

SATURDAY, MARCH 31: ZECHARIAH 9:1-17

JUDICA

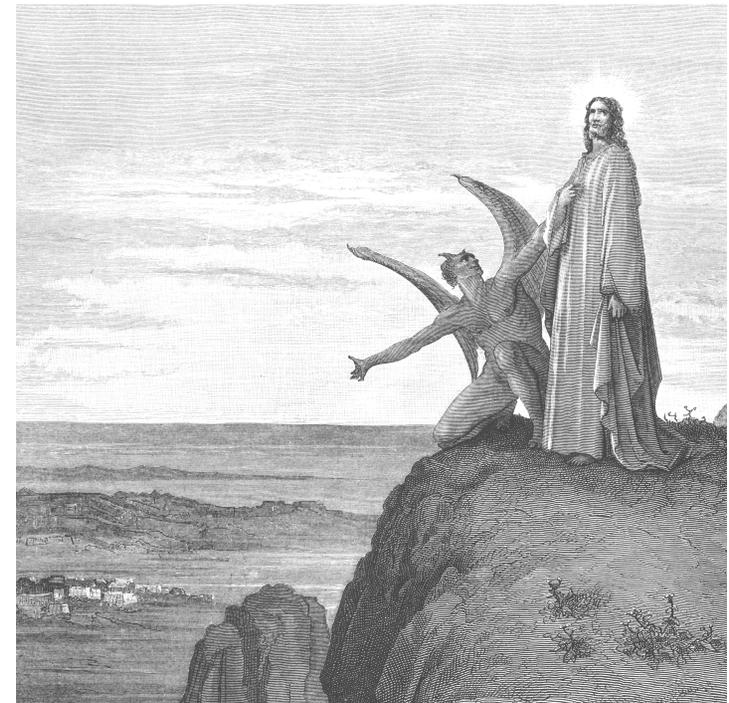
In all the readings for this week, God has been answering the question, “Where is God in my life?” for the Israelites. Today’s reading answers it for us. “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you.” Tomorrow these words are in the Palm Sunday Gospel lesson where we see Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey to begin His Holy Week trip to the holy Cross on Good Friday. There is God in our lives! There He takes our sin to the holy Cross and the grave with Him and buries them! There, on the holy Cross He suffers the punishment we all deserve. On the holy Cross, as St. Paul writes, at the right time Jesus gathered “together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him, in whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory” (Eph. 1:10-12).

Where is God in my life? He is right where we need Him to be—in the manger, as He is born to be my substitute; at the Jordan River, as He is baptized for me; in the upper room, as he institutes the Holy Supper for me; on the holy Cross, as He dies for my sins; in the grave, as my sins are buried forever; and at the open tomb, as He is resurrected as the first fruits of salvation.

Where do I see Him today? In His Holy Word, in the waters of Holy Baptism, on the Altar in His Body and Blood, in my mouth and in my heart.

He is with us always! Thanks be to God!!!

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(REMINISCERE–JUDICA)

The Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of North America

“The lamp of the body is the eye. Therefore, when your eye is good, your whole body also is full of light. But when your eye is bad, your body also is full of darkness. Therefore take heed that the light which is in you is not darkness.” Luke 11:34-35

Faithful Lutheran pastors tell their people not to listen to so-called Christian radio, watch religious television, or read the latest religious books. Why? Because the light those things claim to have is not light at all. It is darkness, which points us to our works—a prayer prayed, a decision made, a giving of one’s self, or an experience we have had.

Faithful Lutheran pastors tell their people to read the Scriptures above all, and the Fathers of our church for guidance. They do this because the truth of salvation is delicate and easily ruined. Truth is intolerant. As soon as it tolerates error, it becomes error and is no longer truth. Faithful pastors know: we cannot pray unless we already believe; we do not choose Christ but, rather, He chose us; we do not give to Christ what He bought with His blood; it is not that we experience something that proves we are Christians, but that Christ Jesus experienced the despair of hell on our behalf. There is the true light that has come into the world. Therefore, we focus our eyes on it.

Suggested Hymn: Salvation Unto Us Has Come (TLH 377, LSB 555)

Prayer: Holy Spirit, cause us to look only to the work of our Savior for salvation. Amen.

Throughout the Book of Isaiah the prophet has built up in an orderly way to a prophecy about the people of God returning from the Babylonian captivity, and setting up a new state and a temple for the purposes of worship. The main altar for burnt offerings would be functioning, the temple restored, but the worship would not be a truly spiritual worship. Only the externals would be present. No concept of the greatness of the God of Israel would be in evidence. This prophecy was a warning to God’s people to be careful about how things would play out.

“Hear the Word of the Lord,” Isaiah says in verse 5, “Let the Lord be glorified, that we may see your joy.” It may well have puzzled even the prophets and the faithful among Israel as they thought about how things would go with God’s people. Even though God’s promises were known it may have seemed too much for even the Almighty God to accomplish. But speaking of the latter days, the prophet insists that the miracle will be accomplished. The Savior of God’s people will come and save them.

