient faith, that is what is in view here. We could get sidetracked by the details in the parable, how many prayers, how forceful, how long etc.. These things are not the focus however. "Prayer" is used here as evidence for persistent, resilient faith.

Prayer isn't a magic incantation that if said in the right sequence, or for the right length of time, or the right method will force God to grant one's wishes. Prayer is a continual exercise of one's trust in the God Who will make all things right and make all things new. Prayer is a demonstration of one's continued trust in God.

This is why prayer is a regular part of our liturgical worship. We maintain such prayers in the Divine Service and other offices to help the faithful Christian offer prayers of worship regularly. When Jesus returns, the passage asks if He will find the faith still on the earth? Of course this does refer to the Christian faith, but it is asking if there will be persistent, resilient Christian faith? Will there be faith that stands up to persecution, heresy and apathy? Of course there will be, but it will get more and more rare before the end. Let us remain steadfast in the faith, praying and resisting the corruption of the world. Many calling themselves the Church do not resist the world. Instead they embrace it. Lord give us the strength to shun the spirit of the age and rely on You in prayer.

“Now a certain ruler asked Him, saying, ‘Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’” Luke 18:18

“What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” It’s a good question, mostly. How many people bee-bop through this life, giving nary a care to eternal matters? At least this man cares.

Two phrases are worth noticing. “Good Teacher,” and “what shall I do?” They point to two possible answers: one law, the other gospel. Jesus invites the gospel answer: “Why do you call me good?,” for none is good but God. As if to say, “You called me good! So are you calling me God? Is this faith I’m hearing here?” Alas, no. He was just being polite.

That leaves the law answer: Keep all the commandments. He claims to have done this...which is laughable, but he has himself convinced. Jesus would lead him to see the futility of relying on his own perfection: “Go, sell all.” The law crushes him, and he leaves.

The law does that to us too. But hear the gospel! This Jesus, Who is good, Who is God, has died on the cross for your sins. Rely for your salvation not on your own perfection, but upon His, and upon His perfect sacrifice for your sins.

“Oh Lord, grant me to long for the life of the world to come, and grant me to trust not in my own works or merits, but in Christ alone, to receive this. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.”

Let us pray: Lord Christ, my Savior, You offer Yourself to me in the Holy Supper of Your Body and Blood. Prepare me to receive You worthily in faith, that I would receive the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation that you provide in this blessed sacrament. Lead me by Your Word and Spirit to examine myself in truth while I contemplate and answer these questions:

1. Do you believe that you are a sinner?
2. How do you know this?
3. Are you sorry for your sins?
4. What have you deserved from God because of your sins?
5. Do you hope to be saved?
6. In whom then do you trust?
7. Who is Christ?
8. How many Gods are there?
9. What has Christ done for you that you trust in Him?
10. Did the Father also die for you?
11. How do you know this?
12. What are the Words of Institution?
13. Do you believe, then, that the true body and blood of Christ are in the Sacrament?
14. What convinces you to believe this?
15. What should we do when we eat His body and drink His blood, and in this way receive His pledge?
16. Why should we remember and proclaim His death?
17. What motivated Christ to die and make full payment for your sins?
18. Finally, why do you wish to go to the Sacrament?
19. What should admonish and encourage a Christian to receive the Sacrament frequently?
20. But what should you do if you are not aware of this need and have no hunger and thirst for the Sacrament?

I beseech Thee, Almighty God, mercifully to look upon me, that by Thy great goodness I may be governed and preserved evermore both in body and soul; through Jesus Christ, my Lord. Amen.



“And I know that His command is everlasting life.”

The Word of God is a word of power. Whatever God speaks, His Word contains the power to make that Word effective. Even as God commanded the heavens and the earth to be formed and it was so, every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God accomplishes God’s purpose.

