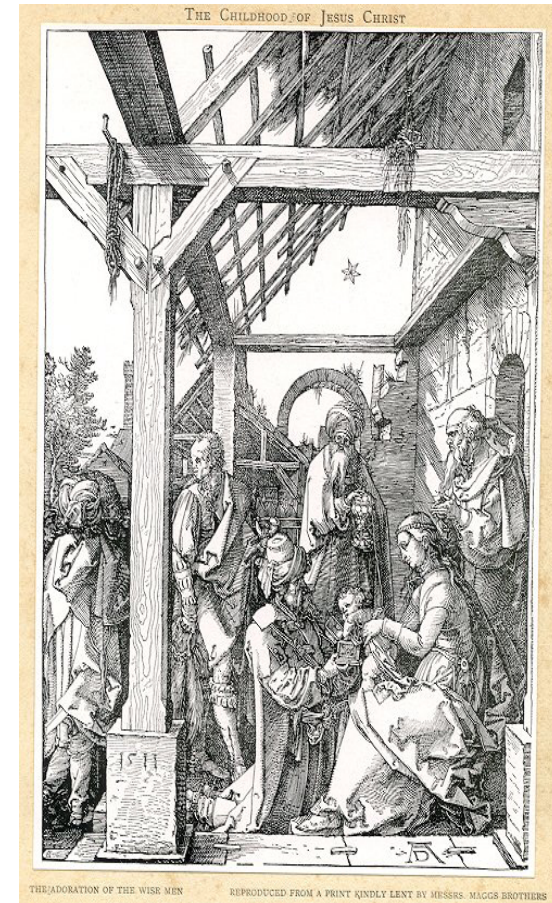


As Jacob made his way back home he was given news that his brother was coming to meet him--in force. It would seem the 20 years of separation did not buffer Esau's grudge. Jacob paused to pray to God, confessing his unworthiness and total dependence on God's protection. He recalled God's promise: "For You said, 'I will surely treat you well, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'" Jacob was going to hold God to His promise. This would take on literal meaning that very night, as Jacob wrestled with a man, whom he found out was God Himself. Jacob's spiritual struggle became manifest in a physical way. God allowed him to "play out" his struggle, ultimately revealing to Jacob that God was still in charge, but would still make good on His promise. Then God asks Jacob His name (not that God can forget) to remind Jacob of his past. His name had meant "heel-grabber," but now he would be known as the one who struggled and overcame: "Israel."

Like the newly named Israel, we too struggle in our daily lives, often "wrestling" with God in the midst of life's difficulties. Like with many of the psalm writers, God invites us to bare our soul to Him, to cry out. To do so is only being human. And what better one to go to than our heavenly Father, who is eager to hear us and always provides the best answer to our prayer.

"All depends on our possessing God's abundant grace and blessing, though all earthly wealth depart. He who trusts with faith unshaken in his God is not forsaken and ever keeps a dauntless heart." (TLH 425:1)

# THE LUTHERAN HERALD



**JANUARY 7—FEBRUARY 2, 2019**

**A PUBLICATION OF  
THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN DIOCESE OF  
NORTH AMERICA**

## *The Calendar*

January 1 (T)	Feast of the Circumcision
January 6	The Epiphany of our Lord
January 13	Epiphany 1
January 19 (Sa)	St. Henry of Finland, martyr
January 20	Epiphany 2
January 24 (Th)	St. Timothy
January 25 (F)	The Conversion of St. Paul
January 26 (Sa)	St. Titus
January 27	Epiphany 3
February 2 (Sa)	The Presentation of our Lord

### *Justification Made Clear—The Reformation 500 Years Later*

Pastor Carver's superb documentary on the doctrine of Justification is now available on YouTube (DVDs will also be sent to every pastor of the diocese). To watch the nine chapters of the documentary, simply search YouTube for "Justification Made Clear" and you should find the channel of the same name.

