

So much of this text is directed toward those who oppress God's people in their arrogance and self-confidence placed in themselves and the world. This prophecy is primarily addressing God's enemies and His use of them and the fallen creation to achieve His good and gracious will for His people. God will use the oppressors' own power and success to make them their own destruction in their unfettered confidence in the world and their own ability contrary to God and His divine all knowing all powerful will and word.

This prophecy allows us to calmly look upon the seeming dominance of the world and the apparent smallness of His Church as nothing more than powerful assurance that God's will and word is being fulfilled. The remnant that is the Lord's flock is being tended by her Shepherd Who protects and guides her from above in spite of the number of ravenous wolves that seem to beset her on every side.

The final verse in the original Hebrew concludes with "and the yoke will be broken because of the fat." This creates an image of a people grown so fat and strong as to shake off their yoke, who have the strength to free themselves from all burdensome oppression. The glory and might of the Lord has produced this reality for His elect due to His gracious shepherding of them because of their relationship to and care by Him through His Means in spite of the world's continuous attacks from all sides.

We pray: Heavenly Father, through the life giving faith bestowed by Your abundant grace may we ever rejoice in our relationship to You through our Redeemer Jesus Christ. That wonderful reality that allows us to ever bring before You our prayers with the precious words "Our Father." Amen.

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Also they teach, that men cannot be Justified before God by their own strength, merits or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by His death, hath made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight. Rom. 3 and 4.

—Augsburg Confession

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 28: NAHUM 1:15—3:19

TRINITY 23

Today's opening verse presents two terms which became central in the New Testament: good news (the Gospel), as news of God's gracious action which delivers people from a desperate situation; and peace (removal of judgment) in the sense of divinely willed and divinely created soundness, wholeness, health, well-being. Nahum's words therefore point to the Christ, whose coming meant peace between man and God.

The keeping of feasts and fulfilling of vows mentioned in the second half of this verse must be understood in a biblical (Christological) sense. These will be offering praise and thanksgiving to the God Who has cut off the wicked oppressor. The feasts of Israel commemorate God's saving deeds and the fulfilling of a vow is the expression of thanksgiving to God. Our worship, tithes, and offerings are likewise not to be seen as something we do to earn God's favor; but instead a joyful reaction to the overwhelming grace He has shown in all that He has already done, and continues to do, for us.

The rest of Nahum focuses on the miserable state of those who resist and deny the Lord and His gracious good news of peace. Their situation is one of panic and desperation as an unnamed enemy comes upon them with great speed and force which they cannot defend against. The poetic verses make it clear that God is in ultimate control of this attacker who overwhelms and destroys the great city of Nineveh (which is representative of all who reject God and plague His people)

We pray: May we always in faith cling to the good news of peace won for us by Christ, and thus never be found outside its gracious promise. Amen.

This prophet reminds all that though God is abundantly gracious and merciful He will not restrain His righteous judgment indefinitely. In Nahum, God is not only the Lord Who is good and knows those who take refuge in Him but also “will make a complete end of the adversaries.” God’s righteous and just kingdom will ultimately triumph, for kingdoms built on wickedness and tyranny must eventually fall. Proof of this is found in Nahum’s declaration of the universal sovereignty of God. God is Lord of history and of all nations; as such He controls their destinies.

The text stresses a moral indignation toward injustice, while focusing God’s people on the Gospel with the declaration of “Though they are at full strength and many, they will be cut down and pass away. Though I have afflicted you, I will afflict you no more. And now I will break his yoke from off you and will burst your bonds apart.” All who have their faith shaken as they watch the dark powers of this world triumphant can draw comfort and strength from Nahum.

When you see the powers which ignore and derided the Lord, listen to Nahum boldly speak God’s answer to this dark agony, pronouncing His Word of promise to His suffering people. The church can, in her dark hours, draw courage from this omnipotence of God and can hope confidently for the day when He shall set His King upon His holy mountain.

We pray: Lord, may we be comforted by Your Word, ever thankful to be called before You as Your elect now and in eternity. Taking comfort in Your power to fulfill Your promise of deliverance from this present darkness. Amen.

The book of Nehemiah takes place during the restoration of Jerusalem, well after Cyrus’ edict that allowed the Israelites to return to their homeland. Nehemiah was still in Persia, serving as the king’s cupbearer. This position not only guarded the king’s food and drink, but it allowed Nehemiah to become a trusted advisor. After learning through visitors of the deplorable conditions in Judah, Nehemiah was appalled and immediately interceded in prayer for God’s help. He knew the importance that Judah held, not only for the Jewish nation, but for the fulfillment of prophecy. The prophets Micah and Zechariah had foretold the key roles that both Jerusalem and Bethlehem would play in the life of the Messiah to come.

We see that Nehemiah was first and foremost a faithful servant of God. Even though he held an important position next to the king, he was primarily concerned with God’s mission for the nation of Israel and the Redeemer who would come from God’s chosen people.

