

SATURDAY, JANUARY 5: LUKE 2:41-52 12TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS

Jesus was now twelve, and that was considered to be the age of religious maturity in Israel. How much did Jesus see that day in the temple? Did He watch the lamb being killed and having its blood spill out? How much did He participate in? The gospel doesn't tell us, but one would think that He saw *and understood* everything. The temple was the place where He was at home. He belonged there.

There was more than a ritual requirement that Jesus had to fulfill there at the temple on that Passover. He wasn't just doing what all the other twelve year old boys had to do. He had an even bigger mission. His destiny was one that was enormous, and it was very much wrapped up in this ancient building in which He stood. When Jesus first saw the temple as He and His family were approaching Jerusalem, He knew that it was the place where He was supposed to be, because it was His Father's house. He was supposed to be present there. When He saw the spotless and perfect lamb being sacrificed on the altar in that temple, He knew that He was going to be the last of the lambs to be slain. When He saw the blood flow down off of the altar, the blood of thousands of lambs, He knew that His blood would one day flow like that. It would flow out of Him, taking His life with it, taking the sins of the world with it.

Jesus is our Passover lamb. That was the purpose for which He was born—and He always knew it.

THE LUTHERAN HERALD

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THE GOSPEL

St. Matthew 21:1-8 (NKJV)

Now when they drew near Jerusalem, and came to Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Loose them and bring them to Me. And if anyone says anything to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord has need of them,’ and immediately he will send them.” All this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying:

“Tell the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold, your King is coming to you, Lowly, and sitting on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey.’”

So the disciples went and did as Jesus commanded them. They brought the donkey and the colt, laid their clothes on them, and set Him on them. And a very great multitude spread their clothes on the road; others cut down branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

THE COLLECT

Stir up, we beseech You, Your power, O Lord, and come, that by Your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Your mighty deliverance; who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

David Scaer, wrote a book a number of years ago called, *What do you think of Jesus?* The main point of the little book and its title was that it made all the difference in the world how one answered that question. Who do you say He is? On this question hangs life and death.

We think of Jesus as the babe in the manger during the Christmas season, but we must never forget that He is ruler of heaven and earth; men rise by their reception of Him and fall because of their rejection of Him. “The thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.” The wheat will be divided from the chaff over the subject of who Jesus is.

“This Child will be spoken against.” This is an ominous prophecy from Simeon. Already, it is known that there will be a rejection of this Christ. The Jews themselves, in madness, will violently reject their Messiah because He does not meet their expectations. And so it is today, Jesus never elicits ‘no reaction’: He is worshipped, or He is actively rejected, but He has never been ignored over the last two thousand years.

Simeon and Anna are two magnificent examples of faithfulness. These were devout people of God, and their faithfulness stands out against the background of their time. The nation of the Jews was on a deplorably low spiritual level and nearly all the ruling classes were morally corrupt; yet God had here and there preserved for himself true Israelites who looked for Israel’s Consolation, the coming spiritual Messiah. It is always thus. The true Church on earth never comes to an end.

When Jesus was born, Augustus Caesar was the Emperor of the world. He could have any of the luxuries that money could buy. He had innumerable servants at his command. He could command something to happen and people would scurry to accomplish it.

Quirinius, who was governing Syria, no doubt also lived in the lap of luxury, as did Herod and the High Priest and all other high officials of that time. And yet none of them were important much after their deaths. The most important person in the whole world that night when the shepherds arrived at a shed where Mary and Joseph were staying, was a baby. A baby that was poor. A baby that did not have soft, expensive clothing. A baby that had to be laid in a trough for a crib. The most important person in the world was, essentially, living in a barn. Most people probably walked by never knowing the ultimately important person that lay in that trough. If they took notice at all, they probably saw just another poor family crowded into some inadequate place for the upcoming census. But the angels of heaven knew. They could not contain themselves. They would sing for joy because God had undertaken such a tremendous act of love and mercy for us.

It is ‘funny’, though, that someone we all know by name, Jesus, is as little understood by many this Christmas season as He was at His birth. This Person restored peace between God and His creation, He opened heaven to you and me, He took away our sin and guilt—this Baby born in a cattle shed!

Our Lord speaks comforting words to us through St. Peter: we may cast all our cares on God Himself! And we are told that we may do so in the confidence that “He cares for you.” We are tempted to doubt that statement and that should come as no surprise. One way to understand the original sin is to see it as a temptation to distrust God! Eve speaks of the warning God had given mankind against partaking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. “In the day you eat of it, you will surely die.”

