

SATURDAY, JUNE 3: ACTS 19-20

In the last few verses of Chapter 20 St. Paul warned the overseers of the churches in Asia of the reality that savage wolves would attack the faithful. These attackers would come from both outside and inside the Church. He warns the pastors to “take heed to yourselves and to all the flock.”

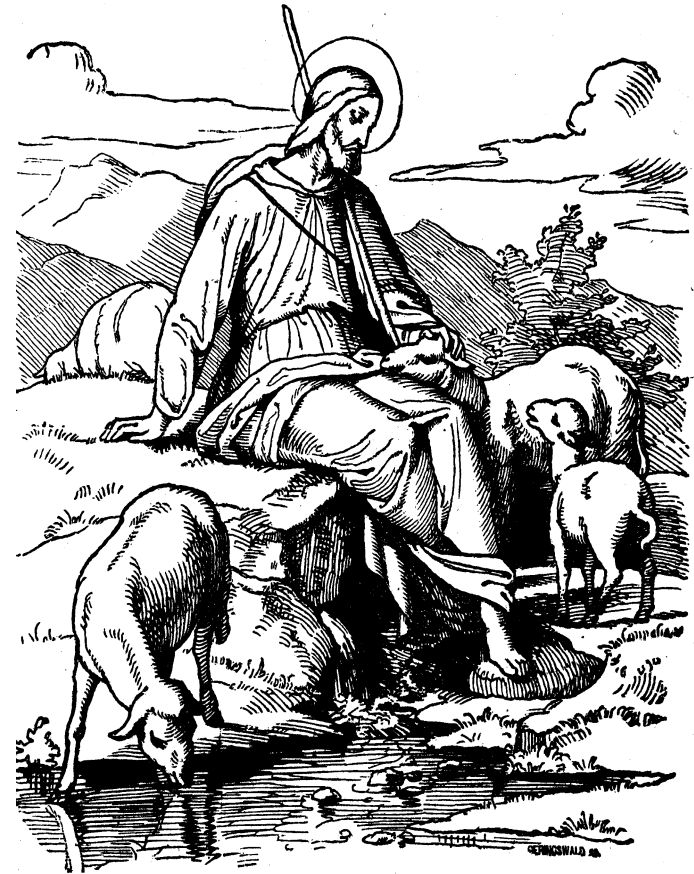
Not only did Paul warn them, he also gave direction on how to overcome. He says, “Therefore watch, and remember... And now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

Today the Church is still attacked by savage wolves. Today faithful pastors are still commended to God and to the word of His grace. Through the power of the Holy Spirit that Word of grace is still able to build them and the saints up. The only means to protect his sheep that the Pastor has is still the Word of God and the Sacraments. As these Means of Grace are proclaimed and administered, the Holy Spirit works faith, strengthens faith and confirms faith.

Through these means of grace, God gathers His people. Through these means of grace, God keeps His people in faith, and through these means of grace He brings His people into His heavenly home. Thanks be to the Holy Trinity that he has begun, continues, and completes our journey home.

Almighty, Everlasting God, make us to have always a devout will toward Thee and to serve Thy Majesty with a pure heart. Amen.

THE LUTHERAN HERALD



MAY 1–JUNE 3, 2017

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The Calendar

May 1 (M)	St. Philip and St. James, Apostles
May 7	Easter 3
May 14	Easter 4
May 21	Easter 5
May 25	The Ascension of our Lord
May 28	Exaudi

Spring Quarter of St. Ignatius Seminary Concludes May 18

Seminarian Josiah Scheck is near completion of another quarter of his seminary studies. This quarter's classes have included "Isaiah" with Pr. Stefanski, "Creation and Redemption" with Dcn. Oncken, "Reformation" with Bp. Heiser and "Greek Readings" with Pr. Rydecki. The Summer quarter will begin June 5.

2017 Colloquium and 12th Annual Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of North America

The Colloquium (Free Conference) and the Diocesan Synod will take place at Salem Lutheran Church in Malone, Texas from Tuesday, May 30th through Thursday, June 1st. The theme for the Colloquium will be this year's 500th Anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. As is our custom, all pastors and deacons of the diocese are expected to be in attendance; laymen of congregations served by the pastors and deacons of the diocese are welcome to attend the Colloquium and open sessions during the Synod, as are other visitors; however, visitors should be in contact with the bishop prior to attendance. For further information, please contact Bishop Heiser either by email (bishopheiser@mac.com) or by calling Salem Lutheran Church (254-533-2330).

FRIDAY, JUNE 2: ACTS 17-18

In the reading for today one thing is very clear. When the Word of God is preached and taught in its truth and purity it always gets a reaction. It is either believed or it is rejected. Wherever the Word of God is preached it causes division. The Word separates truth from lie. This is so profound and pronounced that in Corinth the Lord came in a vision to St. Paul to strengthen him and said "Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city."