In our world today we are no longer bound to a nation or a place, as the Kingdom of God is established where Christ is present in Word and Sacrament. “Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him’” (John 4:21-23).

Prayer: Dear God, regardless of what tasks we perform or positions we carry, help us always to remember our true calling is to serve You and Your Church, in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Several months had passed since Nehemiah heard about all the troubles that were plaguing his beloved city of Jerusalem. He could not hide his emotions from the king, who enquired about his downcast appearance. After explaining his sadness Nehemiah was given the golden opportunity to remedy the situation. He then said a brief prayer, likely asking that God would give him the right words to speak. From Nehemiah's request it was obvious he had given thought to what could be done. He would need both materials and protection if he were allowed to supervise the rebuilding of Jerusalem. The king granted the request, no doubt as a favor to his devoted servant, as well as to have a southern ally against the emerging power of Egypt. Nevertheless, we see God working through such means to accomplish His will in rebuilding Jerusalem.

But the rebuild would not be easy. The walls were broken down and the gates were burned. The damage was so extensive that even travel around the city was restrictive. Additionally, as soon as Nehemiah arrived opposition was already brewing. Even though he wished to keep his mission secret, word had leaked out. His foes didn't want Israel to become strong again, and they accused Nehemiah of building a fortress against Persia. Nehemiah responded with this terse comment in verse 20: "The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem."

Prayer: Dear Lord, let us always trust that You work all things together for the good of those who love You. May Your will be accomplished through our hands. In Jesus Christ, Amen.

The people of the world have been deceived by the world and its prince, the devil. This devilish deception has led them to take advantage of, and persecute God's chosen people—but now the tables have been turned in a mighty way by God Himself. The day of reckoning has arrived and fortunes are reversed. The prophet specifically addresses the especially reprehensible hostility of the Edomites toward their relatives the Israelites in this prophecy.

The troubling time and events of which Obadiah laments is most likely the period leading up to and including the Babylonian captivity. However the second half of the book takes on a tone of Messianic joy and triumphal judgment that culminates with the establishment of the Lord's rule throughout the land in verse 21. (LW 35:322) The text presents the comforting reality that God ultimately delivers His chosen from all their enemies and all their calamities.

He is able to reverse the fortunes and reality of all creation according to His good and gracious will that desires to have all things work for the good of those who love Him. Likewise the great reversal first accomplished by Christ on the cross where He trades His righteousness for our sins will be fully consummated on the final day of this age that ushers in the great Messianic kingdom of eternity wherein the Lord shall rule all in His might and glory.

We pray: Almighty Father, allow us to see Your abundantly gracious hand in all things, that we might allow Your will to guide our lives through regenerate spirits and the Holy Spirit working by and through Your Word and Sacrament Ministry. Amen.

What is this “Valley of Decision” mentioned in today’s text? None other than the Valley of Jehoshaphat where God’s role as Judge of the creation is executed. Here “decision” refers to the heavenly Judge’s decision or judicial decree. This beautifully demonstrates our understanding of Justification being a gracious merciful decision of God bestowed upon us by faith in Jesus Christ and His payment of the debt that our sin requires.

On the other hand, those not washed by the waters flowing from the fountain of faith through grace shall face a God Whose voice will shake Heaven and Earth destroying the nations. As God thundered against the earthly Jerusalem (2:11), so He will now thunder against the heavenly Jerusalem’s enemies. God blesses His people with His inheritance in a dual way: negatively, by destroying their enemies; and positively, by giving them good things. For “the Lord is a refuge to His people, a stronghold to the people.” (16)

The Lord Himself will dwell with them in this holy and impregnable New Jerusalem forever. (Rev 21:1-6) A fountain of blessing will flow from God’s presence (out of the Lord’s house) to refresh His people and make their place endlessly fruitful. Thus setting in sharp focus the contrasting destinies of God’s people and the enemies of God’s kingdom. God’s judgment and redemption are consummated, His kingdom enduring and flourishing eternally. All is right with those who trust in God and live with Him.

We pray: May we be so blessed as to fully recognize and embrace this merciful working in our own lives today and unto eternity. Amen.

Under Nehemiah’s direction and leadership the walls of Jerusalem were being earnestly rebuilt. But it seemed the harder God’s people worked, the harder Satan tried to undo it: “But it so happened, when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, that he was furious and very indignant, and mocked the Jews. And he spoke before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, ‘What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they complete it in a day? Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish-stones that are burned?’” The enemies of God mocked both the workers and their work, trying to derail God’s plans.

It has always been this way. Ishmael berated Isaac as the bearer of the Promised Seed. Goliath mocked David. Jesus was mocked and then crucified for claiming to be a king. But even though the creature mocks the plans of his Creator, God’s will is always done. Therefore, it was right for Nehemiah to pray, “Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their reproach on their own heads, and give them as plunder to a land of captivity! Do not cover their iniquity, and do not let their sin be blotted out from before You; for they have provoked You to anger before the builders.”