“Shall a nation be born in one day?” God says. He tells His people to wait on the Lord for their deliverance. “Shall I bring to the time of birth, and not cause delivery?” Do you not trust My promises? It is now as though the labor pains were about to begin, and as though the birth has already taken place. The message is bold and speaks in terms of the seemingly impossible, but with God all things are possible.

In tomorrow’s reading we will see another prophecy of what God will do and how He will accomplish His salvation. “Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation” (Zech. 9:9). So people of God just hang on and see how the Lord will deliver you.

This is a text for an old navy man. When the announcement comes over the loudspeaker: “NOW HEAR THIS!!” The sailor knows it is time to pay attention. Through His prophets, God had been speaking to His people through the ages, calling them back to Himself. However, from our text it is obvious that they were not listening. So now God says, “NOW HEAR THIS!! Now, because you have not heeded My Word and have not listened to me, now hear what I am going to do—I am going to destroy you!”

In St. John 3 and 4 we hear of some other people who were having problems hearing Jesus—Nicodemus and the Samaritan women at the well. They both had heard something, but they didn’t quite get it. They needed clarification so they asked Jesus, “What are you talking about?” Unlike the other Pharisees, who would not listen to Jesus, Nicodemus wanted to hear what Jesus had to say. Not understanding what Jesus meant, he asked, “How can this be?” The Samaritan woman, not understanding when Jesus told her to ask Him for living water, asked, “Where do you get that living water?” It’s clear that they wanted to hear more. They listened when Jesus said, “Now hear this!”

In His grace, through His Word in the waters of Holy Baptism, God speaks to us also. He tells us we are His redeemed and forgiven children. He tells us we have been born again; He tells us He is the Living Water. Through His Word He says, “NOW HEAR THIS! “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His work of art, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:8-10).

It is easy to follow one passage of Scripture while ignoring others, thus holding to our hypocrisy rather than to Scripture. How many times have you heard someone say, “God doesn’t care how I dress.” True, if all one has to wear is rags, then he will be accepted in God’s presence dressed in rags. But if we have fine clothes that we can wear to church but won’t, we confess by our actions that we do not believe God is what the Scriptures say He is: the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Since everything our spirits express is expressed through our bodies, the way we dress to come to church expresses our attitude toward God. When telling His apostles not to worry about material things, Jesus said that the flowers of the field are clothed better than Solomon ever was. So we see that God *is* concerned with how we dress, promising that he will provide for us even as he provides so gloriously for the flowers of the field. Moreover, the Scriptures say much about how we are clothed spiritually: with humility, righteousness, Christ, etc. Yes, we come into the world naked, and God gives us clothing; most importantly, God has clothed us with Christ so that our naked hypocrisy is covered and we appear righteous before Him.

Suggested Hymn: Lord Jesus Christ, With Us Abide (TLH 292, LSB 585)

Prayer: Holy Spirit, remove hypocrisy from us by teaching us all of Your Word so that we stand in the faith revealed in Holy Scripture. Amen.

“Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but to him who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven. Now when they bring you to the synagogues and magistrates and authorities, do not worry about how or what you should answer, or what you should say. For the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.” Luke 12:10-12

When Jesus told the apostles the Holy Spirit would teach them what to say when called to confess, He wasn't suggesting they shouldn't study the Scriptures—quite the contrary! The Father told them repeatedly to listen to Jesus (Deuteronomy 18:15-19, Matthew 17:5), and Jesus showed them how everything happened just as Holy Scripture said it would. The better we know the Scriptures the better the Holy Spirit can teach us.

We dare not blaspheme against the Holy Spirit, because it is the Holy Spirit who creates faith. If we despise the Holy Spirit, faith cannot be created and sustained. Then we will not confess Christ and He will deny us before the angels of God.

But, the Holy Spirit *has* worked faith in us. Thus, we repeatedly give the good confession, and when our own conscience accuses us, we confess Christ crucified for our sin and He calls us His brothers and sisters before the angles of God. This is what it means to hear the Word of God and do it.

Suggested Hymn: We Now Implore God the Holy Ghost (TLH 231, LSB 768)

Prayer: Holy Spirit work in us so that we not only hear Your Word, but believe. Amen.

In all the prophetic books of the Old Testament the Lord is calling His people to repentance. In our reading for today, Zephaniah tells the people of Judah that they are rebellious and polluted; they do not obey the voice of the Lord; they will not receive correction; they do not trust in the Lord; and they have not drawn near to God. In addition to that, their leaders were corrupt; their judges were only concerned about their desires; their prophets were insolent, treacherous people; and their priests profaned the temple. They violated the law. Now it is evident that there was plenty of evil in those days. But in verse five we read, “The Lord is righteous. He is in her midst, He will do no unrighteousness. Every morning He brings His justice to light. He never fails.”