## **FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 1: GENESIS 31:1-18 3<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY**

For 20 years there had been a running battle of wits between Laban and his nephew Jacob. Jacob had served his uncle faithfully all that time, but still was not allowed to depart with Laban's promised daughters, Rachel and Leah. Since the divine plan was for Jacob to dwell in Canaan, and not Haran, God Himself revealed to Jacob that the time to leave had come: "Then the LORD said to Jacob, 'Return to the land of your fathers and to your family, and I will be with you.'" Jacob knew that returning to Canaan meant dealing with another uncertain future. He had left behind an angry and jealous brother, whose temper had twenty years to either abate or fester. The promise of God to be with him, therefore, had tremendous significance.

As a believer, Jacob knew that God's promise to be present was not a mere "well wish." When God is present with us, we not only stand in awe before His Holy presence, but we draw comfort in knowing that all things are under His watchful eye. Surely, then, as our omniscient and omnipotent Immanuel, God will guide and protect us every step of the way.

We pray: Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities, and in all our dangers and necessities stretch forth the right hand of Thy majesty to help and defend us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Jacob had just finished a long journey from Beersheba to Laban. He had received the reassuring vision from God at Bethel, and now knew that whatever happened in his life, his God was with him. He would need that knowledge, as he would soon be tested by his opportunistic Uncle Laban. Jacob had met his daughter Rachel at the well upon entering the town. He was immediately struck by her beauty and desired to marry her. Laban and Jacob entered into a deal: “Then Laban said to Jacob, ‘Because you are my relative, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what should your wages be?’ Now Laban had two daughters: the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah’s eyes were delicate, but Rachel was beautiful of form and appearance. Now Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, ‘I will serve you seven years for Rachel your younger daughter.’ And Laban said, ‘It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to another man. Stay with me.’ So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed only a few days to him because of the love he had for her.” But all the while Laban was plotting yet again. Leah would be “substituted” for Rachel in order to gain seven more years of labor out of Jacob. Greed and deception would continue to permeate the life of Jacob, but this time he would be on the receiving end.

“Lord, keep us steadfast in Thy Word; curb those who vain by craft and sword would wrest the Kingdom from Thy Son and set at naught all He hath done.” (TLH 261:1)

In Genesis 1 we find two recurring phrases: “God said...;” “...and it was so.” From the beginning of God’s interaction with His creation we find that when God speaks, it happens. This theme is used throughout the Bible to explain what the Holy Triune God has done for His people. Whatever God promises comes to pass. However, we people of this world have always had a problem believing what God says. Adam and Eve were the first; you and I continue the practice.

As soon as Adam and Eve fell into sin God stepped in and made a promise to send a Savior to save His people from their sin. Throughout the Old Testament God sent His prophets to repeat that promise. He continually told them what was going to happen, and it always did happen as He said. God spoke, and it was so!

When the time was right God sent His Son to live, suffer, die, and rise to life again for mankind so that the effects of sin, which is eternal death, do not have to be the last word. In this Epiphany season God reveals the fulfillment of His promise. He reveals that His Son came to save us from our sin. He spoke His promise, and it was so! When God-given faith believes God’s Word, death is defeated! God spoke, and it was so!

When we have trouble believing God’s promises, we pray: O God, by the leading of a star You once made known to all nations Your only-begotten Son; now lead us, who know You by faith, to know after this life the fullness of Your divine goodness; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

In the first few verses of Genesis 2 we see that God continues blessing mankind when He sanctifies the seventh day and makes it a day of rest for all people. Rest is important for all people, but Luther points out in the explanation of the Third Commandment that which is even more important when he says, “We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.” In Genesis 2 the Lord blesses His people by setting aside time to both rest our bodies, and to hear His Word for the nourishment of our souls.

Luther says, “The Word of God is the true holy thing... Indeed, it is the only one we Christians acknowledge and have... But God’s Word is the treasure that sanctifies all things... At whatever time God’s Word is taught, preached, heard, read, or pondered, there the person, the day, and the work are sanctified by it, not on account of the external work but on account of the Word which makes us all saints” (Large Catechism, Ten Commandments, para. 91-92).

God’s blessings rests on His people whenever the Word of God is read, spoken, studied, preached, and shared. What greater blessing can our Heavenly Father bestow on us but to speak to us and cause us to hear Him?