The devil flat contradicted God: “You will not die. God knows that when you eat of it, you will be like Him!” In other words, God doesn’t care about you. God cares about Himself, and the only reason He gave you that command is to prevent you from becoming His equal. Short and sweet, the devil says God doesn’t care about you. St. Peter says He does. Whom will you believe?

Peter says we know God cares about us. How? Well, He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross for us and give us eternal life. God cared so much about you, that He sacrificed His own Son, so that you could have forgiveness and eternal life. Your biggest problem was sin...and the separation from God, death, judgment and damnation that flow out of it. God has taken care of that by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Knowing that God has taken care of your biggest problem, you may by all means confidently trust Him to see you through whatever problems you are facing now.

The Church looks forward to celebrating the birth of the Lord Jesus, and thus also looks forward to His coming again in glory. As we find ourselves between His first coming and His second coming—as we find ourselves between the baptismal beginning of our spiritual life in this world and our departure from this world—what shall we do? And, how shall we do it?

Those two questions are too big to answer, even in a superficial way, in a devotion such as this. Nevertheless, a key component to answering those questions is found in the text for today: In Christ, we have been given divine power! We have been empowered for the living of a Godly life! We have this, because God the Son has taken on a human nature. In Word and Sacrament, we are intimately united with this God-Man Jesus Christ. So, as we are partakers of Him, we partake also of the divine power that He gives us along with Himself.

Of course, that means first of all the forgiveness of our sins. The Lord Jesus died on the cross for us so that, taking our unrighteousness upon Himself and paying for it, we now take His perfect righteousness upon ourselves. In Christ, we are now new, righteous creations, full of life and godliness. God grant us His grace—His powerful grace—therefore, that throughout this Advent season, we may continually repent of our sins, drown our old sinful natures, and live lives that show forth the new, godly man who will live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

Circumcision was required of the Jews on the eighth day after birth. “He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.” (Gen. 17:13)

Circumcision brought one into the covenant with God through blood. The fact that it was performed on the eighth day (the first day of a new week) suggests that it brought with it hope for eternal life. Christ’s resurrection on the first day of a new week gives us a new day of creation, or re-creation, in this eighth day. All things become new and our salvation is brought to its completion.

Luther agreed with this perspective. He said, “circumcision was deferred to the eighth day because in the resurrection, which is signified by the eighth day, we shall be perfectly circumcised, in order that we may be free from every sin of the world.” As we see, God has always had the same plan for our salvation.

The old covenant was full of signposts leading us to Christ. Even John the Baptist points us to God’s true and only way of salvation. John is the bridge between old and new: he is the last of the Old Testament prophets, but in his very name—“Grace of God”—he shows us how we obtain eternal life. God’s grace was upon the Hebrews in giving them His covenant. God’s grace was upon John to lead the Jews out of the desert of sin and toward Christ. God’s grace is with us who are perfected in Christ.

Mary went to see her relative Elisabeth. The angel had told her that Elisabeth was also the recipient of a great work of God, she would no doubt understand.

If there were any doubts about the presence of the very real and true God in Mary, Elisabeth's reaction put those doubts to rest. Upon hearing Mary's voice Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied concerning Mary. Not only that, but the Spirit made clear that the prophecies about John the Baptist being full of the Holy Spirit are being fulfilled even while he is in his mother's womb. He is filled with the Spirit through her hearing of the Word Mary brings and he reacts to the sound of Mary's greeting as well! John leaped for joy at the presence of his Savior.

This is a truly profound thing, since John obviously cannot reason or reflect on what is happening around him, yet he leaps for joy. If an unborn child can react to Christ in this way, is there any question that infants can have faith even though they don't have reflective mental abilities yet?

God is present in Mary. She is the *Theotokos*, the "God-bearer," the mother of God. She is the tabernacle of God. She, in her person, represents the Church because the church now is the tabernacle of God. God may be found in His Church today. He said, "I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Jesus says that He will be with His people to the end of time, but how? Jesus is in Baptism, in the Eucharist, in the Word. God has come near to us.

St. Peter warns strongly against false teachers in this chapter, and particularly the Holy Spirit shows us in the words above the flaw in the thinking of these false teachers. It is a problem with definitions, but we see that same problem these days. People want nothing to do with the Church. Why? Because, they say, "I just want to be free, and the Church wants to enslave me to a bunch of moral restrictions."