What a comfort, then, it is to know that God’s ultimate command is eternal life for the Christian! This knowledge is truly the key to understanding the entirety of God’s Word. His Word of Law, which announces His demands upon man’s life and pronounces His judgment upon any one who fails to meet these demands, does indeed bring death to the sinner. But God speaks this Word so that its power might put to death the Old Adam within each of us, so that he no longer lives within us. Then God speaks His Word of Gospel, the power of which raises up the New Man of faith. In this new life we are made able to believe, observe, and be blessed according to those things He has commanded. This is His ultimate purpose for His ultimate Word, that His command of eternal life might be brought to fruition in the lives of all whom He has chosen in Christ, and continues to preserve in Christ through His powerful, life-giving Word!

We pray: We beseech Thee, Almighty God, mercifully to look upon Thy people, that by Thy great goodness we may be governed and preserved evermore both in body and soul; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

“Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” Luke 19:38

Our Lord enters Jerusalem, and the people cry out to Him: “Blessed is (He) Who comes in the Name of the Lord!” But just yesterday we saw that He is true God. True God is everywhere. So why fight the masses in the crowded city? Why not go out on a lake or into a nice meadow and cry out, “Blessed is He Who comes in the Name of the Lord!”? The answer seems obvious: You don’t go just anywhere. You go where the Savior locates Himself to give us salvation! So they go to Jerusalem, and as He is about to come among them, they chant this song.

And we do the same thing! As the Divine Service unfolds, first, we receive the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon. And then, as He is about to come among us in His Body and Blood on the altar, we too welcome Him by chanting “Blessed is He Who comes in the Name of the Lord.” And unlike many of the unwise among whom we live, we know better than to claim that we can do this “just as well” out on the lake in a fishing boat. We know to go where our Lord locates Himself in His body and blood...where He promises to be giving Himself to us for the forgiveness of sins.

“Lord Jesus Christ, I give You thanks that You do regularly give Yourself to me in the Holy Sacrament for the forgiveness of sins. Fill my heart with zeal to receive this saving gift often, for the nourishment of my soul. Amen.”

“Therefore David calls Him ‘Lord’; how is He then his Son?”  
Luke 20:44

Jesus has just turned away quite an array of those who would challenge His authority: Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes. Then He really puts their heads to spinning: The teachers of Israel expected that the Christ would be a descendant of David. But in the Psalms, David refers to this coming Christ as his Lord! So Jesus asks them how David’s Son could possibly also be David’s Lord...and nobody had any idea.

It really doesn’t make any sense...unless the Christ is both true God and true Man, truly both David’s Creator and David’s procreation. This is exactly Who Jesus is, which in part accounts for the fact that the entire brain-trust of His opponents find themselves utterly unable to refute Him!

Let us not try. We have all kinds of excuses and rationalizations for dodging Jesus’ claim on our lives. Repent of all of those. Instead, embrace Him Who, as true man was able to be your substitute, and as true God was infinite and so able to offer up a sacrifice sufficient to atone for the sin of the world! Through faith in Him, you have forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

“Lord Jesus Christ, I give You thanks for Who You are, and for what You have done for me. I repent of all my sins, and rejoice in the gift of Your forgiveness. Have mercy on me. Amen.”

“But the chief priests plotted to put Lazarus to death also.”

Down to the present day, zealots of false religions persecute the Christian faithful, even unto death. Often hatched by its chief teachers, the plot to destroy Christians becomes part and parcel of the religion itself. Out of hatred for the Christ, Whom they cannot destroy, and on account of the testimony to Christ’s gracious work that the Christian manifests in his daily life, the purveyors of false religion plot the demise of the faithful. Sometimes the aim is to rob the Christian of one of the greatest gifts that Christ gives--the very gift of life--but the ultimate goal of every false religion is to steal from the Christian the greatest of all gifts: eternal life through faith in Christ alone.

By God’s grace the chief priests were foiled in the effort to kill Lazarus. And, by God’s grace, we who are yet alive in this world have been preserved from hostilities at the hands of our enemies. Yet we must remain vigilant, for we Christians, like our brother Lazarus, have been raised from the dead by the Word of Christ. We stand as those in whom the work of Christ is manifest, having been baptized into Him and having been filled with Him when we feast upon His very flesh and blood. By our life of faith and love we are a living testimony to Him and to the one true faith, even to the end of our lives in this world--and the beginning of eternal life with Him!