Today, you and I know there is still enough evil to go around—in our world, in our country, in the Church, in our hearts—but the Lord is still faithful. We are reminded every Sunday how this works as we participate in the Divine Service. The Pastor says, “Beloved in the Lord! Let us draw near with a true heart and confess our sins unto God our Father . . .” Indeed, neither we nor the Israelites can free ourselves from our sin, but we can flee to our Lord as we hear the words of absolution spoken to us by Christ Himself through our Pastor. “I, by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.” (TLH p.15).

Yes, “if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The first verse of our reading begins, “O Israel, you are destroyed.” Verse 16 begins, “Samaria is held guilty, for she has rebelled against her God.” From these words, we can tell that the Jews had brought destruction on themselves by rejecting God and worshiping idols. Often we look at Old Testament Israel and think, “How can they have forgotten what God had done for them so soon?”

However, you and I should not think too highly of ourselves, lest we too fall. In fact, we do fall, repeatedly. We daily forget God’s mercy, turning from faith in God to faith in ourselves or our circumstances. But God, in His mercy, tells Israel that “your help is from Me.” He goes on to say, “I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death” (vs. 14).

St. Paul picks up on these verses and says to us and the whole Church, “Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall all be changed So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?’ The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:50-58).

THE HOLY GOSPEL St. Matthew 15:21-28 (NKJV)

Then Jesus went out from there and departed to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Him, saying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed.”

But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and urged Him, saying, “Send her away, for she cries out after us.”

But He answered and said, “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, “Lord, help me!”

But He answered and said, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the little dogs.”

And she said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.”

Then Jesus answered and said to her, “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

The Collect

O God, who seest that of ourselves we have no strength, keep us both outwardly and inwardly that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

In the midst of an uprising against God and the pastor of God's church by members of the congregation, Moses fell upon His face. Moses, the called and ordained shepherd of God's flock, humbled Himself before the Lord and prayed to Him, knowing that divine intervention was needed. Not only were the earthly and eternal lives of the lambs at risk, but the very Name and reputation of the Good Shepherd was at stake. The God of Israel would appear weak in the eyes of the world, His faithful ones would be tempted to lose faith in Him, and the rebels would continue to revel in their disobedience.

So Moses prayed for God's Name to be great among them, and God answered. God proclaimed His righteous judgment toward the rebellious, for He "by no means clears the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation." Yet, He also proclaimed His saving Name, for He is The Lord Who "is longsuffering and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression." Like Moses and Aaron, Joshua, and Caleb, all who humble themselves before the Lord in repentance of their sins and in faith in God's forgiveness for the sake of His redemption by His Christ, are pardoned of all sin, even rebellion against God (First Table of the Law) and against God's men (Second Table). All who desire the blessed life proclaimed by God's True Joshua—Jesus, the Savior from sin—live forever in a land overflowing with milk, honey, and every divine blessing. All who hear and heed God's Word receive Caleb's "different spirit"—God's Holy Spirit—to live the life of new obedience to God's commandments, God's callings, and God's ordainings, as a member of the faithful remnant forevermore.

Let us pray that God makes His Name great among us—always!

In our reading for today, the Prophet Jeremiah answers the age-old question: "Where is God in my life?" When the prophet answers this question he starts at the beginning, as he reminds the Israelites of their first love for God as He took them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea and how they followed Him through the desert. They relied on God because they had no choice. God gave them His Covenant and brought them to the Promised Land. But how did God's chosen people respond to God's kindness and mercy? They repaid Him with unfaithfulness!

During this Lenten season you and I are constantly reminded how much we are like the Israelites. He came to us when we were dead in our trespasses and sins and He made us alive. Through His Word and the waters of Holy Baptism He made us His people—His forgiven and redeemed people. Through His Word and His Body and Blood in the Holy Supper He keeps us as His own forgiven and redeemed people. He says that we are His holy people. And yet, every Sunday, and many more times throughout the week, we have to say, "O Almighty God, Merciful Father, I a poor, miserable sinner, confess . . ." Yes, you and I have no shortage of sin, and yes, our God is merciful, just as He was to the Israelites.

In Jeremiah 31:31ff the Lord says, "Behold, the days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah . . . I will put My law in their minds and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people . . . for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," says the Lord. "For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sins I will remember no more."

Thanks be to God for His faithfulness and mercy!

THE HOLY GOSPEL**St. John 8:46-59 (NKJV)**

“Which of you convicts Me of sin? And if I tell the truth, why do you not believe Me? He who is of God hears God’s words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God.”

Then the Jews answered and said to Him, “Do we not say rightly that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?”