Let's look at that. Ask most people what kind of person they wish they were, and they will say "hard working, disciplined, generous, honest, kind"...all those things. Ask them if they always are all those things, and they will admit it: "well, no, not always." Why not?

The answer is really quite simple: they, and according to our old sinful natures we too, are slaves to impulses we wish we didn't have: impulses to greed, and lust, and deceit, and selfishness of every kind. The Church isn't trying to enslave anybody. The Church delivers Jesus, Who came to set us free from sin—free to be the kind of people God created us to be in the first place.

Dear ones in Christ, when false teachers promise you "liberty" or "freedom" to engage in all manner of wickedness, turn away. Cling to the Savior God sends to us, for it is in Him that we have true freedom—the freedom to be what God intended us to be in the beginning.

Christians of every age wonder, “Why doesn’t God bring this wicked world to an end?” They wondered already in the generation or two after our Lord’s Ascension, when St. Peter wrote these words. They wondered in the days of persecution, and again when the Roman Empire was crumbling. They wondered when bubonic plague broke out in the middle ages, and not surprisingly, we ask the same question today.

The Holy Spirit is clear: God isn’t slow. Jesus isn’t “tardy.” It is not the absence of God’s care that has kept the Savior tarrying for so long—precisely the opposite. God cares very much. Our Lord waits to bring this world to an end, so that as many as possible can come to eternal life and salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

So then, rather than becoming frustrated with the circumstances of the world in which we live, let us rather consider it a pure honor that God has been pleased to give us life and salvation and to entrust us with serving Him, here and now. Salvation truly is ours in Christ Jesus. What a great joy, when God gives us the opportunity to give the gift of eternal-life-bestowing words to others! Let us, with the mind of Christ, not be willing that any should perish, but rather sincerely desire the salvation of all. May God use us, so that many others may know the joy of everlasting life and salvation, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The angel went to Mary and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” What tremendous words: the Lord God was *with* Mary, not against her! The Lord was on her side.

Remember who this Lord is. He is the one who created the heavens and the earth. He is the one who created life from nothing. He is the one who parted the Red Sea and destroyed pharaoh’s armies in the water. He is the God that led Israel by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. He is the God who made the earth shake when He gave the ten commandments to Moses, and He is the Lord who will wrap up history in his own good time. No army stands against His face. No successful rebel defies His will. This is the kind of Lord you want “with you,” not against you.

It is interesting that imperial Germany had a sense of this. They knew the importance of having God with them. This knowledge was evidenced by the fact that the Kaiser’s flag had written on it, *Gott mit uns*—God with us—1870. That is, they felt that God had fought for them in their war with France.

It is truly important to have the Almighty God with you, because you will then be saved and not destroyed by His powerful arm. When the angel says, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you,” that doesn’t just apply to Mary, it applies to the Church, to you. You are highly favored. The Lord is with you.

FROM THE PROPERS FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY
AFTER CHRISTMAS

GOSPEL

St. Luke 2:33-40 (NKJV)

And Joseph and His mother marveled at those things which were spoken of Him. Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, “Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”

Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; and this woman was a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

So when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth. And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him.

THE COLLECT

Almighty and everlasting God, direct our actions according to Your good pleasure, that in the name of Your beloved Son we may be made to abound in good works; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 7: 1 JOHN 1:1—2:14

ADVENT 1

What a promise! “If we confess our sins.” That’s it! Not “if we confess our sins and tithe.” Not “if we confess our sins and say a bunch of prayers and go on a pilgrimage.” Just confess. And what does it mean to “confess”? Literally, it means “to say the same thing as.” In this case, it means to say the same thing as God. God says you are a sinner. Now, you could *say* you aren’t a sinner, but that would be lying. You can only be “confessing” when you’re saying the same thing that God has said to you.

So say it. You’re a sinner. That’s just putting your faith, your “agreeing with God,” into words. We have more to confess than just our sins, of course. There’s the rest of our faith. God has said that He so loved the world that He gave His Only-Begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him...shall have eternal life. God has said that Holy Baptism now saves you. So confess all that, too.

And then, rejoice in the promise. Rejoice especially in that little word “all.” We are cleansed from *all* unrighteousness. The blood of Jesus doesn’t forgive *most* sins—all except that one that really bugs your conscience. No “excepts.” All. So go ahead. You don’t have to hide or explain away or make excuses for any of your sins. Face them. Confess them. And then rejoice that God has sent Jesus to die on the cross to take them all away. All.