We pray: We beseech Thee, Almighty God, mercifully to look upon Thy people, that by Thy great goodness we may be governed and preserved evermore both in body and soul; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

“And he laid Him in a tomb.”

It was courageous for Joseph of Arimathea to obtain the body of the crucified Christ and to bury Him. This was an open testimony to the enemies of Jesus regarding his status as a disciple of Christ, marking himself as an easy target for persecution at the hands of the same people who delivered Jesus to death.

Even more, though, this act was a courageous witness before heaven and earth of his enduring faith in God. Joseph exemplifies all Christians of the Old Testament, who were waiting for God’s long-promised Messiah to come into the world. In all that Jesus said and did Joseph heard and saw the fulfillment of God’s promises concerning the Christ. The signs that accompanied His final hours of suffering, and the moment of His death upon the cross urged him to confess, like the Roman centurion, “Truly this was the Son of God.”

Perhaps Joseph did not understand fully at the time that it was a divine necessity for the Son of God to suffer and die for the sins of the world. But he did understand that suffering and death is part of the Christian life. Even in the midst of his sorrow, he continued to believe in God and faithfully carried out God’s commandments. He buried the dead body of Jesus like he would bury any other Christian, in the sure hope that God would raise Him up one day. He did not need to wait long to see that hope realized—and to realize that Christ’s resurrection is what gives the same hope to all who continue courageously to believe!

We pray: We beseech Thee, Almighty God, mercifully to look upon Thy people, that by Thy great goodness we may be governed and preserved evermore both in body and soul; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

“Now there was also a dispute among them, as to which of them should be considered the greatest.” Luke 22:24

How sad. And yet how typical of the Church and the people in it down through the ages. They weren’t arguing about who would get to be beheaded vs. who would have to die by being crucified upside down, of course. They were thinking in terms of glory. Who would get to be looked upon as better than whom? Who would enjoy greater prestige? And they did this right after our Lord instituted the Holy Supper!

Dear ones in Christ, think about what it means that our Lord gives us His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. It means not only that you are forgiven and you are His dearly loved child...it means that the guy three people down the communion rail from you is too! Thus we pray at the conclusion of the Lord’s Supper that God would strengthen us “through this salutary gift in faith toward Thee, and in fervent love toward one another.”

We say of ourselves “poor, miserable sinner.” Anything more than that is gift, grace, what God has worked in us and not what we have accomplished for ourselves. God grant us not only to rejoice in the gifts He has given us, but also to rejoice in the gifts He gives our brothers and sisters in Christ, and so to be graciously unconcerned to do anything but to be faithful toward God, and to serve one another in “fervent love.”

“Thank you, Lord, not only for saving me, but for saving my brothers and sisters in Christ as well. Grant us so to love one another, that we would be Your gifts to each other. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.”

“So Peter went out and wept bitterly.” Luke 22:62

Peter said he wouldn't deny his Lord. Peter said he would die before he denied his Lord. Then, Peter denied his Lord...three times...twice before the fearsome interrogation of, well, a servant girl. No excuses, no “I was under a lot of stress” or “I was having a bad day” or “I only kinda sorta denied Him.” No, Peter had just flat blown it. He was guilty as sin, and he wept bitterly at his shameful failing.

Have you ever had a moment like that? Most of us have, and we probably should have had more...moments we softened with our lying excuses about why our sin wasn't so bad. Judas had a moment like that too, only he hung himself. So, two things to notice here:

First, there's a difference between the work of the Holy Spirit calling you to repentance, and the work of the devil telling you to give up hope. Do not listen to the devil. Jesus died to take your sins away. So for heaven's sake, let Him have them. Second, you really do have a sin problem. So stay repentant. Stay trusting in Jesus' death on the cross for your sins. Repentantly and faithfully trusting in Him, stay forgiven. The arms of His mercy do ever remain open to you.