In the Church today these words of Christ still give courage to Christians. Today, as at the time of Paul, the Word is still under attack. Many, both in and outside the Church, still don't want the truth of the Gospel proclaimed. Many want the Church to be just like the world and will do anything to destroy the authority of the Word and those who proclaim it because they think that the way to attract people to the Church is to not be "too controversial".

However, still in our world today disciples are made only by the faithful preaching of the Word and the faithful administration of the Sacraments. And the Lord still promises to be with His people, working in and through the faithful proclamation of His Holy Word. He says to us, "Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent, for I am with you" (Acts 18:9-10). And, "lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

Almighty, Everlasting God, make us to have always a devout will toward Thee and to serve Thy Majesty with a pure heart. Amen.

THURSDAY, JUNE 1: ACTS 15-16

In reading through the Book of Acts we read over and over that the brethren went out and preached the Good News of Jesus just as He told them to do in Matthew 28:19-20. As the Word was preached, God the Holy Spirit worked faith in Jews and Gentiles alike and brought them into the Church just as Jesus had promised. We also see the bane of false teaching following right along with the Word. Sinful human nature hates not being able to save itself.

In the Baptismal service in many Lutheran hymnals we read the words, “We also learn from the Word of God that we all are conceived and born sinful and so are in need of forgiveness. We would be lost forever unless delivered from sin, death, and everlasting condemnation. But the Father of all mercy and grace has sent His Son Jesus Christ, who atoned for the sin of the whole world that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

After the Baptism there are these words, “Through Baptism God has added you to His own people to declare the wonderful deeds of our Savior, who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light.”

It was not through our work of righteousness, but through God’s mercy that we were brought into His Kingdom; nor do these works keep us in His Kingdom. We are saved solely by grace through faith.

Almighty, Everlasting God, make us to have always a devout will toward Thee and to serve Thy Majesty with a pure heart. Amen.

MONDAY, MAY 1: TITUS, PHILEMON

Titus and Philemon both appear to be “pastoral epistles” or letters written to holders of the Office of the Holy Ministry, but have valuable insights from Saint Paul that are beneficial to all believers. Both letters deal primarily with interpersonal relations, especially focusing on such interactions between believers within the Church. The main point is that all of our actions are to be governed by sound doctrine above all other considerations, for through this our thoughts and deeds will always be in line with Christ’s teaching.

The faithful are to be eager for good works or service toward others, especially those within the body of believers. While Titus specifically presents the qualities that an “elder” (what we know as a pastor or clergyman) should possess—these represent qualities that should be found in every faithful Christian. Proper Christian behavior is based on the fact that the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, and therefore those who believe in Christ are to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives as they await His return. The Apostle masterfully presents the grace of Christ’s reconciliation that should overflow from each Christian toward those with whom they interact in daily life.

Lord of All Power and Might, Giver of all good things, graft into our hearts a love of Your Word and will, nourishing us with all goodness that we may love and serve our neighbor while joyfully pursuing Your holy doctrine in all things; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

TUESDAY, MAY 2: HEBREWS 1-4

Since Jesus Christ partook of our flesh and blood through His holy incarnation, He also shares in the temptation to sin that is manifestly common to all of humanity. This sharing in our flesh and blood makes Him a most fitting Mediator or High Priest for us as well as the perfect sacrifice. For He is tempted just like us, but unlike us He does not succumb to that temptation and sin.

Thus by uniting with us through His incarnation, He likewise through His death is able to destroy the one who holds the power of death over us, that is, the devil, and thus deliver us from the fear of death which subjects us to lifelong slavery. Our Lord achieves this blessed redemption of us by His holy vicarious death that removes the enmity between us and God by making propitiation for our sins. Because of this overwhelming grace mercifully shown us in Jesus Christ, we should take care to follow His righteous word, avoiding evil and unbelief that wish to draw us away from the living God.

O God, for our redemption You gave Your Only-Begotten Son to the death of the cross and by His glorious resurrection delivered us from the power of the enemy. Grant that all our sin may be drowned through daily repentance and that day by day we may arise to live before You in righteousness and purity forever; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 31: ACTS 13-14

In our reading for today St. Paul is talking to both Jews and Gentiles. He recounts to his hearers the Old Testament prophecies and promises about the Messiah Who was to come. Then he explained how Jesus Christ had fulfilled all those prophecies and promises. He uses the Word of God to teach both groups about Jesus. He says, “but He whom God raised up saw no corruption. Therefore, let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses.”

Here St. Paul clearly says that “everyone who believes is justified.” This justification is received only through God-given belief in the atonement won for us on the Cross.

It is true that some who heard Paul speak refused to believe, and rose up in opposition to Paul’s teaching. But it is also true that when the Gentiles heard this Good News, “they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed,” that is, those to whom the Holy Spirit, working through the Word, had given faith were declared justified by God.