Prayer: Gracious God, keep us strong and courageous as we strive to do Your work. As we expect Satan to fight hard against us, give us the strength to prevail over the ways of darkness, knowing that Your will is always done. In Jesus Christ, Amen.

Today we switch gears from the physical walls of Jerusalem to the spiritual. With the walls of stone now standing strong in defense it was time to put back the walls of faith that had also deteriorated. The pride in their nation would mean nothing without the spiritual foundation upon which Israel was founded. To that end, Ezra gathered all who could hear and understand into the open square in front of the Water Gate and read to them the Books of Moses. The people were properly humbled by the reading, but were instructed not to remain contrite. Rather, they were told to rejoice that the Word of the Lord had returned to Israel. “And Nehemiah, who was the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, ‘This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn nor weep.’ For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, ‘Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our LORD. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.’”

Prayer: Dear Lord, direct our attention and effort to the spiritual needs in our lives. Let us never take for granted the need to guard and protect our souls against the incessant attacks of the Evil One. Thank you for the necessary work of the Law which prepares us for the sweet news of the Gospel. In Jesus Christ, Amen.

Today we look upon the judgment scene of our Lord Jesus Christ’s return in glory on the Last Day of this age that runs throughout holy Scripture. The words of the prophet that make up the final verse of our text are echoed by Christ in the Gospel according to Mark (4:29) as well as John in Revelation (14:14, 18-19). In all these accounts the theme is the same: the Lord’s chosen elect are mercifully redeemed from the sin filled world, but those who oppose Him and His will are delivered into God’s holy and just wrath.

The “valley of Jehoshaphat” is to be understood as denoting the scene of God’s final judgment on the enemies of His people. Even though this text uses many terms associated with the pain and misery of war we see this as a location of the greatest joy for we are judged by pure grace through faith in Jesus Christ. For our Lord fights for us and through us “...against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Eph. 6:12)

We pray: Almighty heavenly Father, allow us to see Your abundantly gracious hand in all things. Lead us to perceive all of this present temporal life through the lens of eternal life won for us by Christ, crucified and raised—and the precious treasures of redemption abundantly delivered here and now through His holy Means of Grace found in His Bride, the Church. Amen.

Most of the devotions assigned for this week have God's Holy Scripture tearing down man's corrupt sinful flesh. As was stated in an earlier meditation, as much as the flesh hates God's Law and the Old Man strives to survive, the killing nature of God's Law is a good thing. "The Law of God is Good and Wise" is a hymn by Matthias Loy. The 2nd stanza of his hymn confesses: "The Law is good; but since the fall—It's holiness condemns us all;—It dooms us for our sin to die—And has no power to justify."

Today's reading of God's Holy Scripture is a continuation from yesterday. Who can endure the coming of this host, the dawning of this Day of the LORD? Only the LORD creates the possibility of escape. Any hope of rescue and refuge lies only in repentance! And, yet, all of those things: "escape" "hope of rescue and refuge" and "repentance" only come about according to God's sure and certain Word and Sacraments!

Luther once stated: "If I now seek the forgiveness of sins, I do not run to the cross, for I will not find it given there. Nor must I hold to the suffering of Christ...in knowledge or remembrance, for I will not find it there either. But I will find in the Sacrament or Gospel the Word which distributes, presents, offers, and gives to me that forgiveness which was won on the cross." (LW 40, pg. 214)

As God's Word is undoubtedly filled with the Law—it is undoubtedly all the more filled with the Gospel of Christ's fully atoning merits for the forgiveness of sins! As the final stanza of Matthias Loy's hymn confess: "To Jesus we for refuge flee,—Who from the curse has set us free,—And humbly worship at His throne,—Saved by His grace through faith alone."

We pray: Psalm 51:13-18

After the people had celebrated the restoration of the Word they returned to a state of penitence. "Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads. Then those of Israelite lineage separated themselves from all foreigners; and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for one-fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God."

Such is the rhythm of the believer: confession, forgiveness, renewal. To reinforce their renewal, a summary of the history between God and man was read. The history goes all the way back to God's gift of creation, followed by God's call to Abraham. We then hear of His might in delivering His people from Egypt, and His care for them in the wilderness. On and on the story goes, highlighting God's faithfulness to the Promise in the midst of repeated and stubborn behavior from the Israelites. After the reading, the people are "heartily sorry for their sins," even as today we confess the same words in worship. They pray that God, in His mercy, will not need to use the sharp sword of chastisement, as had been required in days of old.

Prayer: Gracious God, let us confess daily our sinfulness before You. We thank You for Your righteousness and boundless mercy that forgives all our sins, and pray that we may walk in newness of life to the glory of Your holy name. In Jesus Christ, Amen.

In this one passage we see a repeated and bold attestation to the source of Zechariah's words. Twelve times we hear the phrase "thus says the Lord" or "the word of the Lord came to me." The prophet is leaving no doubt as to the ultimate author of this book. Repeatedly, throughout Scripture, we see similar claims as the various authors remind the reader that this is no ordinary book, but "the very power of God unto salvation" (Romans 1:16).