Oh, how we cling to the things of this world! Yet the simple and obvious truth is that we can hold on to none of it. The world is passing away, the Apostle tells us, and that includes everything in it. And so the Scriptures repeatedly admonish us: Set your minds on things above, and not on earthly things. Our citizenship is in Heaven. Store up treasures in Heaven, not on Earth, for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

As the Church, we are in the season of Advent. As Americans, we are in the season of sales—rampant commercialism—and all of the “buy our product if you really want Christmas to be perfect this year.” One of the holiest days of the Church calendar, now exploited to encourage what the Apostle calls “the lust of” worldly things. Dear ones in Christ, do not set your hearts on such things.

Set your hearts on doing “the will of God.” And what is His will? His will is that you would rejoice in His great Christmas gift—the gift of Jesus, sent from heaven to bear your sins to the cross and so to be your Savior. Repent. Believe in Jesus. Undertake to lead holy lives that are pleasing in the sight of God, and at the same time remain ever repentant/believing ones—for our righteousness is never adequate; we must ever remain clothed in the righteousness of Christ. So shall we indeed “abide forever.” So shall we have eternal life, for the sake of the perfect life, the atoning death, and the glorious resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The preface of Saint Luke’s Gospel is done in the style of a Greek historian and gives an account of the purpose and manner of Luke’s historical work, but in this instance the historian is an evangelist concerned with the things “accomplished among us,” accomplished by God in fulfillment of His promises. The material being introduced is charged with Old Testament ideas, language, institutions, and historical figures. It all serves to point to the fact that the Gospel is the Gospel of God, the fulfillment of His purpose and promise; now being fulfilled in the last days.

This good news is first spoken amid the sanctities of the Old Covenant (the priesthood and the temple) at the burning of the incense. To an aged priest and his barren wife the angel announces the birth of a son who is to be the vessel of God’s grace, the dedicated prophet and Spirit-filled forerunner who shall prepare the hearts of his people for the coming of the Lord. The God for Whom nothing is impossible has spoken; before Him the questioning of man must fall silent. Man can only receive, in faith, the words which will be fulfilled in their time.

Thus, we are not to deny, revise, harden, or soften these divine, inspired words, but are to receive their gracious, holy truth and simply rejoice in the will of God fulfilled. This is our called state whether we agree or disagree with God’s perfect will and way of accomplishing His plan: for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are the called according to His purpose.

Saint Matthew now sees the will of God which was expressed in the act of the Exodus and articulated in the prophetic word of Hosea as reaching its full measure in the incarnate Son of God to effect the final exodus, the final full deliverance of His people; that is the meaning of “fulfilled” here. Matthew sees an eternal fulfillment of grace and salvation.

The perspective of Matthew, as of the whole Bible, is much less individualistic than Man’s today: a man and his ancestors, a man and his people, felt and knew themselves to be one, united in their joy and woe. Thus it was very serious when Jeremiah heard the mother of the race, Rachel, weeping from her grave as Israel went into captivity. Rachel wept then and Matthew hears her weep again, now at the climax of Israel’s history of guilt and tears. Rachel weeps now when, once again, the redeeming purposes of God collide with man’s selfish will and the mothers of Bethlehem weep for their children.

Again Matthew quotes the Old Testament with a consciousness of the original context. Jeremiah 30 and 31 constitute a Book of Comfort for God’s people in the depths of their sorrow, overflowing with promises for a better day, hope for God’s great future. Throughout His wrath, the Lord yearns for His “darling child,” His people, and He holds out the promise of the new covenant with a people whom He has renewed by forgiving their iniquity and remembering their sin no more—the hope for a time when the history of God’s people would no longer be a history for tears.

THE GOSPEL

St. Luke 21:25-36 (NKJV)

“And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men’s hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of heaven will be shaken.

“Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

“Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near.”

Then He spoke to them a parable: “Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. When they are already budding, you see and know for yourselves that summer is now near. So you also, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near.”

“Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.

“But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

THE COLLECT

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Thine only-begotten Son, so that by His coming we may be enabled to serve Thee with pure minds; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth, and reigneth, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

This past Sunday, our Gospel was a reminder during the Advent Season, that the “coming of the Lord” commonly known as the “Day of the Lord” was to happen as sure as the next season to arrive. While waiting for that day we are to: “Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.” This week our devotional readings assist us with accomplishing this goal.

Our first reading urges us be to watching, praying, and being counted worthy to stand before God as we “do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God.” How important are these words?