Through the Word, in Baptism we who have been brought into this faith are also glad and glorify the word of the Lord. We too, having been given faith, have been appointed to eternal life.

Almighty, Everlasting God, make us to have always a devout will toward Thee and to serve Thy Majesty with a pure heart. Amen.

TUESDAY, MAY 30: ACTS 11-12

The world at the time of Acts was not so different from our world today. Governments were run by evil and corrupt leaders, the religions of the day were teaching falsehood and leading people away from the True God. Into this culture came the Apostles teaching and preaching God's Word and laying out the truth in Law and Gospel.

It is quite obvious that the New Testament Christian Church had to deal with many problems, heresies, and prejudices. In the Book of Acts we see the new Christian Church use only the Word of God to combat error and to teach the truth. And by the power of God, working through the Word, the Church grew rapidly.

However, there is a great difference in the Church today. Today the Christian Church has little or no regard for God's Word. There is little concern for Law and Gospel and the Sacraments. It seems more interested in social justice, equal opportunity for all, and in doing good deeds. As a result the Church is shrinking and failing. Why?

God gave His Apostles and the Church the tools needed to grow the Church—the Word of God and the Sacraments—and promised to work through these means. When Peter and all those scattered by the persecution, those from Cyprus and Cyrene, and Barnabas went out they had the authority of God's promise! They spoke the Word of God! And a great number believed! (Acts 11:20-21). When the Church uses the tools that God gave—His Word and Sacraments—it continues to grow and produce believers. The Word does not fail!

Almighty, Everlasting God, make us to have always a devout will toward Thee and to serve Thy Majesty with a pure heart. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 3: HEBREWS 5-7

The office of high priest is discussed in detail within these chapters, focusing especially on the fact that the priest is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. The two qualifications of being selected from among men and called by God means the priest is able to represent humanity before God with legitimate authority. Jesus Christ meets both these requirements more completely than any other priest.

These texts also warn professing Christians to beware of the danger of apostasy, the horrible sin that leads one to fall away from God and the doctrine delivered through His Highest Priest. This New Testament epistle compares Jesus to the Old Testament priest Melchizedek. Of particular significance is Melchizedek's prefiguring of Christ by holding both the office of King and of Priest. That he was a real, historical figure is clear, but the author of Hebrews uses the silence of Scripture about Melchizedek's genealogy to portray him as a prefiguration of Christ. Thus Melchizedek's priesthood anticipates Christ's eternal existence and His unending priesthood.

Almighty God, You bless us abundantly through our High Priest Jesus Christ and His most holy ministry of grace. Show those in error the light of Your truth so that they may return in faith by grace to the way of righteousness and follow all such things as are pleasing to You; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

THURSDAY, MAY 4: HEBREWS 8-10

Today's verses build magnificently on the foundation laid in Wednesday's chapters. Through these inspired words the abundant grace and true glory of Christ's Priesthood is expounded on extensively. The depth and width and length of that priestly ministry is beautifully summed up by God's simple declaration of "I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more" (8:12). The subsequent verses explain how Jesus Christ acting as our High Priest has brought this about for each of us who look to Him as our Minister of a more perfect covenant.

These chapters make a wonderful, and I would argue completely necessary, comparison between the Old Testament sacramental sacrifices for sin and Christ's sacrificial death of atonement for sins. You cannot truly understand Christ the cross and the empty tomb (the New Testament) without understanding the Old Testament sacrifices. For "not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of His own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption" (9:12) Christ our High Priest has mediated our holy absolution before God. Jesus has secured this eternal inheritance for all believers through His once for all vicarious death because "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (9:22).

O God, the protector of all who trust in You, without Whom nothing is strong and nothing is holy, multiply Your mercy on us that, with You as our Ruler and Guide, we may be found to be "those who have faith and preserve their souls" (10:39). Amen.

MONDAY, MAY 29: ACTS 9-10

In Acts 9 one of my favorite Biblical characters shows up—Ananias. He was a real human being. Jesus told him to go meet Saul of Tarsus. In fear Ananias said, I've heard about him! He wants to kill me! Are You sure You want me to go? In the Lord's answer to Ananias' question is given a glimpse of what Saul is to accomplish in the future. Ananias is merely to aid in the first step, the Lord will do the rest. As Ananias obediently went he saw immediate results.

It is patently obvious that you and I also have a difficult time following God's Word. Like fearful Ananias, like St. Paul, and all the other saints in the Bible, we are sinners forgiven by the Blood of Christ. As Dr. Luther writes in his hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God":

*Tho' devils all the world should fill, All eager to devour us,
We tremble not, we fear no ill, They shall not overpow'r us.
This world's prince may still Scowl fierce as he will,
He can harm us none, He's judged; the deed is done;
One little word can fell him.
The Word they still shall let remain Nor any thanks have for it;
He's by our side upon the plain With His good gifts and Spirit.
And take they our life, Goods, fame, child, and wife,
Let these all be gone, They yet have nothing won;
The Kingdom ours remaineth.*

Our Lord is indeed a Mighty Fortress against all the wiles of the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh!