With such inherent power and Divine will, our God greatly desires for His book to have its way with us, as He desires all men to be saved (1 Timothy 2:3-4). Zechariah describes God's earnest desire this way: "Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'I am zealous for Zion with great zeal; with great fervor I am zealous for her.'" God is deadly serious when it comes to the First Commandment. He wants no other gods before Him. God wants us all to Himself because He knows we're only safe with Him. Even when we turn away from Him, the Good Shepherd searches for us, eager to bring us back to His fold. As Zechariah puts it: "Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'Behold, I will save My people from the land of the east and from the land of the west; I will bring them back, and they shall dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. They shall be My people and I will be their God, in truth and righteousness.'"

Prayer: Thou on my head in early youth didst smile, and though rebellious and perverse meanwhile, Thou hast not left me, oft as I left Thee. On to the close, O Lord, abide with me (TLH 552:5). In Jesus Christ, Amen.

Mankind is conceived in sin, and thus, born with what is called the "Old Man" or "Old Adam" (one might call it man's original nature). This Old Man is totally absorbed with himself, that's why we are so constantly inwardly turned. Self-satisfaction, self-justification, autonomy (or being a law unto oneself) and expecting everything to operate so that the self can live comfortably—these are all the marks and desires of the Old Man which exist within everyone's flesh. Suffering (and especially dying) are constantly avoided—because the old Man is all about surviving, for himself (at enmity against God and careless of neighbor).

Joel's prophecy (in chapter one) is about locusts and devastation. That devastation theme continues in chapter two—preparing man for the Day of the LORD. Reminiscent of the Book of Revelation, devastation is both judgmental and preparatory (a call to repentance). Although all parts of the world (and we believing/baptized Christians) might not have to deal with a plague of locusts to remind us of living in a fallen world that has judgment coming upon it, suffering (through other forms of devastation) abound nonetheless.

Sinful flesh wrestles with such devastation and suffering because of the uncomfortable judgment aspect of its message. By the power of God's Holy Scripture, we, believing/baptized children, are renewed in our thinking so that we are prepared for the Day of the LORD. We are reminded of the text in St. Luke, where Jesus speaks about the Last Day with "men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken." But speaking to His believers He concludes, "Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near."

We pray: Psalm 51:1-12

To read a section of God's Holy Scripture using what comes across as harsh language can, for some, be unsettling. Unfortunately, these same unsettled remain in the dark when it comes to the understanding of God Almighty being holy and just. They need to be brought to the knowledge of God's Law; His demand for perfection. And when that perfection is not carried out by them He then demands judgment.

Some go so far as to only read the flowery language of Holy Scripture—avoiding God's Law at all cost. And what a cost it is, for when God's Law is not known, purposely avoided, or lost then so is God's Gospel! It is not, however, just those who are unsettled by God's Law or judgment language that are at risk, all sinful flesh desires to avoid God's Law and Gospel truth. The Old Man (who remains in the believing/baptized children of God) ever strives to survive, to be like God. As Luther says in his commentary on this section of Isaiah: "The prophet adds some threats for those who despise the Word, so that those who did not want to obey the promises must hear threats, for such is the custom of the prophets after they have taught, instructed, and exhorted." (LW 17)

Hopefully this helps in understanding why pastors must continue to preach and teach God's Law. And, thanks be to God, the Gospel is also preached and taught; to present to those broken and repentant the fully atoning merits of Christ Jesus. And, thus, when God's Law crushes and grinds, and brings us to nothing, the Gospel abounds all the more to declare us alive and justified—by grace alone, because the merits of Christ alone, through faith alone!

We pray: Psalm 38

The breadth and depth of these verses is overwhelming! There is verse eleven's declaration that Jesus, the only Savior, is Yahweh, the (all caps) LORD, contrary to the Jehovah's Witnesses; the assertion of eternity and uniqueness of the true God; the definite signs of the Messianic age that are seen fulfilled in the events of Jesus' birth, the words and actions of His ministry, and the acts of His Apostles, such as the healing of the deaf and the blind, and the gathering of the Gentiles into the Kingdom of God. And that's just scratching the surface!

The point of all of this theology is neither to overwhelm, nor merely to intrigue us with the complexity of its layers, but to show the richness of God's grace and the lengths to which He goes for those who are His. He sacrifices Egypt to deliver His people and will let no nation stand in the way of His Church; they will give up their riches to Him voluntarily or He will simply exert His ownership over them. Therefore, He invites you to fear none, because He has called you by name, He has placed His seal upon you in Holy Baptism, marking you as one for whom Christ's atonement has been received for forgiveness of sins and adoption to life. The things that men fear and that lead them away from His righteous ways are not fearsome to you anymore, because you know that even if you suffer from such things, the end of them all is freedom from sin and all of its effects in the resurrection.