Shortly after the Luther’s death as we read in the preface to the Book of Concord, Satan used godless men to scatter seeds of division with their corrupted teachings in their churches and schools concerning the true doctrine of Jesus Christ. As a result the bond of Christian love and the furtherance of the Holy Gospel was hindered. But it never stopped the faithful from seeing the importance of John’s words: “do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God.”

What follows are John’s words put into practice which we the faithful would do well to heed in these last days as we wait for the coming of the Lord: “that our churches and our schools should persevere in the pure doctrine of God’s Word and in that longed-for and godly oneness of mind.”

Bethlehem is not merely the name of a place; it marks the divine, supernatural character of the Redeemer and the ransom: the Deliverer would rescue His people from their sins, and not only His people—He was to “be great to the ends of the earth.” The words of the prophet Micah find fulfillment in Jesus; and the fulfillment is attested in a strangely wondrous way. Israel’s scribes are compelled to point it out to the non-Jewish King Herod and to Gentile wise men from the ends of the earth. Israel remains indifferent to the promised Ruler from Bethlehem; King Herod seeks Him out in order to destroy Him; only Gentiles, alerted by a star in the East, guided by the prophetic word of God and led by His star, seek Him out to worship Him.

The story of the wise men (The term *magi* originally designated a priestly class of the Medes and had come to be used generally of Eastern sages versed in knowledge of the stars—arguably more astronomer than astrologer) is both fulfillment of prophecy and a prophecy of things to come: “Many will come from east and west...while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness.” Christ will be lifted up on the cross, will rise from the tomb according to Scripture, and will ascend into heaven—thus calling many, both Jew and Gentile, to Himself for the forgiveness of their sins and redemption of their souls purely by grace through that life-giving atoning sacrifice and resurrection. This grace-filled reality shall originate, through God’s will and Word, from insignificant little Bethlehem.

Both the beginning and the end of Jesus' life on earth proved a stumbling block to the faith of His people. They looked on His obscure beginnings and said, "Is not this the carpenter's son?... Where then did this man get all this?" They looked on His crucifixion, remembered the curse of Deuteronomy upon the executed man, and said, "Jesus is accursed."

Matthew proclaims that Jesus is the Christ according to the will and Word of God and cites the Old Testament (OT) most richly at the beginning and the end of his narrative; he is saying that just here and in just this way the redeeming will of God is at work, that just here His Word is reaching the full measure of its utterance and effect. His Word is being fulfilled for the redemption of the fallen creation.

Matthew's quotations from the OT are usually brief; but they seem to be designed to recall a larger context for OT believers. One is well advised, therefore, to turn to the OT and read Matthew's quotations in their original context. "An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.'" The promise made to David is fulfilled; God implants in the house of David what the ruined and guilty house of David could not of itself produce, the Christ Who dawns on men like the morning light.

Our reading for this day is important for the faithful as we await the coming of the Lord because Satan is always attacking a believer with seeds of doubt that we shall not be ready when our Lord returns.

One of the seeds of doubt is that mankind can never be saved by faith alone, that is, faith that believes Jesus is the Son of God. Overcoming this seed of doubt disappears when we return to the promise of the coming of the Messiah foretold by Isaiah, "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel," and it's fulfilment in Matthew, which says that "Immanuel" means, God is with us."

As we individually confess each week that "Jesus is born of the Virgin," we are saying that we actually love God, that His plan of revealing Himself in the person of His Son, was sorely needed so that we might have eternal life. For only through this sinless God-Man—Jesus Christ—could the law of God ever be kept perfect as demanded; that the wages of sin, which is death, be paid; and that death could be defeated forever by His rising from the dead alive!

Faith which comes through Christ, leads us to trust that the promises of God are genuine; that His means of grace, His Word and Sacraments do save. How is that possible? Our heavenly Father continues to look upon the work of His Son, as the Spirit bears witness to Jesus Christ as the anointed One Whom we rejoice in and look forward to His promised return.

Today our devotion guides us in the direction of an action that is truly important in these last days as we wait for the coming of the Lord “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.” Here, Jude encourages the reader to remain on the right course; and then says why: “there are those among us, those who have crept in,” that is, into the ministry, “who pervert the grace of our God, into lewdness.”

Jude is speaking in reference to those powerful speakers who can lead a man astray from the person/work of Jesus Christ that God the Father revealed in the flesh, to contemplate one’s own personal success and good works. What these intruders are really saying is that “Christ’s works are no use to you” but you must merit salvation with your own good works, which denies the Lord Who has ransomed us with His blood.”