Jesus answered, “I do not have a demon; but I honor My Father, and you dishonor Me. And I do not seek My own glory; there is One who seeks and judges. Most assuredly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he shall never see death.”

Then the Jews said to Him, “Now we know that You have a demon! Abraham is dead, and the prophets; and You say, ‘If anyone keeps My word he shall never taste death.’ Are You greater than our father Abraham, who is dead? And the prophets are dead. Whom do You make Yourself out to be?”

Jesus answered, “If I honor Myself, My honor is nothing. It is My Father who honors Me, of whom you say that He is your God. Yet you have not known Him, but I know Him. And if I say, ‘I do not know Him,’ I shall be a liar like you; but I do know Him and keep His word. Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.”

Then the Jews said to Him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?”

Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.”

Then they took up stones to throw at Him; but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by.

The Collect

We beseech Thee, Almighty God, mercifully to look upon Thy people, that by Thy great goodness they may be governed and preserved evermore both in body and soul; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

The uprising became a mutiny. An unholy trinity of rebels led 250 men into a wrongful taking of the office of the holy ministry in the congregation of Israel. Despising their God-given vocations, these rebellious men exalted themselves rather than letting the Lord Himself raise them up. These men did not rely upon the call of the Lord through His Church, but instead counted upon their own renown among men for their legitimacy. These men desired to stand before the congregation and pray at the altar of God, but only so that they could prey upon God’s people through their false doctrine and wicked practice. Pretending to be rightly called as leaders of God’s people in the way of life, these imposters were leading the people toward the pit of despair and death.

In the midst of this hostility, Moses and Aaron remained faithful to their calling and faithful to their Lord and His people. Though they were vastly outnumbered by the usurpers of the office that they rightly occupied, they trusted in God to give them the victory by His grace. They fell prostrate before the Lord and humbly implored His mercy upon the congregation. They prayed for forgiveness for all despite the sins of one, entreating God’s grace upon them all for the sake of the One Who bears the sin of all and offers Himself as the atonement for all sin. God answered the prayers of His true priests with His Word of forgiveness for the believing, and moved the faithful by His Spirit to separate from the rebellious for the sake of their salvation, that they would not be consumed in a moment but saved forevermore!

Let us pray that God makes all of His servants faithful to their callings—always!

“Do not be deceived; God is not mocked” (Gal. 6:7). As a testimony to this truth, God poured out His wrath upon those who mocked Him during the exodus. The three rebels who masquerade as legitimately-called servants of the Word are swallowed alive by the earth into an eternal death—together with the wives and children who followed them in their sin and unbelief. The 250 men who sought to present unholy prayers at God’s holy altar are totally consumed in a holy fire, and God commands that the metal from the censers be hammered into a covering for the altar as a permanent reminder of their mockery and God’s judgment against it.

Do not be deceived; God’s judgment against such mockery would rightly come upon us, too, for we share the fallen nature of man with the children of Israel. We do not rightly fear God and consider Him with reverent awe as we ought. We mock His Holy Name with our inattention to pure teaching and holy living. We treat His Church, ministry, Word and Sacraments as creations of men instead of “holy things for His holy people.”

Thanks be to our Merciful God that He brings us salvation from judgment against our sins! As depicted by Aaron’s making atonement for the sins of the people and then standing between the dead and the living, God’s Great High Priest, Christ Jesus, has delivered us from God’s judgment. Christ made atonement for our sins by His offering of Himself for us. Jesus suffered His Father’s full and final wrath against our sin. He stood between the dead and the living to take our death upon Himself, then turn around to give all who believe in Him His life—even life everlasting!

Let us pray that God makes all of His holy people glad for His holy things—always!

Moses’ work was now over. The Lord showed Moses the land that the Children of Israel were about to enter though he, because of his disobedience, would not be allowed to enter. Moses had witnessed all the ups and downs of the Children of Israel. He watched a rebellious generation die off as they wandered in the wilderness and witnessed God being faithful to the promise He had given their forefathers as He was about to give them the Promised Land.

Though “his eyes were not dim nor his natural vigor diminished,” it was time for Moses and the Law to give way to Jesus. Joshua is the Hebrew name that comes to us through the Greek and into English as Jesus. Only Jesus, prefigured in Joshua, could take them into the Promised Land for all the promises of God come to His people in and through Jesus and the Gospel.

As we live out our lives in this wilderness we call the world, we now follow Jesus on the path He blazed via the holy Cross whereon He paid the price for our sins. As a result of His fulfillment of the Law and His death on the holy Cross, we await the day when we will enter the Promised Land. This Promised Land is not some land carved out in the Middle East, but the new Heavens and the new Earth that will come when all we now see will pass away.

As Moses continues to warn the Children of Israel of the dangers of not obeying God's Law, "And the Lord will take you back to Egypt in ships, by the way of which I said to you, 'You shall never see it again.' And there you shall be offered for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but no one will buy you."