We pray: Almighty and all gracious Father, strengthen me to face the things my flesh would fear, giving me confidence that none can take me away from Your love in Christ Jesus, Your Son, our Lord. Amen.

“I know who You are: the Holy One of Israel!”

Thus a demon speaks while cowering in fear at the presence of Jesus, and from today’s reading we see how it is that even the words and deeds of our enemy are a comfort to us. Certainly, anyone who heard the demon on that day should have remembered these words in Isaiah and thought, “The remedy has come! The demons must fear and those spiritually poor and needy whom the Lord has chosen may stand and conquer as His instruments!”

All of the lushness that God presents through Isaiah here, the water and the trees, are not meant as mere physical promises for the physical nation and its tribes in that day, but for His Church throughout this age of walking through the sin-caused wilderness. All that comes against you, even that which comes from your own flesh, shall be defeated and become as nought: as John said as he preached and baptized, you are the grain that is brought into the Lord’s storeroom and the chaff shall be blown away.

We pray: Thank you, O Triune God, that You have given it to me to rest in Your deliverance and to trust that I shall have rest from all of my sorrows and all of my sins in You forever. Grant me strength to persevere, through the knowledge that God the Son has already secured this victory for me, and that You will strengthen me through the very Body and Blood by which He has done so. Amen.

Pride-filled, self-centered mankind likes to “think” that God can be put beneath himself—as if God can be handled, or measured, or made into a subject for man to do with what he desires. The opening words of this text at verse 11, however, “The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, the haughtiness of man shall be bowed down, and the LORD alone shall be exalted in that day” (words repeated at verse 17, which double-down the point) reveal God putting His created being in its place! There is a saying regarding Holy Scripture that carries this same understanding: “It’s not necessarily that man interprets God’s Holy Scripture, it’s that God’s Holy Scripture interprets man!”

Luther comments on this text: “It’s as if [God] were saying: ‘Begone with all your glory, wisdom, and power, which amount to nothing.’ Whatever is exalted in the eyes of men is cast down; it will be nothing in comparison with the loftiness of Christ, and everything will become worthless.” Finally Luther, revealing the Christ-centeredness of biblical/Lutheran theology, sums up his commentary on this section of Isaiah by stating: “The chief point of this chapter is that Christ will reign through the Gospel over everything lofty on earth, whether external or internal, whether secular or spiritual. All these things will have to yield and be subject to Him, with the result that He alone will remain LORD, King, and Priest forever.” (LW 16)

Oh how we, believing/baptized children of God, are so blessed to worship (that is, receive) Christ’s reign through God’s Law and Gospel each week. Because of God’s Divine Service of Word and Sacrament Ministry the LORD kills and makes alive as He accounts those who are His own justified with the reign (and righteousness) of His Son, Jesus Christ, through faith alone!

We pray: Psalm 6

The tug of war between a believers sinful flesh (his old nature, which ever causes doubt and unbelief) and the Spirit (his New nature) will ever go on until the flesh (the old Man) is finally consumed in full death (the New Man's sleep or rest IN Christ). The LORD knows that His believing/baptized children struggle with this as he inspires Isaiah to write: "But Zion said, 'The LORD has forsaken me, and my LORD has forgotten me.'"

Luther writes in his commentary on this section of Isaiah: "Therefore let the Christian know that this is his condition, to feel himself forsaken. But in real desolation he lifts up his head from the midst of the waves and says, 'Although I feel myself forsaken and forgotten, I know the promise of God given to me. Therefore He deserts me to put me to the test, and He shows me the power of the Word so that I may trust in Him and then not be put to shame.' It is not really an act of forsaking but a test. It is our consolation that God thus tests us by trials to see whether we are willing to persevere." (LW 17)

Luther comments that this text of Isaiah is like a wrestling between the flesh and the Spirit. The LORD is reminding the reader of Isaiah to live by faith and not by sight! The flesh (by sight) is a desolation, but the fruit comes by the Spirit (through faith alone)! We are ever tempted to live by sight, yet the promises of God's Holy Scripture endureth forever; ever pointing to Jesus Christ and Him crucified for the full atonement of our sins. God, through His Word and Sacraments, is ever keeping His own rightly focused, bringing us to truly live as He keeps us fixed upon Christ, the author and finisher of faith!

We pray: Psalm 13

Habakkuk is troubled by the seeming success of the ungodly, especially of the king of Babylon. He rightly sees how the king is filled with pride in what he has and accomplishes, thinking that it is all his own doing or, at best, worshiping his tools and looking to them for all good—having them as his god. This is like the so-called prayer of Jimmy Stewart's character in the old movie, *Shenandoah*: "Lord, we cleared this land, we plowed it, sowed it, and harvested it. We cooked the harvest. We wouldn't be here, we wouldn't be eatin', if we hadn't done it all ourselves...but we thank you just the same anyway." By the end of the movie, it is clear to the viewer (though not, it seems, to the one so "praying"), that all of this hard work was unable to sustain the family and, therefore, must not be what actually caused their previous blessings.