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on us as You had mercy on St. Peter. Grant us such joy in the gift of Your forgiveness that we sincerely lament our sins, and by the help of Your Holy Spirit, grant us to amend our sinful lives. Amen.”

“It is as you say.”

Pontius Pilate asks Jesus about His identity, “Are You the King of the Jews?” And Jesus gives these words as His answer: “It is as you say.” At first glance, this appears to be an indirect answer to a direct question. Certainly, the answer given here is less direct than Jesus' invocation of the divine name, “I am,” to describe Himself on other occasions. Yet, Jesus' answer could not be more direct, for what He said was directed straight to the heart of Pilate. Answering the question in this way, Jesus was turning the question back to the questioner, seeking Pilate's own response to the question of Jesus' identity. By his response to the question Pilate would reveal what he believes in his heart about the identity of Jesus—and whether this King of the Jews is his King and Savior.

“It is as you say.” The answer that Jesus gives to Pilate's question speaks to the vital importance of one's confession of the divinely-revealed truth. Jesus is the King of the Jews--the Savior of God's people--and that remains true no matter how many men might deny it. What does matter is whether a man acknowledges the truth that God has revealed by His Word and through His Spirit about salvation from sin and death through faith in His Son. As it was for Pilate, so it is for any man, “It is as you say. . . . For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation” (Romans 10:10).

We pray: We beseech Thee, Almighty God, mercifully to look upon Thy people, that by Thy great goodness we may be governed and preserved evermore both in body and soul; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

“The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

With regard to spiritual powers, the flesh is weak indeed. In truth, it is powerless. We are conceived and born with a flesh inherited from our fallen father Adam, and it is one that is utterly corrupted by sin and spiritually dead. This is a truth that the Small Catechism confesses: “I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him.” Thanks be to God, Who graciously brings life to the dead! Through His Gospel God raises this dead flesh to life by the same divine power that raised His Son, Christ Jesus, from the dead, breathing into us the Spirit of Life, His Holy Spirit.

Yet this flesh remains weak. It remains powerless even after we are called to faith by the Gospel. This is exemplified by Peter, James, and John, who were the inner circle among Jesus’ disciples, whose physical weariness at a time of spiritual crisis in the Garden of Gethsemane symbolizes the flesh’s utter inability to sustain itself. All Christians are totally dependent upon God throughout our lives for spiritual life.

Thanks be to God that His Spirit is willing indeed! The Holy Spirit not only calls us to faith, but also continuously calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies, and keeps us in the one true faith. Through His Baptism, Absolution, and Supper, God gives new life to the flesh, daily and richly forgiving sins and assuring believers of eternal life in body and soul in glory forever.

We pray: We beseech Thee, Almighty God, mercifully to look upon Thy people, that by Thy great goodness we may be governed and preserved evermore both in body and soul; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

“But they shouted, saying, ‘Crucify Him, crucify Him!’” Luke 23:21

“Why does God let this happen? What good can ever come of it?” Have you ever asked this sort of question? Something terrible happens...maybe some horrific world news event, maybe some personal life catastrophe...but whatever it was, it made you wonder: Such an evil. It just doesn’t seem like God should have allowed it.

There is no greater evil conceivable than that people would cry out for the crucifixion of the holy, innocent, perfect Son of God. What a total miscarriage of any form of justice whatsoever! It’s as sinful and as wrong as it gets...and yet by means of this, God brings about the sacrifice that accomplishes the salvation of the world.

So too you should know: God does not just “work around” the evils that transpire in your life. He co-opts them, and uses sometimes the most awful things to bring about His will, and His saving good purposes in your life and in the lives of others.

They cry “crucify Him,” and crucify they did...on *Good Friday*. Rejoice that God’s will is done, even by way of the wickedness of man. Rejoice, for in Christ the unjustly crucified One, your sins are forgiven you.

“Lord God heavenly Father, grant me grace to bear the injustices that are done against me, just as Your Son has suffered unjustly on account of me and my sin, and given me eternal life. Amen.”