Their sins and their unwillingness to repent will take the Children of Israel full circle and "back to Egypt." But this time it will be different. Though they were slaves while in Egypt, their masters had a vested interest in keeping their merchandise healthy. Though the Children of Israel did not live in the lap of luxury while in slavery, the Lord made sure through their masters that they had the necessities: food, clothing, and shelter. But upon their return no one was going to buy them. There would be no one to take care of them. They would be left alone and all to themselves. They would have nothing.

Such is how the world turns. Though enslaved by sin, God still provides for mankind. God graciously calls out to the world to repent and trust in His forgiveness that was secured for the entire world through Christ's death on the holy Cross. But the day will come when those who reject God's gracious call to repent will be left to themselves, just as they always wanted.

In the aftermath of the congregational strife that had been created by the usurpers of the office of the holy ministry and those who followed their false teaching and ungodly practice, God wanted the complaints against Moses and Aaron to cease. Thus the Lord devised a way to demonstrate clearly that it is God Himself Who issues the call and ordains the man of His own choosing for His congregation. The Lord directed Moses to set before Him twelve rods; each rod bore the name of one of the twelve tribes of Israel, though Aaron's name was substituted for Levi's since several other Levites had led the prior rebellion. By the next day, the rod bearing Aaron's name miraculously had been brought to life; that rod had sprouted and brought forth buds and blossoms and almonds! By the fruitfulness of Aaron's rod, God demonstrated that Aaron was the man of His own choosing.

In like manner, God graciously has given a sure sign to His congregations today regarding the men that He has chosen to serve them. "You shall know them by their fruits," the Lord of the Church declares (Mt. 7:16). Faithful pastors are distinguished from the wolves in sheep's clothing by the fruit of the pastor's service among the people. Where God's Word is taught in its full truth and purity by a faithful servant of the Word, there the Law of God kills the sinner with God's judgment and the Gospel of Christ brings such "dead wood" to life anew! Where Christ's Sacraments are administered in full accord with His institution by a faithful steward of the mysteries, there the Christian life sprouts and buds and blossoms and bears the fruit of faithfulness toward God and love toward the neighbor!

Let us pray that God continues to send faithful laborers to bring forth fruit among us—always!

“Be faithful, even unto death . . .” (Rev. 2:10) is a call to faithfulness even in the little things. Moses and Aaron learn that lesson the hard way, when they are not obedient to God’s directions. Though the Lord previously instructed Moses to strike a rock with his rod to produce water for His people (Ex. 17:6), this time the servants of God were charged only to speak the Word—yet Moses again struck the rock with the rod. This seemingly small act of disobedience was no small thing in God’s sight, as both Moses and Aaron received a harsh judgment: neither one would enter the land to which God was leading His people. Truly, faithfulness in the little things is a big thing for God.

For the Lord Himself is faithful in all things, small and great. He is faithful to His promise of forgiveness and eternal life for the sake of His Christ to each one who faithfully follows His Word without alteration of a single jot or tittle. While such perfection is just as impossible for us as it was for Moses and Aaron, all things are possible with God. Indeed, our faithfulness is God’s own work in us by His holy Word and His Holy Spirit. He creates and maintains that little seed of faith—and a perfect faithfulness—in us by His grace through His means of grace. Like Moses and Aaron, we also remain in the faith through His enduring faithfulness to us, trusting in His forgiveness and His promise that each of His faithful ones will be “gathered to his people”—the place in which God’s people receive the crown of eternal life for their faithfulness—for God’s faithfulness to them!

Let us pray that God keeps us in the faith and faithful even unto death!

Centuries later the “New Moses” would ascend a mountain to preach. What the Children of Israel would not do, which is “fully obey the Lord your God,” Christ, did. And in doing so, the relationship between God and sinners was changed. Christ fulfilled the Law. He obeyed the voice of God all the way to the holy Cross and He even suffered the curse of death. Christ was blessed by God the Father as shown in His blessed resurrection from the grave.

If Israel would fully obey, they would be blessed. But all that is changed in Christ. Conditional Law is supplanted with unconditional Gospel. When Moses spoke the Word of God to Israel it was a matter of “if you obey,” then “you will be blessed.” When Christ speaks in the Sermon on the Mount, it is simply, “Blessed are . . .”

In Christ, the Law is accomplished fact and the blessings “are.” Those who are in Christ are blessed. Though from an earthly perspective it may not always appear that we are blessed because “we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” we are nonetheless blessed for God has declared it so. As we sojourn this earth, we are assured that the blessing of the new Heavens and the new Earth are ours.

In today's reading from Deuteronomy, Moses continues to preach to the Children of Israel. We hear the reoccurring theme: Keep My commandments and you will be blessed, disobey and you will be cursed.