Each day we live with these voices pulling for our attention to hearing similar Cain-like preaching of success or good works that are not pleasing to God. Many are deceived. How can we lead them back? By contending for the faith which was once delivered for all the saints and remaining grounded in such teachings of Holy Scriptures “which are profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” Some will be pulled from the fire, others will not! But you will have contended for the faith that was delivered to you.

Matthew is writing a new Genesis, the history of the new creation, a book of the genealogy of grace. Literally, it is a “book of the generations” or “history of the origin,” as in Genesis 5:1, which may be called the title for the whole gospel. The genealogy of Jesus is linking Christ with the history of God’s dealings with His people; Matthew is tracing the story of God’s blessing, which begins with the free grace of His blessing on Abraham—in the face of the accumulated curses on man—and is to end when the Son of Man shall say: “Come, O blessed of My Father.” This genealogy is a terse summary of the Old Testament portion of that history.

Matthew is proclaiming the Christ as the climax of the history of God’s mercy to His people. God has been in control of that history; Matthew points that out by the symmetrical form of the genealogy (3x14 generations). God, as Lord of history, is as much in charge of Israel’s generations as God, as Creator, is in charge of the 14 days of the waxing and of the waning of the moon. Israel’s history is the history of His mercy; it rises from Abraham to the splendor of David’s reign but then goes downward to the deportation to Babylon, God’s signal punishment upon His people’s unfaithfulness, and ends in obscurity—Joseph is a nobody and his wife Mary, an unknown. Such an ancestry for the Christ, though, tells the story of Israel’s failure and of God’s mercy for both Jew and Gentile. When the Son of David appears, men can only cry, “Have mercy on us, Son of David.”

The birth of the Messianic Child and the history of His persecuted church are nothing less than the final working out of the primal struggle that began with the Fall of Man. This history is the history of the assault of the enemy—furious but futile—on the Messiah and the Messianic people of God.

The woman symbolizes the people of God from whom the Messiah sprang. The Dragon, killer of men and father of lies, is the ceaseless opponent-by-nature (by virtue of earlier rebellious choice) of the Messianic Child whose coming means God's grace and truth for men. Satan swept down "a third of the stars," which represent his fallen angels. Verse five definitely identifies the Child as the Messiah. The whole victorious career of the Messiah is summed up in the words "was caught up to God and to His throne."

The Christ is at the right hand of God; the Church is still in the wilderness, on earth far from Her true and lasting home, like Israel far from Canaan. There God provides for her, though, as He did for Israel, until the time of affliction is past. The church lives, imperiled and apparently helpless, in the wilderness; but God's saints can face the prospect of martyrdom and the last wrathful attack of the devil with serenity, because they know they face a *defeated* enemy. The decisive battle has already been won, for the blood of the Lamb has atoned for man's guilt. The great and decisive reality now is (not the devil's short season of wrath, but) the eternal salvation, power, and kingdom of our God and the omnipotent authority of His Christ!

The reading from Revelation reveals another action for His saints to be about as they are awaiting Christ's return: "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near."

With these words, one is reminded of the Koehler's Annotated Catechism Question: "What do you mean when you confess, 'I believe in God?' Answer: I mean that I know, and accept as true, what the Bible says of God and trust in Him and rely on Him with firm confidence."

Many times I've heard people say, "I'm not sure I want to read, learn or study the Book of Revelation. It's so gloom and doom type stuff; it's down right scary what people say about it." Those comments usually come from people have never trusted in God's true purpose in revealing Himself in the flesh that, "God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved."

The book of Revelation is about grace and mercy, how God our Father has called His saints to have faith that believes His Word to be divine truth! For to believe in God means to trust in Him, to depend upon Him, to feel secure in our hearts that He will keep His promises and help us in every need. Such confidence is called faith, which cherishes those words, "Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen."

Our reading for today incorporates the message from Last Sunday's Gospel regarding the coming of the Lord into God addressing His whole Church on Earth with these words: "Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."

Faithfulness seem to have disappeared from some in three of the four churches that John is inspired to address with the voice of God who calls His saints to be about forever living in repentance. In Ephesus, some had lost their first love, so that it kept some from loving the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, and mind. In Smyrna, the one who was found faithful, was told they would be tested in the days to come, but to rely on the promises of God. In Pergamos, where faithfulness was missing, false doctrines were believed and practiced. Likewise with Thyatira, without faithfulness, false teachers were allowed to teach false doctrine, the exact opposite of divine truth. Where faithfulness is missing Satan fills the void with his lies of deception that produces division.