We pray: O God, by the leading of a star You once made known to all nations Your only-begotten Son; now lead us, who know You by faith, to know after this life the fullness of Your divine goodness; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

As Jacob left Beersheba to flee from his angry brother, he had a long trip ahead as he set out for Haran. At a city called Luz, later to be named Bethel, he lay down to sleep. The Lord provided him with an extraordinary vision: “Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And behold, the LORD stood above it and said: ‘I am the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you.’”

With this vision the accessibility of God is emphasized with the angels “ascending and descending.” Not only does our God come to us, but we, through prayer, can access Him. With this relationship the presence of God is assured, not only to Jacob, but to all believers. Jesus uses this very story in John 1, as He Himself serves as the ladder between God and man.

We pray: Dear Father in heaven, we thank You for sending Your Son to redeem us. May we always welcome His presence among us in Word and Sacrament, and go to Him often in prayer. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

In Genesis 27 we see the culmination of the stew/birth-right deal between Jacob and Esau. Esau has had plenty of time to “stew” over his reckless decision, but he’s counting on father Isaac to still give him the blessing. His father promises to give it to him if he prepares his favorite meal. Mother Rebekah overhears the conversation and forges another plan of deception. She would make the meal and dress up Jacob using brother Esau’s clothes. The weak-eyed Isaac falls for the deception, trusting his senses of touch and smell to verify Esau’s identity. When Esau returns, it’s too late; the blessing has already been given. Esau, now furious, vows to murder his brother after his father has died.

There is certainly plenty of blame to go around. Jacob and Rebekah had their schemes and lies. Esau played loose with the greatest gift he could be given. But what’s often forgotten is the role that Isaac played, or didn’t play, as head of the family. First, he allowed favoritism to cause problems in his house. Most importantly, Isaac knew all along that the birth-right, by God’s own design, was meant for Jacob, yet Isaac always meant to pass it on to his favored son.

May this sad account be a warning to us that God must always be placed first, and that our Christian love should bind families together in service to one another.

“Oh, blest the house, whatever befall, where Jesus Christ is all in all! Yea, if He were not dwelling there, how dark and poor and void it were!” (TLH 625:1)

In the Genesis 1-2 we have the account of the creation of all things, the goodness of creation, and man’s place in that creation. In chapter three we have man in the Garden, the appearance of Satan, and the introduction of sin. This is followed by man’s fall into sin and God’s gracious promise of dealing with sin in the coming Savior, plus the removal of man from the Garden and the consequences of sin. Now in chapter four these consequences take on real form with the sin of Cain and the murder of Abel. In mercy God confronts Cain, seeking his repentance, but Cain hardens his heart and rejects God. He would not seek forgiveness. Therefore, God sends him away from His people.

In the removal of Cain God’s grace and mercy for His people becomes clear. The Church must live in the midst of an unbelieving world, but in His mercy God continues to guide and protect His Church.

We can clearly see the consequences of sin in our lives and in our world. Everything is corrupted by it. The devil, the world, and our own sinful nature are constantly assaulting us. As baptized children of God, you and I know that without God’s grace in Jesus Christ we would be lost. As He did with Adam and Eve, as He wished to do with Cain, God continues to call us back from sin to repentance and forgiveness through Christ.

We pray: O God, by the leading of a star You once made known to all nations Your only-begotten Son; now lead us, who know You by faith, to know after this life the fullness of Your divine goodness; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

In Chapter 4 the descendants of Cain became a large and talented nation who, in spite of the blessings they received from God, chose to care nothing about God and did not follow Him. Then in verses 25-26 God blessed Adam and Eve with another son, whom they named Seth, and Seth was given a son named Enosh. We are told “Then men began to call on the name of the Lord.” This new line, which our reading for today calls “the genealogy of Adam,” becomes the Church, the people of God through whom God has promised to bless all mankind. The rest of this chapter lists all the genealogy of the line of Seth through the years right up until Noah. This is the Church through which God has promised to send the Savior to redeem His people from sin.

In this list we find Enoch (vs. 24), of whom it is said he “walked with God.” And finally we come to Noah, of whom it is said, “Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord,” and “Noah walked with God” (Genesis 6:8-9). God preserved for Himself a faithful Church.