How does one keep all God's commandments? After all, there is so much to remember: not taking His name in vain, remembering the Sabbath Day, honoring father and mother, etc. There is so much to the Law and we have so little, indeed no, ability to keep it. Had the children of Israel remembered to simply cast their eyes on God in all things, they would have been fine.

As Luther explains in the Large Catechism concerning the First Commandment: "Therefore it is the intent of this commandment to require true faith and trust of the heart which settles upon the only true God, and clings to Him alone. That is as much as to say: 'See to it that you let Me alone be your God, and never seek another,' i.e.: Whatever you lack of good things, expect it of Me, and look to Me for it, and whenever you suffer misfortune and distress, creep and cling to Me. I, yes, I, will give you enough and help you out of every need; only let not your heart cleave to or rest in any other."

Included in God's giving and helping is the most important gift of forgiveness to those whom He brings to repentance. "You shall teach them to your children" and by teaching them God reminds us that His forgiveness is meant for us, too.

God's people had become discouraged on their journey to the Promised Land. The trip already had been lengthy, and would take many more years until the people finally could settle into homes. The travel was arduous, as the Israelites were forced to circle around kingdoms when access was denied by the king; it was also at times dangerous, as when a king would wage war against this wandering nation. Shamefully, though, the Israelites lashed out in frustration against their leaders, Moses and God Himself. The people forgot how God mercifully provided water for them in the desert, and they despised His gift of daily manna to feed them. They saw themselves as good as dead if they remained in the wilderness. God then began to give them exactly what they envisioned—death in the wilderness by fiery serpents.

God's chastisement of His children turned their discouragement into contrition over their sins. They implored the Lord's mercy for deliverance from the serpents—and God had mercy upon them. To symbolize His mercy, God had Moses mount a bronze serpent upon a pole. This depicted not only the deliverance from the serpents in the wilderness, but the ultimate victory over the ancient serpent, the devil, who brought sin and all of its ill effects—even death—upon mankind. Israel was to look upon the pole and see the Promised Seed upon the cross, crushing the serpent's head at the expense of His own life to bring forgiveness and deliverance into new life. Many in Israel believed and received that new life through faith in the Savior. With newfound courage they defeated the mighty kings and captured their lands. With renewed vigor they continued their traveling, following the Lord Who delivers them by His cross.

Let us pray that Christ's cross encourages us along the way through life—always!

THE HOLY GOSPEL**St. Luke 11:14-28 (NKJV)**

And He was casting out a demon, and it was mute. So it was, when the demon had gone out, that the mute spoke; and the multitudes marveled. But some of them said, "He casts out demons by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons." Others, testing Him, sought from Him a sign from heaven. But He, knowing their thoughts, said to them: "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and a house divided against a house falls. If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? Because you say I cast out demons by Beelzebub. And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.

"When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are in peace. But when a stronger than he comes upon him and overcomes him, he takes from him all his armor in which he trusted, and divides his spoils. He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters. When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest; and finding none, he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when he comes, he finds it swept and put in order. Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first."

And it happened, as He spoke these things, that a certain woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, "Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You!" But He said, "More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"

The Collect

We beseech Thee, Almighty God, look upon the hearty desires of Thy humble servants and stretch forth the right hand of Thy majesty to be our defense against all our enemies; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

In the reading from Deuteronomy 10, Moses continues to preach to the children of Israel. Moses reminds his hearers how God had "delighted" in their forefathers and "chose their descendants after them." Moses also reminds them how he pleaded with God to spare them even though they had grievously sinned against God. Moses preaches as every preacher sent by God is supposed to preach. He brings Law and Gospel. He speaks of their fallenness and of God's mercy.

God is about to fulfill the promise He had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The children of Israel are about to enter the land God had promised to their forefathers. And what does God "require" of them? What does He require of us?

Moses gave the answer within his rhetorical question: "but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord and His statutes which I command you today for your good." In other words, take God at His Word. "Fear, love, and trust in God above all things." And thankfully we can do so because He has graciously given us faith in His Only-Begotten Son Who has accomplished this for us.

There has been much ballyhoo given to the notion of the need for “self-esteem.” For several decades the importance of one’s self-esteem has become so great that, according to the Wall Street Journal, there have been over 15,000 scholarly articles written on the subject. Though initially many had touted the importance of self-esteem in order for people, especially children, to be the best they can be, subsequent studies showed quite the opposite being true. According to the article, “high self-esteem doesn’t improve grades, reduce anti-social behavior, deter alcohol drinking or do much of anything good for kids.”

Though there are many flaws found with the self-esteem movement, it did get one thing right. The way you think about yourself is critical. And the way you think about yourself will affect the way you think about God.

When sinners are left to themselves, they exude all that is wrong with mankind. When Moses went to the mountain-top to receive the Law, those who remained behind provoked God’s wrath by worshipping the golden calf. They were a “stiff-necked people” who thought highly of themselves and nothing of the God who had brought them out of slavery. Moses pleaded with God for “forty days and forty nights” to spare His people, not for their sake, but for the sake of the promise God had made to their forefathers.