In all four churches, one message was the same, "He who has ears, hear what the Word of the Lord has to say. Repent. Our Lord wants to lose none of those who were given to Him, but that all should come to the knowledge of the truth and be saved.

Our Lord desires us to return to our first love, the love of God in Christ Jesus who first loved us, and gave His Only-Begotten Son to die for our sins and be raised again on the third day to guarantee eternal life.

GOSPEL**St. John 1:19-28 (NKJV)**

Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."

And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?"

He said, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?"

And he answered, "No."

Then they said to him, "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?"

He said: "I am 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Make straight the way of the LORD,"' as the prophet Isaiah said."

Now those who were sent were from the Pharisees. And they asked him, saying, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

John answered them, saying, "I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. "It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose."

These things were done in Bethabara beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

THE COLLECT

Stir up O Lord, we beseech Thee, Thy power, and come and help us with Thy great might, that by Thy grace whatsoever is hindered by our sins may be speedily accomplished through Thy mercy and satisfaction; who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

Sometimes fire and brimstone has its place. When gentler means are ignored by obstinate sinners the preaching of wrath and eternal death is all that remains. Yesterday's passage considered the suffering of the unfaithful inhabitants of the Earth. They would be allowed to suffer, but not die, in the hope that they might repent. However, in the last half of Revelation 9 we see that the sixth trumpet moves beyond that. A third of mankind is allowed to die so that the other two thirds might repent and avoid the same fate.

It was the fire and smoke and brimstone that killed them, just like the Law of God kills the sinner in "fire and brimstone" preaching. Unfortunately, dangerous preachers rely only on the Law. They beat down the souls of people with a skewed purpose that thinks man can be tormented into piety. This is not the way of God. Our sinful souls need to be struck down so that we can be made to see the glorious salvation that comes from Jesus Christ in the Gospel. Part of us must die for the rest to live through faith and repentance. In similar fashion, God can use the tragic death of the faithless to move the hearts of others to faith.

The Word of God must be preached to all people, but it must be proclaimed in its full truth. His Truth is sweet when it brings life to man by the message of redemption in Christ, but the bitterness of judgment is often unavoidable because of their impenitence.

Today we bring our Last Day preparations to a conclusion, by heeding our Lord's words of encouragement to the last three of the seven churches addressed in Revelation.

To Sardis: "Remember how you have received and heard." We're talking about receiving faith through hearing the Word of God. Faith leads one to trust in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, believing God revealed Himself in the flesh of His Son to perfectly fulfill the demands of the Law, to suffer and die for the sins of the world, and then on the third day rise in victory over death.

That is what continued to be taught in Philadelphia. The faithful demanded the Word of God to be taught in its truth and purity, and the sacraments were administered only according to Christ's institution. For only through these means of grace can man be strengthened to live in daily repentance, trusting the work of Jesus Christ to be sufficient for salvation, and remain in fellowship till the coming of the Lord.

We also read what happens when this is not the practice as with the Laodiceans. Believers there neither saw the importance of practicing nor condemning other doctrine regarding the saving work of the Triune God. Therefore, because they would not hear and repent the Lord says, "because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth."

Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man." He who has ears to hear, let him hear the Word of the Lord.

THE GOSPEL

ST. MATTHEW 11:2-10 (NKJV)

And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?"

Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me."

As they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. For this is he of whom it is written: 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You.'"

THE COLLECT

Lord, we beseech You, give ear to our prayers and lighten the darkness of our hearts by Your visitation; who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

The locusts that came after the fifth trumpet brought pain and suffering to the inhabitants of the Earth who were not sealed with Christ. Unbelievers often mock God by saying that if He truly existed, or if He were truly good, He would not allow suffering in the world. But sometimes suffering is a blessed warning that keeps us from continuing in a worse way. From a benevolent perspective, it is better that we suffer and be changed, rather than be blissfully ignorant and thoroughly destroy ourselves.

The locusts would be allowed to torment the faithless for a short time, but they were not allowed to kill them. It is actually a good thing that the Lord would prevent these men from the death that they desired. As long as they live, they are able to repent and be saved through faith in the Lamb.

Suffering will continue to come in all manner and sizes, whether it be on the small scale of passing difficulties, or on a grand, terrible scale of disasters and violent men of power. Either way, God can and will work through suffering so that people may be saved from death in their sins. The greater woe is their final judgment, from which there is no chance to turn.

Lord, preserve us through all things, and keep us steadfast by Your Spirit, that as many of us as are sealed by Jesus Christ may rejoice in His coming. Amen!