In Hebrews 11 we find some of these names as part of a longer list of “witnesses” who were saved by faith in the promise of the Holy Triune God. These witnesses are listed in order to assure us that this One God is faithful and He will also keep us until the end.

We pray: O God, by the leading of a star You once made known to all nations Your only-begotten Son; now lead us, who know You by faith, to know after this life the fullness of Your divine goodness; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Today’s lesson describes the well-known saga of two contrasting and competing Biblical characters, Jacob and Esau. Even before they were born there would be competition between the two: “But the children struggled together within her; and she said, ‘If all is well, why am I like this?’ So she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said to her: ‘Two nations are in your womb, two peoples shall be separated from your body; one people shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger.’”

From the wrestling in the womb to even the birth process itself, these two would be struggling with one another. It all came to a head with the issue of the birthright, which was due the older brother, Esau. Jacob tricked him out of the birthright, taking advantage of Esau’s hunger by selling him the most expensive bowl of stew in history. The ensuing conflict would even be passed on as Esau’s descendants, the Edomites, would be enemies of Jacob’s descendants, the Israelites.

In this account we see how easily man can be swayed. If left unchecked, sin festers within us and eventually seeks to devour. We should constantly be on our guard to check sin at the door, lest we fall into even greater sin, as did Jacob and Esau.

We pray: Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities, and in all our dangers and necessities stretch forth the right hand of Thy majesty to help and defend us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

# Lesson from the Book of Concord

## The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

### XVI.

Of Civil Affairs, they [the Lutheran theologians] teach, that lawful civil ordinances are good works of God, and that it is right for Christians to bear civil office, to sit as judges, to determine matters by the Imperial and other existing laws, to award just punishments, to engage in just wars, to serve as soldiers, to make legal contracts, to hold property, to make oaths when required by the magistrates, to marry, to be given in marriage.

They condemn the Anabaptists who forbid these civil offices to Christians. They condemn also those who do not place the perfection of the Gospel in the fear of God and in faith, but in forsaking civil offices; for the Gospel teaches an eternal righteousness of the heart. Meanwhile, it does not destroy the State or the family, but especially requires their preservation as ordinances of God, and in such ordinances the exercise of charity. Therefore, Christians are necessarily bound to obey their own magistrates and laws, save only when commanded to sin, for then they ought to obey God rather than men [Acts 5:29].

—The Augsburg Confession

FRIDAY, JANUARY 11: GENESIS 6:9-22

EPIPHANY

Genesis 1:27 and 31 says “God created man in His own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female He created them... Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good.” This creation doesn’t sound like Genesis 6:5 where God sees “that every intent of the thoughts of his [man’s] heart was only evil continually.” Mankind had certainly fallen! God was certainly displeased that man would not listen to Him. And God was grieved in His heart.

But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. “Noah was a just man, perfect (blameless or having integrity) in his generations. Noah walked with God.” It appears that Noah and his family were the only ones who continued to walk in the grace promised to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15. Verse 6:22 says, “Thus Noah did; according to all that God commanded him, so he did.”

Today in this sin-filled world we still have those who hear God’s Word and do it. In Baptism “the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sin and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever” (Small Catechism). In these latter days God’s faithful Church, like Noah, is surrounded by an unbelieving world. And like Noah, it continues to listen to God’s Word, and according to all that God commands it, so it does.

We pray: O God, by the leading of a star You once made known to all nations Your only-begotten Son; now lead us, who know You by faith, to know after this life the fullness of Your divine goodness; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

We know from Genesis 6:3 that Noah had about 120 years to complete the ark and warn people of the coming flood. We also know from Matthew 24:38 and II Peter 2:5 that the people completely ignored Noah and went right on with their lives, as though nothing was going to happen. They lived as though things would keep on going just as they always have.

Peter reminds his readers, us, that there is another final Day of Judgment coming. He says that since God didn't spare the ancient world, don't fall into the trap of thinking He will spare this world. But the Holy Triune God has promised His people a new heaven and a new earth. After the Genesis flood Noah and his family replenished the earth; however, it was with sinners like us. In Matthew 24 Jesus' disciples asked Him about the last day. In His answer Jesus tells them no one except the Father knows when the Last Day will come. The signs are obvious, but no one knows the exact time. The end will come unexpectedly, like the Flood.