We, too, are spared from the just rewards for our sins by the promise God made to us in Holy Baptism whereby we were placed into Christ and thereby are covered with His righteousness.

“Then the LORD opened Balaam’s eyes, and he saw the Angel of the LORD standing in the way with His drawn sword in His hand; and he bowed his head and fell flat on his face.”

We are told that the Lord’s anger burned against Balaam. The reason is that even though Balaam said that he would do what the Lord told him, his motive was really greed. Balaam was swayed by the rich gifts that Balak desired to bestow upon him, and it was not because he desired to faithfully preach the Word. Therefore, the Lord sends His angel to block the way of Balaam, which leads to Balaam’s donkey preaching to Balaam.

There was no true prophet to be found, so then our Lord caused a donkey to preach His Word to the false prophet Balaam. It was after this preaching, that his eyes were opened to see that the donkey, the preacher of the pure Word, was indeed protecting Balaam from certain destruction at the hand of the Angel of the Lord.

Those entrusted with proclaiming the Word of God need to guard against being “belly servers.” Preachers do not preach the Word of God (or fail to do so) because of their earnings (or lack thereof), they preach the Word on account of the call that they received to do so. And therefore, must faithfully preach the Word of God in any situation that they have been placed.

This means that those who are hearers of the Word of God, must also demand that the preachers who have been called to watch over them remain faithful to the pure Word of God, so that they may be protected from the false and pernicious doctrine, and may be spiritual fed with the pure milk of the Word of God.

“Who can count the dust of Jacob, or number one-fourth of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like his!”

Balaam was not known for giving out blessings. He was a preacher of the Law, not of the Gospel. However, in today’s pericope Balaam can do nothing but bless the people of Israel. In fact Balaam blessed the people of Israel four times. And here in his first oracle, Balaam preaches nothing but Gospel.

What good news does Balaam preach? In verse 10 Moses records the words, “Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like his!” Now at first, this may not appear to be much of a blessing. After all, what sort of a blessing involves talk about death? But the death of “the righteous” refers to One Who died and rose again, our Lord Jesus Christ. Here we have a Messianic prophecy about our Lord’s death and resurrection.

In fact, St. Ambrose equates this verse not only with our Lord’s death and resurrection, but ultimately with Holy Baptism, for it is in the waters of Holy Baptism where we are buried with Christ and are drawn out with Him in His resurrection. What is our Lord’s end? It is His Resurrection. What is the completion of our Holy Baptism? It is our new life in Christ, where we are bestowed with forgiveness of sins, eternal life and salvation.

Therefore, let us comfort ourselves at the death of our loved ones with this hope that they have died the death of the Righteous One, and we will join them in Heaven at our end on account of having died and arisen with Him in the waters of Holy Baptism.

THE HOLY GOSPEL

St. John 6:1-15 (NKJV)

After these things Jesus went over the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. Then a great multitude followed Him, because they saw His signs which He performed on those who were diseased. And Jesus went up on the mountain, and there He sat with His disciples. Now the Passover, a feast of the Jews, was near.

Then Jesus lifted up His eyes, and seeing a great multitude coming toward Him, He said to Philip, “Where shall we buy bread, that these may eat?” But this He said to test him, for He Himself knew what He would do.

Philip answered Him, “Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may have a little.”

One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to Him, “There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two small fish, but what are they among so many?”

Then Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand.

And Jesus took the loaves, and when He had given thanks He distributed them to the disciples, and the disciples to those sitting down; and likewise of the fish, as much as they wanted.

So when they were filled, He said to His disciples, “Gather up the fragments that remain, so that nothing is lost.” Therefore they gathered them up, and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves which were left over by those who had eaten. Then those men, when they had seen the sign that Jesus did, said, “This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.”

Therefore when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone.

The Collect

Grant, we beseech Thee, Almighty God, that we, who for our evil deeds do worthily deserve to be punished, by the comfort of Thy grace may mercifully be relieved; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

“Your garments did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years.”

Tomorrow is Laetare, the fourth Sunday in Lent. Laetare means “rejoice.” It is one of the three “rejoice” Sundays in the Church Year. The first is in the other penitential season of Advent, Gaudete; the third Sunday in Advent. The second is in the Festival season of Easter, Jubilate; the third Sunday after Easter. All three of these “rejoice” Sundays mark the halfway point of their respective seasons.

They are both an interlude and a turning point to their respective seasons. Gaudete takes us from texts that focus on the Last Day to focus on the coming our Lord’s Incarnation. Jubilate turns the focus from the Resurrection of our Lord to His Ascension and the coming of the Holy Ghost on Whitsunday. Laetare begins the point of the Lenten season when our focus is drawn away from our sin and the Ten Commandments to the crucifixion and death of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Laetare gives us an interlude from reflection upon our sins, and gives us glimpse of the foretaste of the feast to come. Therefore, in today’s reading we see Moses comforting the people of Israel, who have wandered in hardship and the wilderness for 40 years by reminding them of how the Lord has watched out for them over these past four decades.