The just one is just only through faith; true blessedness is only that which we have—and know we have—by grace. This is a reality that changes our perception of how everything else is: we have life only through faith in Christ; therefore our life is governed by that reality and shows it forth. We thank God for our doctor, our job, our tools, our abilities; God's Law shows us that we must not trust in them, though, but only in Him Who gives us such gifts to accomplish His good purpose. Otherwise, we are guilty of worshiping the creature, rather than the Creator (as St. Paul writes of those who follow their homosexual lusts in Romans 1). To God ALONE must be the glory for our salvation and for every other temporal or spiritual blessing.

We pray: O Lord, help us always treasure the great truth of the Reformation (because it is the truth of Your Word) that we are justified and have life only through faith in Christ's atonement for our sin. Amen.

Verse 17 is a great key to understanding the will and ways of God when we, though Christians, sometimes resist His Word. Here the complaint is not one of, “Really, Lord, admit that our sin and wandering is Your fault,” but, “O Lord, do not give us what we have demonstrated that we wanted! Do not let us keep wandering; do not facilitate our staying away from You, because we are too weak to come back!” It is another instance of what Luther termed the “theology of the cross”: it is in such instances where God seems hidden at best, or at worst that He is afflicting us Himself, that we must learn to see that He is specifically working to destroy any false self-sufficiency, unbelief, misbelief, “and other great shame and vice,” so that we confess that only He can restore us and keep us.

Such is the realization of the Lord’s loving-kindnesses, how in all of our affliction He was afflicted, how Jesus is not a High Priest Who is untouched by our infirmities, but One Who was like us in every way, except that He endured all things without ever having sinned. This is the sort of realization they were supposed to come to at Corinth in 1 Cor. 11:27-31; they did not suffer and die because “that’s what God wants,” but because He had to use the conditions they brought upon themselves through their sin to awaken them unto repentance.

We pray: Grant, O Father, the true humility that sees that Your will is always best, not being discouraged by cross and trial, but directed ever away from any thought of my own strength and toward the strength that is only by Your Son and His sacrifice for my salvation. Amen.

As Micah had prophesied (in chapters 1-3), the very leaders whom God appointed to administer justice, to teach and to preach His Word faithfully are abusing their authority for personal gain. The Prophet laments in seeing visions of judgment as the Babylonians and Assyrians arrive as instruments of the Lord’s wrath. The remnant of believers are among those who are oppressed.

It is not surprising that leaders, whom God puts into place abuse their authority. All of mankind is conceived in sin. Anyone put in high positions of authority would certainly be tempted to abuse it. As Luther explains the Third Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, this is why God brings us to pray against ourselves, for His will to be done. We confess: “God’s will is done when He break and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature, which do not want to hallow God’s name or let His kingdom come; and when He strengthens and keeps us firm in his Word and faith until we die.”

The devil, the world and sinful flesh, however, scowl fierce on this side of glory. Abuse of authority happens, and God’s people will be subject to its abuse; sometimes being severe oppression. Amidst the on-going suffering of this fallen world God gives His believing/baptized people hope as He keeps us fixed upon Jesus Christ and His fully atoning merits! As Micah words exhort: “There you shall be delivered; there the LORD will redeem you from the hands of your enemies.” (v. 10) As we receive His Word and Sacraments—right in the midst of our suffering—we shall be delivered—by grace alone, because of the merits of Christ alone, through faith alone!

We pray: Psalm 142

Isaiah, like most of the prophets, goes back and forth, addressing the wicked in Israel and then the righteous in Israel, the impenitent and the penitent, unbelievers and believers. In one verse he threatens punishment, then promises deliverance, alternating between Law and Gospel. We certainly see that in today's reading.

The Law had an intended effect for each group. For the impenitent, the prophecies of destruction were to frighten them and bring them to repentance. For those who still would not repent, the Law was the damning testimony against them and the harbinger of final judgment. For the penitent, the same prophecies of the Law served as reminders that they stood only by faith, to keep them focused on God's grace and the Redeemer whom He would send to rescue them from sin, death, and the power of the devil.

The Gospel also had an intended effect for each group. For the penitent, the announcement of God's favor and the sweet promises of deliverance served as great comfort and provided strength as they patiently endured under the cross. For the impenitent, the promises of divine favor and deliverance demonstrated their foolishness in rejecting such a good God and the salvation He offered in Christ.

Believers and unbelievers will always live side by side in the Church, hearing both Law and Gospel proclaimed from the pulpit. May our ears ever be attentive to His Word, that His Spirit may work daily contrition and repentance in us and cause us to cling to Christ, our Redeemer, who will soon free us from this bondage to decay and lead us safely into His heavenly kingdom.

We pray: O Lord, open our hearts to hear what Your Spirit says to the churches, that we may join the saints in the glory of everlasting life; through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Even with all the assurance we have seen this week of the ultimate blessedness of the redeemed, we often wonder at the Lord's patience. We yearn for God's vengeance to be taken upon those who trouble us, because we are certain that they are His enemies if they are acting as enemies against us; "vindicate our faith, O Lord!" we cry.