Almighty, Everlasting God, make us to have always a devout will toward Thee and to serve Thy Majesty with a pure heart. Amen.

SATURDAY, MAY 27: ACTS 5-6

“Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common” (Acts 4:32).

Properties were sold and the proceeds were turned over to the apostles to provide for the needs of all the members of the nascent Christian Church. Ananias and Sapphira were not slain by God because they did not turn over the entire amount but because they held some back and reported that they had submitted the entirety. Theirs was the sin against the Holy Spirit, the sin of unbelief. They lied to God.

You and I sin much daily. If we say we have no sin, we lie and deceive ourselves, but God cannot be deceived. Many times we have vowed to amend our sinful ways and many times we have failed in keeping our promises. That which we should do, we don't; that which we should not do, we do. Wretched persons that we are, who will deliver us from this body of death? Thanks be to God that when we confess our sins, lying neither to ourselves nor to God, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:8-9).

Lord God, heavenly Father, replace any weakness within me that looks upon sin but lightly and casually presumes acquittal on Your part with that peculiar strength which confesses with sorrow and horror my habitual, wanton breaking of Your holy Law yet turns to You in the confidence that for Jesus' sake my sins are removed from me as far as the east is from the west; In Jesus' Name. Amen

FRIDAY, MAY 5: HEBREWS 11-13

Our final chapters focus intently on faith and its eternal value regarding justification and sanctification. For through faith by grace we are declared justified, and through faith by grace we walk in the word and will of God. This theme is presented throughout the Old Testament references, and commended to those who lead God's elect now, as well as held aloft as the primary quality and goal of believers until the end of this age.

Faith sets before us life and death, blessing and curse, and calls us to choose life. Faith in God and His promises is life, while faith in everything else is death. Faith is crucial, for only by faith can man live by the invisible realities of God and enter upon God's eternal future. The entire scriptural record of the patriarchs is a record of their faith. God joins us to them and their faith record that all might be made perfect together in Christ. This perfecting means we need the Word that warns us of the danger of growing weary or fainthearted; the Word that warns against growing bitter and resentful toward God's Fatherly disciplining love, as well as the rebellion of apostasy.

We dare not forget that He Who is speaking to us now and is warning us from Heaven is the omnipotent Lord. We should look to the Author of this great gift of faith with reverence and awe, being impelled by faith and in fear and love offering acceptable worship. This faith guards our souls and compels us to make intercessions for and of the Church.

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

SATURDAY, MAY 6: JAMES 1-3

James is sometime referred to as the Proverbs of the New Testament since it is structured similarly and addresses what can be described as the wisdom of living one's life in Christian faith. Luther believed the author wanted to guard against those who relied on faith without works, and tried to accomplish this by focusing on the law rather than love. I think Luther's assessment of James is worth noting in our present age that desperately wants to make all things good acceptable and normal under the pretense of being "loving." Even those things that are clearly contrary to God's word and will.

The text before us strongly promotes what I will call a "confessional faith" that boldly confesses itself before the world in word "and deed." Many self-proclaimed Christians attempt to live as though there are no guides, rules, statutes, and commands from God regarding what is acceptable and pleasing before Him. We do not conform our lives to these laws of God out of fear or an attempt to work our way into salvation, but rather out of love and thankful gratitude for the salvation that has been bestowed upon us purely by grace through Christ. James instructs that we do well to love our neighbor as ourselves, striving to show impartiality while avoiding any transgression of God's Law. Aligning one's words and deeds with God's Word is the beginning of wisdom for the Scriptures come from above through holy inspiration for our edification and building up in the faith.

Almighty God, all that we possess is from Your loving hand. Give us grace that we may live our lives totally ruled by Your holy righteous will and Word. Amen.

FRIDAY, MAY 26: ACTS 3-4

A name is a powerful thing. A good name is a prized possession. So important a thing it is that not only has God commanded His Name to be used rightly according to the First Table of the Law, so also is the reputation of our neighbors' to be protected according to the Second Table.

The power of a good name is evident when, for example, one visits with someone who might say, "I knew your grandfather well. He was a good man." Quite beyond that, however, is the power of God's Name. God the Father is Yahweh, the "Ground of All Being." God the Son is Jesus because He will save His people from their sins. The names of God reflect divine character and work and are not mere labels for casual identification.

The lame man looked at Peter and John. Peter, by the power of the Holy Spirit, immediately perceived the man's faith in the goodness and power of God and he was thereby healed. He rose to his feet at once, walking about and even leaping into the air with joy as he praised God for the miracle. Because of Who God is and what He does, we are rightly instructed to fear and love God so that we do not curse, swear, use satanic arts, lie, or deceive by His Name, but call upon it every trouble, pray, praise and give thanks.