Jesus and Peter both use Noah's flood as an example of God's grace to His people. Like Noah and his family, faithful people now have been brought into the Kingdom of Christ, His Church. In the waters of Baptism the Holy Spirit "works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this" (Small Catechism).

We pray: O God, by the leading of a star You once made known to all nations Your only-begotten Son; now lead us, who know You by faith, to know after this life the fullness of Your divine goodness; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

How do you receive the one who is sent to do the Lord's work? Laban says, "Come in, O blessed of the Lord! Why do you stand outside?" Abraham's servant is welcomed in and given provisions. When brought to the table, he would not eat until he had discharged his duty to get a bride for the bridegroom. After hearing the Word, Laban and Bethuel respond, "The thing comes from the Lord; we cannot speak to you either bad or good. Here is Rebekah before you; take her and go, and let her be your master's son's wife, as the Lord has spoken."

When a newly called pastor is presented in the Church, the congregation is asked, "You have heard the solemn promise of him called to be your pastor. Will you now receive him, show him that love, honor, and obedience in the Lord which you owe to the shepherd and teacher placed over you in your Lord Jesus Christ, and will you support him by your gifts and pray for him always that in his labors he may retain a cheerful spirit and that his ministry among you may be abundantly blessed?" The congregation responds, "We will with the help of God."

Our gracious God sent His Servant to atone for our sins, and even now He continues to send out "pastors and teachers... for the work of the ministry" (Ephesians 4:11-12) to preach the Word, which creates and strengthens faith in our hearts.

We pray: O Christ, You love the Church and gave Yourself for her; sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the Word, that she might be presented to You as a glorious Church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing, but holy and without blemish (Ephesians 5:25-27). Amen.



Finding a wife for Isaac was not simply the fatherly duty of Abraham. God had told Abraham that Isaac was the heir to the Promised Seed, our Savior Jesus Christ who was to come. This marriage was of great religious importance. Isaac would inherit the Promised Land; Abraham's servant was not to take Isaac to another land, lest he forsake God's abundant promise.

Like a called and ordained pastor who swears to perform the duties of the pastoral office in accordance with the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, this oldest servant was bound by an oath to get a wife for Isaac in Abraham's fatherland. A pastor preaching the Word prays and trusts that the Holy Spirit will grant success to that Word by creating faith in the hearers. Preaching and teaching the Word, we ask the apostolic question, "Do you believe?" We wait in silence to know whether a believer has been created. When the answer is "yes", then we rejoice and bless the Lord, for He has "not forsaken His mercy and His truth."

The Church is the bride and Jesus is the bridegroom. St. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 11:2, "...I have espoused [promised] you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ." This happens through the preaching of the Word and administration of the Sacraments as God brings us to faith and we are made members of His Body, the Church.

We pray: Almighty, gracious Lord, You fulfilled Your promise to Abraham to give him a holy Seed, our Savior. Keep us in the true faith that we may remain faithful to Christ, the Church's bridegroom, and enjoy the coming marriage feast of the Lamb which has no end. Amen.

"I will never again curse the ground for man's sake, although the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth."

The Lord makes mankind a promise, never again to curse the ground for man's sake. He attaches a visible rainbow to His promise as a reminder to us. And what is there in man that God would make such a promise? Nothing! He makes this promise "although," despite the fact that the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth!

Man, indeed, is born by nature sinful and unclean. The wicked imaginations of our hearts are but symptoms of the underlying original sin that we have inherited from Adam. Only God can solve that problem, and it requires a good bit more than a rainbow. For this He sacrifices His Son, a more satisfying sacrifice than Noah's sacrificial birds and animals. By means of Christ's sacrifice every one of the evil imaginations of our hearts is atoned for.

So it is with the mercies God bestows on us. They are unearned, undeserved gifts of His grace. From the gift of being created in the first place, to the gift of our Lord Jesus' sacrifice for our sins, to the gift of the resurrection of our bodies and the life of the world to come, everything we have from God is a gift. "For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him" (Small Catechism).