Yet, we must remember two important facets of the beautiful truth of our God's dealing with mankind.

First, we must here what St. Peter writes about God's 'delay': it is not that God is slack concerning His promise, but that He is longsuffering toward us. "Toward us," Peter writes, because we also needed to be brought into His Kingdom through Baptism, and He delays the return of the Christ so that such grace may be extended effectually to others, as well.

Second, we must understand how our Lord prefers to deal with enemies: bringing them to repentance! So Jesus comes to sinful men and makes them His disciples—whether we think of the rough and tumble seamen whom He called to be apostles, or tax collectors like Zacchaeus, or a persecutor of the Church like Saul of Tarsus. In Psalm 118, we hear the voice of the singer say repeatedly that when his enemies surrounded him, he "cut them off" in the name of the Lord. Interestingly, in Hebrew the word used is not the usual one for "cut" or "kill," but for "circumcise." Today, we would say, "My enemies surrounded me, but in the name of the Lord I baptized them." Thanks be to God that this is how He dealt with us while we were yet dead in trespasses and sins, bringing us to faith in Christ!

We pray: 1. O God, look down from heaven and see
A sight which well may move Thee:
Of godly men how few there be,
Forsaken we who love Thee!
Withheld is Thy pure Word, the light
Of faith itself extinguished quite
In all the sons of Adam.

6. O God, preserve it pure and free
From this vile generation,
And let us be preserved by Thee
From their abomination;
The wicked walk on every side,
When 'mid Thy flock the vile abide
In power and are exalted. Amen. (#163, ELHB, CPH, 1912)

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 15: ISAIAH 5:1-7

TRINITY 20

As we head toward Sunday, we find in our readings a call to repentance. God has been longsuffering toward us but, perhaps, we have been easily irritated by His patience with the rest of the sinners. We must ask ourselves whether our works have had the quality of wild grapes and not cultivated ones. When we look at the works by which we ought to have worshiped Him, we might well conclude that He should take away the hedge, break down the wall, allow us to be trodden upon by the wild animals, and deprived entirely of rain.

The Nation-Church of the Old Testament had certainly acted in this way, substituting oppression for godly judgment and justice; wringing a cry and groan from the powerless, rather than practicing and inculcating righteousness. Yet, we note that this song calling for judgment between the gracious Lord and the evil actions of Israel comes many chapters before the great promises we have looked at this week! The intent of recording it is that we might judge our actions rightly and repent of them, trusting in the Christ's payment for our sin and His fulfilling of all of the Law to keep us as the Lord's treasured vineyard, restored for the sake of the Savior Who has offered His works in place of our own.

We pray: Lead us, dear Father, to see our sins against You and to turn from them, that we do not bristle at Your correction, but run to You through Christ when brought to suffer any consequence of sin, so that You may truly cultivate and prune us by Your Word, that we may bear fitting fruit that brings glory to You through Jesus, the true Vine. Amen.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 21: JEREMIAH 31:23-40

TRINITY 21

What would it take for Israel to be restored? What would it take for the Gentiles to be added to Israel and for the Church of God to be built throughout the world? Nothing less than a new covenant.

The old covenant of the Law was always destined to pass away. The primary covenant—a covenant of grace—had already been made with Abraham and his Seed. The Law “was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made” (Gal. 3:19). The Seed, as the heir of the covenant with Abraham, was the only one who had the right to abrogate the covenant of the Law and institute a new covenant or “Testament” in His blood. It is a covenant of the forgiveness of sins to all who are brought into this covenant by Holy Baptism and by faith, a covenant that is repeatedly sealed and renewed to those same people in the sacred Meal of Christ's New Testament.

As new creations in Christ and participants in His new covenant, we have the moral standards of the Law written on our hearts. As we also confess in the Apology, Art. III, “Therefore, when we have been justified by faith and regenerated, we begin to fear and love God, to pray to Him, to expect from Him aid, to give thanks and praise Him, and to obey Him in afflictions. We begin also to love our neighbors, because there is now, through the Spirit of Christ a new heart, mind, and spirit within.”

We pray: O Lord God, Who has left unto us in a wonderful Sacrament a memorial of Your Passion, grant, we pray, that we may so use this Sacrament of Your Body and Blood that the fruits of Your redemption may continually be manifest in us. Amen.

The Lord's judgment against Israel had already been harsh by the time of Jeremiah as He drove them out of their land and scattered them among the nations. His judgment against Judah and Jerusalem would also be harsh, bringing destruction to their cities and captivity to their inhabitants. Jeremiah spent his entire ministry warning Jerusalem of their impending exile.

But the prophet also preached hope to the people of Israel and Judah. He spoke of God's faithful love for His people. He spoke of a future time when a remnant of them would repent and be brought back into the territory that God had taken away from them. In repentance, the remnant would find forgiveness and restoration to God's favor in the Promised Land.