At the seventh seal there is a brief silence, like a time of rest. Then the trumpets sound and it seems as though the Earth is being unmade. Not by the hands of men, but by tremendous powers in nature the created gifts of God are destroyed. The plants of the Earth are burned, the creatures living in the sea die, then the waters are poisoned, and the lights of the sky are darkened.

God would have every right to take away the blessings He had first given the world at its creation. Men have corrupted and abused His gifts in amazing ways. In contrast to the incense and prayers of the saints rising up before the throne of God would be the smoke of the devastation mixed with the cries of the faithless, praying to the mountains to fall on them.

But His grace is greater than His wrath and those who trust in Him will not be harmed. Even when things seem like they are burning down around us, we must cling to our hope in Christ and we are under His protection. Even if we lose those we love, or our own bodies, He will not let real harm come to any of us who are sealed with Jesus' cross.

Let us continue to offer up prayers before God's throne, that we be kept faithful to the Lamb Who takes away our sin, and that many others may be brought to that faith before His wrath must fall on them.

Lord, Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven. Amen.

No created person or thing could open the scroll in John's vision. Christ Jesus alone is worthy to hold and reveal the whole power of God in this world. All the events of history, whether they are tragic, glorious, violent, peaceful, awesome, or mundane, are made to work together for the sake of the Lamb and His people. Like all of Scripture, the scroll and its seals are only unlocked by Jesus Christ.

Apart from Christ, the Old Testament is just as cryptic and confusing as the visions of Revelation. The stories of power and wrath and violence bound together with promises of hope, deliverance, and glory only make sense when they culminate in the flesh and blood reality of God's only begotten Son revealed in the New Testament.

The only hope we have is in the kingdom, and the power, and the glory of the Lamb who was slain. Our hope only makes sense according to faith in the reality of Jesus' death, resurrection, and return in glory at our own resurrection. Otherwise, all the wrath and violence that has been on this earth, and will continue to come on this earth, will consume us.

John wept in despair that no one could open the scroll, until he was made to see that the Lamb who overcame death could do it. May God keep us focused on Christ, who gives us life and hope, through all the things to come as well. Amen.

Our faith is based on the clear things of the Gospel. God's Word is straightforward on the essentials, such as our guilt by the Law and our redemption in the Gospel. Parts of Scripture that are less clear to us are useful for study and meditation, but it is very important that we not stray from the clear way of Christ's teachings by recklessly chasing after the more mysterious things.

Concerning the four horsemen in Revelation 6, interpreters have offered many explanations throughout the centuries. However, the more useful interpretations connect these images of power and destruction with the realities of this world, which in turn emphasize God's power and grace toward us. The first horseman can be seen as the kings of the earth, some of whom would even make themselves as gods. But none can conquer Christ and His kingdom, which will remain until the end of the age. The second horseman may be the image of the commanders of armies who bring wars and rumors of war. The third, the rich who exploit poverty and famine rather than use wealth to help mankind.

Death could easily follow such men illustrated in the first three horsemen, but a more poignant understanding of the horseman named "Death" is the idea that he represents the deadly false teachers who would deceive portions of those who hear, killing the faithful as martyrs, and leading many others to eternal death through deceitful works.

But evil kings and commanders, lovers of wealth, false teachers, and all the unfaithful will be terrified by the wrath of the Lamb, while the faithful will be preserved by His grace.

As time unfolds, our only hope is Christ crucified. The children of Israel were called to serve the living God and bear His laws and promises. Many of them chose to reject Jesus Christ and they are rejected by God because of it. But those who would be faithful are sealed with the Cross of Christ. They would be saved by the blood of a Lamb like their forefathers were saved in Egypt. But it was not because of their virtue, or their strength, or their national identity. They were only saved through faith in the sign God had placed on them.

144,000 is often understood to symbolize a number of completeness, perhaps a complete remnant from a number that might otherwise be much larger. Then there are the countless multitude from all nations crying out in glory to God for His salvation. No one in this wonderful picture of our Lord's glorious presence is there according to their own honor or might. They are there only because of the Lamb who was slain to take away the sins of the world. They are the servants of God, not servants of their own glory.

To serve our own glory in this life is to fall to the temptations that Satan is allowed to cause among us. Whether we endure a quiet existence of relative ease, or a life of trials and suffering for the faith, the seriousness of Satan's attacks on our souls is no less. The Lord is our Shepherd, and He is the only one who can bring us to the living waters to dwell in the peace of His presence forever.