We pray: Heavenly Father, I give You thanks for all Your manifold blessings, chiefly the gift of salvation in Christ Jesus. Grant me ever to live a life that confesses my gratitude. Amen.

“Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth.”

The Lord graciously, by means of the ark, spared a remnant of humanity during the great flood. And was humanity forever grateful for this? We know better. In their arrogance they attempted to build a great tower to heaven. It was the height of fallen, sinful hubris. We read in verse 5 that “the Lord came down to see the city and the tower.” The Lord is omniscient and omnipotent, of course. But the point of saying “the Lord came down” is to drive home the point that what we think is “great” is pitifully small in the eyes of the Lord.

The Lord puts a stop to it. It is a drastic mercy, a throwing of cold water on the hubris of man, that we might repent and receive the Lord’s grace, rather than trying to invade heaven with skyscrapers of our own making. The text says He confused their language, jumbled their lips. And so we have a multiplicity of languages to this day.

By the cross of our Lord, man’s fall in Eden was overthrown (though the effects remain). So too, at Pentecost the curse of Babel was overthrown (though, again, the effects remain). The Church is given the task now to spread the good news of salvation in Christ Jesus to every nation, tribe, people, and language.

We pray: O Lord, we beseech Thee mercifully to receive the prayers of Thy people who call upon Thee; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfill the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

With the promised birth of Sarah’s son, everyone is laughing with Sarah. Abraham laughed in believing joy when God told him that He would have a son in his old age. Initially Sarah laughed in disbelief when God told her that she would conceive and bear a son. Now she laughs with Abraham in believing joy. Her disbelieving laughing was her own fault, but her believing laughing she credits to God. “God has made me laugh...”

When we sin and deny the Word, then we wholly are to blame for our unbelief. When God gives to us the gift of faith, He gets all the credit for our faith in Christ and the salvation it brings. Sarah says, “...and all who hear will laugh with me.” She knows that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. The power of the Word comes from the Word giver. In thanksgiving for these great promises, Abraham holds a great feast for the gift of Isaac. Abraham knows the “Who” of Sarah’s rhetorical question, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children?”

Due to our sin, we have brought the effects of sin upon ourselves. But due to His graciousness, we have been lifted out of the depths. The psalmist says, “You turned my wailing into dancing; I will give You thanks forever” (Psalm 30:11). Those who know the One who always keeps His promises believingly laugh with joy at the gracious God who keeps His promises to Abraham, and to us.

We pray: O Lord, You have made great and precious promises of life to us. Create and maintain faith in us so that we give thanks for Your salvation in the Virgin’s Son and Your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

After His visitation to bring the Word to Sarah, the Lord stuck around to speak with Abraham about the planned destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham shows forth the fruits of faith when he attempts to be a mediator for the righteous one living there. Now who would Abraham know who lives in one of those cities? His relation, Lot!

In today's reading the two angels come to Sodom to rescue Lot from his predicament. Lot shows forth his righteousness by the hospitality shown to these visitors. Lot must have borne witness to his faith, because the people of the city complain that Lot "keeps acting as a judge" (v.9). Nevertheless, having separated from Abraham and choosing to live among such a wicked population has definitely affected his judgment. Lot wrongly offers to substitute one sin for another in attempting to protect his visitors. We might even ask why had he promised his daughters in marriage to unbelievers, anyway?

Thankfully, the Lord was gracious to him, and us. "God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow." As Luther says, "We daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment." Our Mediator, Jesus Christ, pleads for us before the heavenly throne. He daily covers over our sin and rescues us from the overthrow of the devil's kingdom. We flee to the heavenly city, small though it is among the large cities of wickedness in this world.

We pray: Dear God, do not remember my sins, but remember me in Your Son Jesus Christ, in whom I trust for my salvation. Amen.

"And Pharaoh called Abram and said, 'What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife?'"

Our Lord called Abram (later "Abraham," meaning "father of many nations") to follow Him. He promised him land, numerous descendants, and a great name. Most importantly, the Lord promised that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. He would be the father of the nation through which the Savior of the world would come, Christ Jesus our Lord.