*All hail the pow'r of Jesus' Name! Let angels prostrate fall;
Bring forth the royal diadem And crown Him Lord of all.
Bring forth the royal diadem And crown Him Lord of all.
("All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name"; Edward Perronet, 1779;
339:1, TLH, 1941.)*

THURSDAY, MAY 25: ACTS 1-2

There were two miracles on that great Pentecost two millennia ago, not counting the tongues of fire appearing from nowhere: the sound of a mighty rushing wind and the wonderful addition of 3,000 souls to the newborn Christian Church.

The greater of the miracles that day was the speaking in tongues, that is, known human languages that were foreign to the speakers. The less obvious miracle was the intelligible hearing of that which was spoken in one's own native language from the various locations, the languages of Jews from all over the known world now in Jerusalem to observe the feast.

The message that was spoken and heard was of the wondrous works of God. In response, the people asked a wonderful question, "What does this mean?" God the Holy Ghost, manifested in flame and wind, now moved Saint Peter to speak His truth with extreme clarity, uniting Old Testament prophecy with the miracles and signs God did through Jesus in their midst and culminating in Christ's death and resurrection. This prompted another question: "What shall we do?" "Repent," Peter said, "and be baptized."

May God move powerfully among us also, stirring us to speak His truth in clarity and to hear it as God means us to hear it, truly believing that He does not want any to perish, but that all to come to repentance and be saved.

*Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord! Be all Thy graces now outpoured
On each believer's mind and heart; Thy fervent love to them impart.
Lord, by the brightness of Thy light Thou in the faith dost men unite
Of ev'ry land and ev'ry tongue; This to Thy praise, O Lord, our God
be sung:*

*Hallelujah! Hallelujah! ("Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord!";
Martin Luther, 1524; 224:1, TLH, 1941.)*

MONDAY, MAY 8: 1 PETER 1-2

"But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy" (1 Peter 2:9-10).

Peter certainly knew what it felt like to be changed. God transformed Peter continually, and in dramatic form. God's actions in his life were radical, yet always for the good of Peter and the extension of the Kingdom. God's intervention in Peter's life, choosing him as well as chastening him, was for the eventual good of His disciple and His Church.

God has transformed us as well from "darkness into light." Darkness is an apt description of a world separated from God. The Bible often refers to man as spiritually blind. By our fallen nature, we are ignorant of God; we are unable to see Him. Darkness also typifies our inclination to sin, as we hide ourselves under the cloak of darkness. Light is the complete opposite of darkness; it is driven out of a room where there is light. Light reveals the way on a dark path, or illumines places never before seen. There is simply no substitute for light, and this is especially true of our Light, Jesus Christ.

We pray: Dear Father, You have taken us out of the lost world of darkness, through no merit of our own. Help us in being Your light bearers, giving us the wisdom and strength to reflect Your light so that others may be drawn to it and be saved by it, through Your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

TUESDAY, MAY 9: 1 PETER 3-5

There are many people and many books that prescribe “magic steps” to witnessing. The following passage from today’s reading tells us otherwise. “But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed. For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil” (1 Peter 3:15-17).

What do these words prescribe? First, nurture your faith on a daily basis. Don’t ever take the 1st Commandment lightly, knowing that our sinful nature is always at work to supplant Jesus as Lord. Not only is devotion to His Word vital in the life of the believer, but will help us to convey our message with greater depth and conviction. Second, know what you are talking about and how to explain it. Are you able to present the Gospel to someone who has never heard the message, or to correct someone who has heard it wrong? Third, be kind in your approach. It does no good to witness by coercion. Respect the other person. Remember, you too were once lost, but now have been found.

We pray: Dear God, we thank You for calling us to faith. Help us to prepare our hearts and minds in sharing the message of salvation with others, that they may possess the comfort of salvation that we now enjoy. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 24: JOHN 20-21

Saint Peter, famously ebullient, quick with tongue and sword, violated his own promise and fulfilled Jesus’ prophecy by vehemently denying the Christ three times before the rooster crowed at the end of the night following Jesus’ arrest. (Visitors to modern Jerusalem can stand outside the Church of Saint Peter in Gallicantu, said to be built on the site of Caiaphas’ palace, overlooking the Kidron Valley, and see chickens scratching and strutting in neighboring yards.)

After Jesus’ resurrection, the disciples went to Galilee, where several of them engaged in their former line of work as fishermen. Jesus blessed them from the shore with an enormous haul of fish after a night of fruitless effort. Jesus cooked for them a meal of fish, but Peter ate crow, in a sense.

When Peter had jumped out of the boat to walk on water with Jesus but then sank when he considered the wind and waves, Jesus held out His hand and simply caught him and did not drag him gasping for air back to the boat. So also, here on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias, Jesus was gentle in His restoration of Peter. Gentle, but firm. Three times Peter professed his love for Jesus and three times Jesus instructed him to serve as a shepherd of His flock. Just as the disciples were eating fish that Jesus alone had provided so also in tending the flock the shepherd (pastor) feeds them not from his own resources but with the Word of God which Jesus has given them.