Luther cautions against having a morbid Lent, one in which we—like the women of Jerusalem—weep over Jesus and what He suffers in such a way that we pity Him when, really, we are the ones in need of being pitied. Considering the burden that He, the green tree, bears, how will a tree that is dried out and brittle from sin going to fare when it is under such trial? Neither the inhabitants of Jerusalem in its coming fall four decades later, nor the disciples who will scatter in a matter of hours, nor we who live in relative peace are able to withstand by our own powers or merit the fiery darts of the devil, the cares and pleasures of the world, and the corrupt thoughts, words, and deeds that bubble up constantly from our own sinful flesh.

The key to not having an unholy fixation upon the wrong things in Lent is to see that the very thing Jesus says to these women—“Weep not for Me, but for yourselves and for your children”—is something that He has already done Himself. He has already wept over Jerusalem. He has already pitied Zion. His gut was wrenched over His nation, dying in their sins. He, therefore, redirects them to consider what the real tragedy would be: their staying attached to the shadows that prefigured Him (the Temple and its worship) instead of clinging to His Body that cast those shadows. (Col. 2:16-17)

In this way we understand the rest of this chapter. From the cross Jesus both dispenses and earns the forgiveness of sins, which means life with Him in Paradise. The veil in the Temple is torn in two, as the Crucified Christ is the Throne of Grace, by Whom we have access to the Father forever.

The scattering of the disciples reminds us of what our relationship to Jesus is: we are the sheep; He is the Shepherd. When we look at the cowardice displayed by the disciples, we might fantasize that we would do better, since we live after the crucifixion and after the resurrection. In sober-thinking moments, though, we know that our flesh is no less troubled than theirs was with thoughts of earthly security and comfort. If our Shepherd were smitten, we would scatter.

Only by the grace of God in Christ can we stand and stay—as these scattered ones later would do. His grace has enlightened us by the Gospel, so that we see that our Shepherd was smitten for our iniquities, punished so that we could have peace with God. Thus, even in His being stricken He was acting as our Shepherd. Shepherded by the slain Lamb Who is risen from the dead, there neither was, nor is, reason for us to scatter. When we suffer the assaults of the devil today, these cannot separate Him from shepherding us; we are kept through faith in the obedience, suffering, and death of Jesus.

Our enemies still try this same tactic, nonetheless, today. They try to strike at our Shepherd—and the shepherds He appoints over us—so that we will abandon Jesus by abandoning the sound teaching that our pastor brings to us. Thanks be to God that He has given us His clear and wholesome Word and His Church’s Confessions that declare it, so that we know always to embrace that Word proclaimed by our shepherds, being gathered by it to partake rightly in the body and blood of our Shepherd, offered for us so that we may be scattered no more!

“My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?”

This is not mere pain that cries out. Most certainly, it is not doubt: it is not for Himself that Jesus utters these words, but for those who will hear Him. He cries out as One Who has no reason to question His Father’s constancy, nor His own faithfulness, as One—the only One—Whose relationship with the Father has no reason to be disrupted. Yet, disrupted it is, as disrupted as can be: God has abandoned Him.

We can never make this cry. We have often abandoned God, but He has never abandoned us. The very moments in which we would doubt His love, when we are grieved and beaten down with trial, the very fact that we are yet living and not cast to Hell gives certainty that we are not, indeed, abandoned. Instead, we experience the cross upon us so that we may remember that He was forsaken for us. These things that we, by our sins, have brought into this world—upon ourselves and upon one another—He uses to drive us back to the suffering of Christ that saves us from Hell.

The One Who cries out suffers all of Man’s scorn, all of Hell’s evil, and all of the wrath of God over all men’s sins at once. Jesus suffers abandonment by God on the cross—God abandoned by God!—all that we would suffer in Hell is upon Him, and He cries out. He cries out so that we might see the injustice of it all: the only Righteous One suffers for the sins of all sinners.