Abraham is rightly called a great man of faith, and rightly so. When the Lord told him to leave his homeland and go to a new place, he did it! But Abraham also had profound failings. In this case, he feared that the Egyptians would kill him because they wanted his beautiful wife. Instead of trusting in the Lord to protect him, he told her to lie and say she was his sister. Pharaoh took her, the Lord cursed Pharaoh's house, and Pharaoh was justly angry at Abram.

Pharaoh returned his untouched wife, of course. Abraham was in the wrong, yet God protected him and his wife anyway, by grace. Even more importantly, He had His use of Abraham, again by grace, to bring about the coming of Christ, the Savior of the many nations.

We pray: O God, as You graciously had Your use of Abraham despite his failings, I pray forgive me of my many sins for the sake of Christ Jesus, and have Your use of me also. Amen.

“Abram dwelt in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelt in the cities of the plain and pitched his tent even as far as Sodom.”

Abram and Lot had been given great material blessing by the Lord; so great that the herdsmen employed by each were getting in quarrels over resources. So Abram asked Lot to pick one side or the other, and agreed in advance to take whatever Lot did not pick. Lot picked the good green land of the plains, “and pitched his tent even as far as Sodom.” Later, we will hear that he had moved into town. And Sodom was a wicked city.

Abram dwelt in Canaan. He understood, at least in this case, that he did not need to secure the best for himself. The Lord had promised to bless him, and nothing about this division of the land would ultimately change that. Quite to the contrary, he may well have seen that it was a blessing to keep some distance from wickedness. Certainly we can see that!

So, too, with us. The wicked places may look more attractive, but God grant us to keep our distance! Rather, even when we find ourselves placed in “less than ideal” circumstances, God grant us the simple trust that “He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all” will indeed, together with Him, give us all things.

We pray: Merciful heavenly Father, keep me this day from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. Strengthen my faith, that I may quietly and confidently trust in the salvation You have given me in Christ Jesus. Amen.

In chapter 17 almighty God comes for the benefit of Abraham, the father of many nations. In chapter 18 He comes for the benefit of Princess Sarah. Abraham’s three guests eat and drink with him. Before the Lord begins to speak, he wants to make sure that Sarah is listening. “Where is Sarah your wife?” Once the Lord is assured that Sarah is listening just beyond the tent door, He gives her the good news.

Unlike believing Abraham, who laughs with unexpected surprise at such good news, Sarah laughs with doubt and unbelief at what she thinks is the impossibility of her bearing a child. It is not surprising that she disbelieves; that is our sinful reaction, too. We have all kinds of reasons why we don’t trust in God’s Word regarding our finances, our children, our sickness, our situation, etc., but in the end, it is sin. We doubt the Lord’s ability. “Is anything too hard for the Lord?”

Sarah’s gracious Lord exposes her sin so that He might take away her sinful unbelief. Sadly, we see that it is fear which keeps her from telling the truth. Now we know why Sarah needed this visitation. The Lord did not come to create fear, but to create faith in His Word of promise.

When the Lord comes to you through His Word and Sacraments, receive His gracious promises. If His Word exposes your sin, confess it. Stop disbelieving. Believe in the Word of forgiveness through your Savior, Jesus Christ.

We pray: Heavenly Father, keep us in Your Word and truth. Remove our sinful fears, which keep us from trusting Your Word. Give us faith in Your promise of salvation, secured by our Lord Jesus. Amen.

When Abram was 75 years old, he left Ur. When he was 85 years old, God made a covenant with him (Genesis 15). Now it is 14 years later, and God is giving Abram a few more details about this covenant. Patience, Abram!

The details of today's reading reside in the names:

- Although Abram and Sarai are well beyond the age of bearing children, his God is El Shaddai, the almighty One (v.1)! With God nothing is impossible. The Blessed Virgin Mary learned this truth, when she was given the announcement that she would bear a child named Jesus, meaning "One who saves."
- God changes Abram's name to Abraham, the father of the multitude (v.3). God's promise is that Abraham will be the "father of many nations" (v.5). This prophecy is not fulfilled until the one nation Israel becomes many nations in the spreading of the Gospel to all nations (Matthew 28:19).
- After receiving the news of the covenant (Genesis 15), Abram listened to Sarai's advice to use Hagar as a surrogate. She gave birth to Ishmael. By changing Sarai's name to Sarah, "princess," God makes it clear that the Promised Seed will come through his wife, not a surrogate. God grants Abraham's prayer to bless Ishmael, but the covenant will be established through the future son, Isaac.