These comforting words found their fulfillment first among Old Testament Israel as God brought Jerusalem back from exile in Babylon. But there is a greater spiritual fulfillment to note here.

What was Israel's hope, and what is ours? Historically, the Church has understood that hope to be centered in the "new thing" described here in Jer. 31:22—a reference to Christ Jesus, true God and true Man, born of the Virgin Mary, the woman who "encompassed a Man."

So Jeremiah's prophecy is mainly about the repopulating of Israel with Jews and Gentiles from every nation—all believers in Christ Jesus. Our home is not the physical territory of Israel, but the spiritual territory of the Church, where Word and Sacrament are proclaimed and administered, heard and received. Nothing can hinder this "Israel" from being built, not even the gates of Hades.

We pray: Gracious Father in Heaven, we give You thanks for putting hope in our future and joy in our present by grafting us into Your Son by faith. Sustain us in this hope forevermore. Amen.

The Lord confronts apostate Israel in today's reading with stern words of reproach. He had rescued them from Egypt, provided them with faithful leaders, preserved them from harm and brought them safely into the Promised Land. But they had acted unjustly in their dealings with one another. They had abandoned mercy toward their neighbor. They had exalted themselves before God, and as a result, they were about to be humbled by a rod of punishment. No amount of sacrifices would help them as long they continued to live in impenitence.

The Lord has shown even more faithful love to His Christian Church, rescuing us from sin, death, and the power of the devil through the sacrifice of His own firstborn and only-begotten Son. Through His faithful ministers He has called us to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. He continues to provide Word and Sacrament to preserve us in faith and love until He brings us safely into the Promised Land of heaven.

Those who are righteous by faith strive to "do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly" with their God. But where contrition and repentance are lacking, faith, too, is lacking. Therefore, Micah's reproaches apply to those within the visible Christian Church who stray from their Baptism by exalting themselves, by living in impenitence, by refusing to be corrected by God's Word. May the Lord graciously preserve us from such impenitence through the reproaches of His prophet!

We pray: Keep Your Church, O Lord, with Your perpetual mercy; and because the frailty of man without You cannot but fall, keep us ever by Your help from all things hurtful, and lead us to all things profitable to our salvation; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord. Amen.

Again the Lord confronts Old Testament Israel, this time through the prophet Isaiah. For what? They were designing their own external ways to serve Him—fasting in sackcloth and ashes and using the Sabbath Day for personal pleasure—while ignoring the service He actually called for in His Word. Then they were shocked and dismayed when God didn't praise, thank, and bless them for their self-chosen, self-gratifying forms of worship. For this the LORD rebukes them and calls upon them to change their thinking and their ways.

We, too, in the New Testament must beware of self-chosen, self-gratifying forms of worship. God has told us in His Word the things that please Him, like trembling at His Word (Isaiah 66:2), and showing love, kindness, and faithfulness toward our neighbor in his need. These are the things God would have His people busy themselves with.

Even in showing such love our goal must not be to earn God's grace and favor, as the Israelites were trying to do with their acts of worship. Indeed, true works of love and service can only flow from faith in the God whose grace has already been earned for us by Christ. As we confess in Article III of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, "The chief worship of the Gospel is to wish to receive remission of sins, grace, and righteousness." Faith, which is born of God's Word, and love which is born of faith—these are the ways in which God wants to be served and honored. In these the Christian will find true blessing.

We pray: Almighty and everlasting God, give us the increase of faith, hope, and love, and that we may obtain that which You promise, make us to love that which You command; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord. Amen.

Isaiah paints the tragic picture of Israel and all mankind: sinful, defiled, deceived by lies, serving ourselves at the expense of anyone who gets in the way, destined for destruction, all by our own fault. Some people display the symptoms of this spiritual illness with unbridled wickedness and injustice. Others show fewer outward symptoms, but suffer nonetheless from the same disease. Born in this condition, we are utterly without hope and unable to lift a finger to save ourselves.

But then the prophet also paints another picture: of a God who saw that we had ruined ourselves, who saw that we were hopeless and helpless, and decided—even from eternity—to come to our aid. Seeing our unrighteousness, God promised to come in the flesh with His own righteousness. All our hope is now wrapped up in the righteousness of the Redeemer whom God promised to send to Zion, "to those who turn from transgression," that is, to those who recognize their lost condition and turn to Him for help, for mercy, and for forgiveness.

Such recognition—such repentance and faith—is born of God's Spirit, whom He once placed upon Isaiah and promised to continue to send through the words of Isaiah throughout all generations. That is the other picture the prophet paints, of this Gospel going out into all the world and saving lost sinners from sin, death, and the power of the devil. True to His word, the Lord has preserved Isaiah's Gospel even for us, and His Spirit will continue to bring salvation through it.

We pray: O Lord, let Your continual pity cleanse and defend Your Church; and because it cannot continue in safety without Your help, preserve it evermore by Your help and goodness; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord. Amen.