He cries out so that we may see the victory soon to be revealed, as well. “MY God,” He cries, because His bearing all our sin cannot end in His being abandoned forever, but only in the triumph by which He brings us sinners—cleansed and forgiven—into being separated from God no more.

Man is confused about what a good work is, trying to judge between works based on the concerns of life in this world—or by looking at God as if He were a worldly ruler. By such a standard, selling the woman’s ointment and box and giving the proceeds to the care and feeding of the poor might be a better work than pouring it on Jesus. Yet, Jesus speaks against His disciples’ evaluation.

Some misunderstand Jesus’ rebuke and think a truly good work must be something done toward God with no benefit to Man. Thus, those whom Jesus condemned for not honoring father and mother, giving what should have supported their parents to the Temple, instead. So, also, the works done in the monastic life to try to earn status before God.

Rather, the faith displayed by this woman’s work causes it to be God-pleasing. She was confessing the upcoming death of God the Son in her place. As the writer of Hebrews teaches us in his eleventh chapter, this is the dividing line between good works and evil, from the sacrifice of Cain and Abel to the end of the world: whether they are not only in accord with the Commandments, but whether they are done from faith in Christ alone.

From this, too, we see what it is that makes one worthy to receive the Supper Jesus here institutes: not our piety and commitment (that varies wildly, like Peter’s), but faith in these words, “given and shed for you for the remission of sins.”

The stalwart ones cannot fight back sleep even for an hour...nor withstand even one “interrogation” by a servant girl. The betrayer is so close that he hands the Lord over with a kiss. Those who loved the Messiah would try to keep Him from saving them, attacking the brigade with the sword. Jesus, though, resigns Himself to what is necessary to save us and lets Himself be taken away, never speaking in His own defense, but saying only enough to make clear the reality behind what is seen.

All of this is so that the Father’s will might be done, that what His will had mapped out in prophecy would be seen to be fulfilled, so that not only would the Christ earn your salvation, but that you would have a solid basis for your confidence in Him. “The Scriptures,” Jesus says, “declare that it is necessary for things to be this way”—not that God compelled anyone to an evil action, but that each sinner’s deeds would, in the end, accomplish the will of God for salvation. Whether the open acts of evil by the unbelievers or the misguided words and actions of the Christians, all were woven into what was required to have Jesus go to the cross at exactly the right time and in exactly the right way, so that your sins are paid for and so that you trust in His payment and now possess the forgiveness that He won.

What, then, of the machinations of devil, world, and flesh against you, His child, today? Still, “All things work together for [our] good” (Rom. 8:28) as God’s good and gracious will must certainly be done. (Third and Seventh Petitions)

Is confession good for the soul? Judas confessed his sin to those in charge of distributing the atonement, but in the end he murdered himself.

Why, then, do we Lutherans retain the confession of sins? To this, our Apology (that is, “Defense”) of the Augsburg Confession answers: “For we also retain confession, especially on account of the absolution, as being the word of God which, by divine authority, the power of the keys pronounces upon individuals. Therefore it would be wicked to remove private absolution from the Church.” (Apology VI:2)

The problem in today’s reading is that the wicked priests knew nothing of absolution! They did not point Judas to the Temple sacrifices, much less to the Messiah to Whom those sacrifices pointed (and Whom they now had under trial and on the way to crucifixion), so that they might give him Christ’s atonement to trust in for forgiveness and life. Instead, having thrown away the Messiah, having thrown away the significance of the sacrifices, having perverted the Temple—the place of God’s presence—into a place for those hungry for power and wealth, they told this one who had served them and betrayed his Master, to do the impossible. Their words mean this: “Fix your sins yourself.”

Oh, the horror that must have overcome Judas, the absolute despair! He had thrown off Jesus, and if he understood nothing else, he knew that he was now a murderer of the innocent. From those who should have given God’s forgiveness, he received none, even while God the Son was in the midst of suffering to earn forgiveness for everyone!

“We...retain confession...on account of the absolution.” May our hearts be ever fixed upon this treasure of Christ!