Our name is changed when we are baptized. From then on we are called "Christian." We are united with Christ in our baptism through faith. God bestows upon us the title "son of God" (Galatians 2).

We pray: Almighty God, though we have sinned, You have called us blessed and righteous through faith in Jesus, the One who saves. Amen.

"Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High."

An enemy king had overrun Sodom, taking Lot and his family captive. Abraham came out with 318 men, and God gave him victory over this enemy, and all the captives of Sodom were freed. Abraham himself refused any recompense, that he might clearly confess that his blessings were from the Lord, and not from the king of Sodom.

Abraham then goes to this "Melchizedek." The name means "King of Righteousness," but he is also king of Salem (later called "Jerusalem"). And as well as being a king, he was "the priest of God Most High." Abraham even gives him tithes of everything! This man is introduced to us out of nowhere, and here Abraham is, submitting to him. And the priest/king accepts his tithes.

What a picture he is to us of Christ, the true King of Salem (which means "peace"), the true King of Righteousness, our true eternal "priest of God Most High." God grant us ever faithfully to confess Christ as our prophet, priest, and king; both with our humble submission to Him, and also with our Christ-confessing offerings.

We pray: Lord Jesus Christ, my prophet, priest, and king, grant me this day faithfully to confess You with my resources, with my humble obedience to You, and with my Christian conduct before men. Amen.

“There appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces.”

The Lord was making a covenant with Abram. In the original language the idea was to “cut a covenant,” and that’s important. To do this, animals would be divided, and the two parties to the covenant would pass back and forth between the divided animals, the implication being “may it be so to either of us if one of us breaks the terms of this agreement.”

As Abram passes into a deep and dreadful darkness as the sun went down, he sees this “smoking oven and burning torch” pass between these divided animals, and God promises that Abram will live to a good old age, and that his descendants would inherit the land. But Abram himself does not pass between the animals!

Thus it is with us and the Lord. There is only the gift and promise of God. In Christ He binds Himself to save us, to forgive our sins, and give us life. It all depends on Him, upon His grace and mercy; not at all upon our works. Salvation is given to us through the faith God Himself creates in us. Nothing is left for us but to say “Amen” and “thank you.”

We pray: Lord Jesus Christ, I give You thanks that You have purchased forgiveness of sins and eternal life for me. Strengthen my faith in this great gift, and grant me to say “thank you” with my life today, and with all the days You give me. Amen.

## Lesson from the Book of Concord The Second Sunday after the Epiphany

### XI. Of the Marriage of Priests.

In prohibiting marriage, and burdening the divine order of priests with perpetual celibacy, they have neither reason nor right, but have treated it as antichristian, tyrannical, sceptical scoundrels, and have afforded occasion for all kinds of horrible, abominable sins of impurity, in which they still wallow. But just as the power has been given neither to us nor to them to make a woman out of a man, or man out of a woman, or to annihilate both, so also it has not been given them; so also power has not been given them to sunder and separate such creatures of God, or to forbid them from living honorably in marriage with one another. Therefore we are unwilling to assent to their abominable celibacy, nor will we even tolerate it, but we wish to have marriage free as God has instituted and appointed it, and we wish neither to rescind nor hinder His work; for Paul says that this prohibition of marriage is a doctrine of devils (1 Tim. 4:1sq.).

### XIV. Of Monastic Vows

As monastic vows directly conflict with the first chief article, they ought to be absolutely abolished. For it is of them that Christ says (Matt. 24:5, 23 sq.): “I am Christ,” etc. For he who makes a vow to live in a monastery believes that he will enter upon a mode of life holier than the ordinary Christians, and by his own works wishes to earn heaven not only for himself, but also for others; this is to deny Christ. And they boast from their St. Thomas that a monastic vow is on an equality with baptism. This is blasphemy against God.

—The Smalcald Articles, Part III, Art. XI, XIV