He states, “Your garments did not wear out.” Now this is more than just a statement about the quality of their clothes, but is a statement about the resurrection. For if animal skins can endure for 40 years by our Lord’s hand, how much more will our bodies though in a grave be changed into glorified bodies for all eternity? Rejoice, therefore, that our Lord God preserves you in the one, true faith by the working of His Holy Ghost, through the pure Word and Sacraments.

“God brings him out of Egypt; He has strength like a wild ox; He shall consume the nations, his enemies; He shall break their bones and pierce them with his arrows.”

Again today we have a Messianic prophecy from the lips of Balaam. Today we are reminded of St. Joseph, St. Mary, and our Lord’s flight into Egypt on account of the cruelty of King Herod, who sought to kill the child Savior. We are reminded of this by the words, “God brings him out of Egypt.” Notice that the pronoun is singular, “him,” not plural, “them.” By these words we are reminded of the interpretation of the Evangelist St. Matthew regarding the words from Hosea 11:1, “Out of Egypt I have called My Son.”

Now at first glance the rest of the prophecy does not appear to be about our Lord. After all, when did our Lord Jesus “consume nations” or “break their bones” or “pierce them with arrows.” But it is important to remember that these words are spiritual, therefore, they have a spiritual meaning. The meaning is that our Lord, through His Word preached by the Apostles, “consumed the nations.” He is a Lion, Who by His Word subdued the nations under His Almighty power. His Word went forth into entire world, where not just the Jews, but the whole Gentile world heard the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, even as our hearts are pierced with the Law, which leads us into repentance, so too, all those whose hearts were broken on account of their sins, heard the Good News, that our Lord Jesus Christ paid for those sins on the tree of the holy Cross. And He has called us out of the spiritual Egypt, that is, out from under the power of sin, death, and the devil, and has given us an eternal home in the Promised Land with Him forever.

“Let the LORD . . . set a man over the congregation . . . that the congregation of the LORD may not be like sheep which have no shepherd.”

Moses is brought up into Mount Abarim to see the Promised Land that the Lord God promised to the Israelites. However, there is one problem. Moses will not get to enter into the Promised Land with the Israelites. The reason? Because he had 38 years prior not obeyed the word of the Lord God, and struck the rock at Meribah, instead of just speaking to it. This is meant to teach us how seriously the Lord God takes His Law.

For we would say, “Why does it matter whether he spoke to the rock, or struck the rock, the result was the same; they received water.” But the one, true Triune God requires complete and perfect obedience to His commands, therefore, on account of his sin, Moses is forbidden to enter the land of Canaan.

But it must also be pointed out the response of Moses to the sentence of the Law. What does he do? Does he pout and whine about the Lord being unfair? Does he charge the Lord with being too harsh of a Judge? Does he run and tell his other friends how mean the Lord is? No! This would be the response of the impenitent. But what does Moses do? He prays to the Lord Almighty to place over the Israelites a faithful ruler to shepherd them.

This is the response of the penitent; that the Lord would not count our sins against us; that He would not forsake those who need to hear His holy Word, but that He might send them faithful preachers, to guide them into the way of all truth. May the Lord grant this unto us all.

“And Moses called all Israel, and said to them: ‘Hear, O Israel, the statutes and judgments which I speak in your hearing to-day, that you may learn them and be careful to observe them.’”

At the beginning of their wandering in the wilderness the Lord God gave to the Israelites His Ten Commandments, which on account of their idolatry and fashioning and worshipping a golden calf, the Lord God required that they wander in the wilderness for 40 years. Here, almost the end of their wandering (the eleventh month of the 40 years), Moses stands up before the congregation of the Israelites and once again proclaims to them the commandments of the Lord God.

We are now in the third week of Lent, and Sunday (Laetare) we enter the halfway point of the 40 days of Lent, which bring us through the wilderness of our sins and breaking of the Law of God, into the Promised Land of our Lord’s death and resurrection for our salvation. On Sunday we will take a brief interlude from the reflection upon the Ten Commandments and our sin against them, and rest in the Word made flesh, Who gave us His very Body and Blood to eat and drink in bread and wine. It will serve as a reminder of that true Promised Land where we will for all eternity gather around the throne of the Lamb with all the saints and enjoy the eternal Liturgy and wedding feast of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

But here at the end of the third week (Oculi), it is appropriate to hear once again the Commandments of our Lord, and reflect upon our transgressions, just as yesterday Moses was reminded of his past transgression, so today, we and the Israelites are reminded that we are poor, miserable sinners, in need of a righteous Savior to save us from our sin.