O Lord, O God of Heaven and Earth, bless Your pastors with the steadfastness always to speak the truth in love, forgiving and retaining sins in accordance with Your Word of truth; In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

TUESDAY, MAY 23: JOHN 19

Two locations in Jerusalem purport to be the place where Jesus died and was buried. One is within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, inside the walls of the Old City. The other is located not far outside the Damascus Gate, within a peaceful garden. There are ancient cisterns in the garden, supplying water for the plants. And there is a tomb carved into the rock of the hillside with a cupped track at the entrance where a heavy disc-shaped stone was set to seal it.

Some visitors tend to prefer the Garden Tomb, possibly because it is far less ornate than the one inside the wall and is not caked with the soot of candles and incense. In one corner of the garden, looking out over a nearby modern bus station, one can see a promontory, the face of which has small, shaded indentations created over time as water dissolved the limestone, forming the appearance of a skull (Latin, *calvariae*; Hebrew, *golgotha*).

Pontius Pilate had a sign posted at Calvary, which read in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, "JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS." Inside the Garden Tomb is a more recent sign which reads, "He is not here. He is risen." Regardless which place of crucifixion and burial one might prefer, the fact remains clear to the believer visiting holy sites that he is there because He is not. He is not two, but one Christ, our King, Who alone uttered those words which changed all history: "It is finished."

Heavenly Father, keep me in the joy of Your salvation, trusting that Jesus paid for the sins of all people of all time, and receive my eternal thanks for Your gracious gift of faith through which this truth applies also to me; In Jesus' Name. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 10: 2 PETER

Within today's reading we find two important verses that seem to have an inherent contradiction. "Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:10-11).

Can election, which is totally an act of God's decision and grace, be somehow dependent on man? Important to understand is the context, as well as the division between Law and Gospel. Election is a doctrine that is emphasized to those in need of hearing God's grace and mercy. It is for those who doubt their salvation because they don't see themselves as forgiven; in their minds the ledger of sin is either too long or too strong.

But Peter is addressing Christians who have grown lax in their faith. They are in need of the Law. Their view is, "Since God has given me faith, what does it matter how I live?" Natural man will always need the mirror of the law to avoid self-security. Broken man will always need the comforting assurance that God is the sole source of salvation. Election is a Gospel element, not a law. It should be taught and preached to broken sinners, lest its impact be lessened, or worse, produce carnal security.

We pray: Dear Father in heaven, thank You for the Means of Baptism in which our election is made manifest. Encourage us by Your Spirit to partake regularly of the Word and Supper, that we may be held in the sure bonds of our calling. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THURSDAY, MAY 11: 1 JOHN 1-3

In chapter 3 of John's first epistle it's clear what he wishes to emphasize. In the first two verses, John describes our new relationship with God, twice calling us "children of God." With that wondrous declaration comes also enormous responsibility: "And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness." This addresses the idea of "cheap grace." Since we're incorporated into God's family, we must not only act the part, we must live the part.

There's a connection between justification and sanctification. The former costs us nothing, the latter demands our all. This doesn't mean we'll eventually "get it right" by working ourselves up the sanctification ladder. No matter how hard we try, we'll continue to fall short of God's standard. John himself admits in his first epistle: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." The Christian life will always be a war of the sinner/saint who lives in each of us. We must continue to struggle and fight, knowing that God is there to forgive when we fall, as John continues: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

We pray: Dear Father, let us never cheapen the great gift of salvation You have bestowed upon us. In Jesus Christ, Amen.

MONDAY, MAY 22: JOHN 17-18

It can be irritating, while watching TV or listening to the radio, when a commercial intrudes and a product spokesman instructs viewers and listeners to get the medical or dental care, home financing, legal assistance, and so on, that they deserve by calling such-and-such number or going online. It rangles partly because it is a testimony to the entitlement society in which we live—deserve, indeed!—but mostly because it is a reminder that grace is continually under attack in our world.

According to God's Word of truth, if we get what we truly deserve, we are eternally lost and condemned. Everyone but Jesus has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But, because Jesus—perfectly sinless, obedient, and holy beyond measure—willingly suffered the ultimate humiliation of arrest, mock trial, scourging, and crucifixion even as Barabbas, who was a robber, was set free, you and we who surely have exceeded Peter's perfidious triple denial of the Christ on the night of His betrayal and arrest many times over, are set free.

The Son has set us free. According to the unmerited goodness of our heavenly Father, by simply trusting that Jesus lived, died, and rose again on the third day for the forgiveness of our sins, everlasting life and salvation are ours. "Men made strange,...a murder they save, the Prince of Life they slay" ("My Song Is Love Unknown"; Samuel Crossman, 1623-1683).

Heavenly Father, sanctify me by Your truth. Your Word is truth. Give me a heart eager to share Your Word with a dying world, but protect me from wanting what the world wants, so that my focus remains on Him Whose kingdom is not of this world; In Jesus' Name. Amen.

SATURDAY, MAY 20: JOHN 13–14

We sinners tend to water down laws so that we can feel good about ourselves. More, some even take God's Sacraments and deprive them of their glory and power so that we can take credit for our salvation! Observance of the Lord's Supper fell, in the centuries leading up to the Reformation, to something mechanically received to fulfill a commandment of the Church, rather than giving us the forgiveness of sins won by the very body and blood of Christ that we are receiving. When Luther reemphasized receiving the Sacrament the right way, stripping away what had been added that diminished the importance of faith in Christ's words, he was accused of "abolishing the mass." In the Augsburg Confession, though, we clearly keep the mass, but "condemn those who teach that the Sacraments justify by the outward act, and who do not teach that, in the use of the Sacraments, faith which believes that sins are forgiven, is required."

Today, many try to "sacramentalize" Jesus' washing of feet. They want to wash each other's nice, clean, shoe-wearing, sidewalk-walking feet as if this were what Jesus intended. Such a bare minimum approach leaves them feeling good while neither bearing grace and forgiveness to them, nor understanding what Jesus says and intends. His point is that we are to prefer one another's well-being to our own and to serve one another as He has served us. His question, "Do you know what I have done to you?" leads us to understand that the Law is even more thoroughgoing for those who know grace, forbidding any reduction of the commandments, and urging us washed ones to the cleansing of our feet in Holy Absolution.

We pray: Father, let us not reduce your Law, but find the remedy for our condemnation in Your Son alone. Amen.

FRIDAY, MAY 12: 1 JOHN 4-5

In a portion of today's reading John makes a very bold claim about what his apostleship means: "You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error."

As Peter also claims and explains: "And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:19-21). All false teaching is derived from sources outside the apostolic ring. So-called prophets may claim God's authority, but if their message doesn't ring true with the apostolic Word, it must be rejected.

We pray: Dear God, guide and direct us to always test the spirits from the voices that surround us. Let us continually return to Your Word to judge what we hear. In Jesus' name, Amen.

SATURDAY, MAY 13: 2 AND 3 JOHN, JUDE

The book of Jude is an encouragement to fight for the faith. We hear this clearly in verses 17-18 of this epistle: “But you, beloved, remember the words which were spoken before by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ: how they told you that there would be mockers in the last time who would walk according to their own ungodly lusts.” There has always been, and there always will be, those who willingly or unwittingly lead people away from the truth. Numerous church bodies surround us with a message that distorts God’s Word. Some of them have much in common with the truth, leading many to compromise their faith as they ask “Isn’t this close enough?”

How do we guard against such temptation? If we root ourselves deeply in the Word, when counterfeit doctrine is heard it will be repugnant to our ears. A deep and knowledgeable faith will inevitably result if we immerse ourselves daily in God’s Holy Word. Jude also encourages with this: “But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit...” We should trust the power of the Holy Spirit, who wants nothing more than for us to stay in the one true faith.

We pray: Dear Father, sustain us in the study of Your Word and in our prayer life. We know that by such discipline we are given the strength and wisdom to discern and withstand the assaults of the devil. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

FRIDAY, MAY 19: JOHN 11–12

The signs of Jesus reach a climax in the raising of Lazarus, and immediately the topic shifts to Jesus’ own upcoming death. As with the man born blind, the raising of Lazarus is unprecedented. Jesus had raised others—at their home, even during their funeral—but this was different: Lazarus was not only dead, but buried. Lazarus’s sister even said that Jesus shouldn’t go to the tomb because there would already be a stench. Yet, Jesus went, thanked the Father for always hearing Him, so that those now hearing and seeing would believe, and then called Lazarus forth, bound in his graveclothes. Only the miracle done to show the power of His atonement—the raising of many of the believers from their tombs when He breathed His last on Good Friday and their going into Jerusalem and being seen by many when He had Himself arisen—went beyond this, and both were to show the same thing: that Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

Jesus’ thoughts and words then turn to His crucifixion. Mary, the sister of Lazarus, anoints Jesus, as He says, for His impending burial. Then He heads steadfastly toward Jerusalem, because He is the only good grain of wheat and must die to bear the real fruit that all of His words and works had been pointing to. Still, for all of the miracles He did, He was rejected by many because they had been so conditioned to expect a different sort of Messiah and a salvation that was assured by their own works.

We pray: O Holy Spirit, do not let our presuppositions and predispositions blind us, but ever open our eyes and hearts by Your Word! Amen.

THURSDAY, MAY 18: JOHN 9–10

Jesus teaches us today why we suffer the consequences of sin in our bodies: it is an opportunity for God's works to be revealed in us. If it were that the man born blind had committed a particular sin, or that his parents had, we could expect everyone with the same sin to result in at least one person born blind. While a drunk driver may wrap his car around a tree and be paralyzed, not every drunk driver does this. Nor is everyone in such a wreck drunk. But just as often someone else is harmed by the drunk's transgression. What is true in every case, though, is that God desires above all to bring forgiveness of sins and the perfect healing of the resurrection to everyone who is afflicted. God had such charity toward the rebellious world that it brought Him to the beneficial action of sending His Son, so that everyone who trusts in Him has everlasting life, instead of perishing in the Judgment as deserved, because He has made atonement for all.

With this understanding, Paul Gerhardt asks, "Why should cross and trial grieve me? Christ is here, with His cheer; never will He leave me. Who can rob me of the heaven that God's Son for my own to my faith hath given?" (TLH 523:1). Jesus comes displaying such signs that none before had rendered, healing a man blind from birth, to point to His ability to free us from all of sin's consequences and, indeed, from sin itself.

We pray: O, Good Shepherd, grant that we do not cling to the mere life of the flesh, but always to the life You have given for us on the cross, that we may live with You in resurrected glory. Amen.

MONDAY, MAY 15: JOHN 3–4

In John 4:42 we hear the men of Samaria conclude that Jesus truly is the Christ, "the Savior of the world." Indeed, it is for this cause and purpose that the Father sent Him: because He loved the world and He would have everyone who trusts in Him to be saved (3:16). God so loved the world. Not that He had some sort of friendly affection for the world, but He willed what is good for the world, so that He would also do what was best for it. God so loved the world that He had made, so loved the very rebellious creatures that His holiness required the hating of, that He would send God the Son to make atonement for their sins. God the Son did not come into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world could be saved through faith in Him and His work.

To have such faith, condemnation must come. The condemnation of our sins comes so that we see what we had earned for ourselves, lest we not see the need for Christ and His redemption. Thus Nicodemus must be brought to see how drastic his need was—he needed to be born anew of water and the Spirit! The Samaritan woman had to see how she could not conceal anything from the Messiah, and that she should not want to. Christ can see every one of our faults, but that ought to cheer us, rather than alarm us. For what He could see, He could also die for, and pay for, and free us from.

We pray: Lord Jesus, thank You for displaying Your omniscience so that we might know the depth and breadth of Your love and Your atonement! Amen.

TUESDAY, MAY 16: JOHN 5–6

Jesus is rejected over and over in today's reading. Some reject Him over their understanding of the Law. Others reject Him over what they believe is or is not possible. Others simply reject out of hand that He could possibly be who He said He was and who His works showed Him to be: the Son of God, equal with God the Father. In response to all of this, Jesus simply points to the witnesses that point to Him, chief among them His doing of the Father's works and the words of Holy Scripture that pointed to His coming and His doing of these very works. Those who reject Him are the ones who search the Scriptures in a merely academic fashion, thinking their good work of studying the Bible so intently will make God pleased with them.

Instead, Jesus teaches that in all of our study of God's Word we are to be looking for Him—for Man's need of the Messiah, for the promises of what we have in Him, and the promises that show how we are to know when the Messiah has come. Bible study that fails to focus on Christ and the salvation He brings is futile. Theology that doesn't center in Christ bears that name improperly, because failing to honor Him dishonors and distorts the Father. Jesus has "the words of eternal life," as Peter confesses, because He is the one who fulfills the Law and the Prophets, so that we sinners may be absolved and declared fit in Him to live with God forever.

We pray: Grant, O Holy Spirit, that we may so understand the Word You have given as to see God the Son clearly and know that He has done all for us, to give us forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 17: JOHN 7–8

"No one laid hands on Him, because His hour had not yet come." They did not lay hands on Him in spite of their trying with everything in them to do so! It's not that they had not willed to take Him and to kill Him, but that they couldn't do so. Because they plotted against Him and were unable to do as they wished, their frustration grew and we see them become more and more agitated in their reasoning against Jesus. "Where will He go that we will not find Him? Will He teach the Greeks?" becomes "Will He kill Himself?"—which is, really, "Will He kill Himself just to spite us and then claim the victory because we could not bring Him to trial and put Him to death?"

Jesus shows how flawed their thinking has become in their hatred toward One who would, by His works, make salvation by grace through faith the reality that the fathers had always trusted it to be. If a boy were born on the Sabbath, they would circumcise him on the next Sabbath because the command that such be done in the eighth day outweighed the idea of not working on the Sabbath. How, then, would they condemn Him for healing on the Sabbath? Circumcision was to give what the Christ would win—citizenship in God's Kingdom, with its assurance of resurrection to life with perfected body and soul on the Last Day. How could the Messiah's undoing sin's damage in a man's body—thus showing that He had come to do what circumcision promised—be condemned?

We pray: Lord Jesus, break our reasoning when it fails to seek every answer in Your cross, since You are the Savior we need, not that our flesh desires. Amen.