

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 30: ISAIAH 6:1—7:9

LAST SUNDAY

When the Bible speaks of holy objects, or holy people, or holy time, it always refers to them having been “set apart or consecrated.” With God, He is certainly “apart” from us. He’s in a class by Himself. There’s a profound difference between the Creator and His creation. What gives this separation? God’s purity. He always does what’s right, for God is unstained by sin, and never compromises. Unlike us, God doesn’t “bend a little” when it comes to wrongdoing. God always acts in a righteous manner because His very nature is holiness.

One of the best ways to understand “holiness” is to look at today’s text. Note the subtle details of Isaiah’s vision. God is on the throne. King Uzziah may have died, but God is still on the throne. And the throne is described as “high and exalted,” which means it’s greater than all the thrones of man.

What does this mean for us? Well, the person who has little sense of his own sinfulness has no sense of God’s true nature. The person who believes he’s done enough to “get himself saved” has no awareness of how deeply stained he really is. You see, like Isaiah, we too must be “undone” before we can be “remade.” The Holy Spirit has to kindle an awareness of our sin before we can be summoned to His Throne of Grace. All praise to our Triune God Whose Holiness exposes our sin, and Whose love covers it.

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THE GOSPEL

ST. MATTHEW 9:18–26 (NKJV)

While He spoke these things to them, behold, a ruler came and worshiped Him, saying, “My daughter has just died, but come and lay Your hand on her and she will live.”

So Jesus arose and followed him, and so did His disciples.

And suddenly, a woman who had a flow of blood for twelve years came from behind and touched the hem of His garment. For she said to herself, “If only I may touch His garment, I shall be made well.”

But Jesus turned around, and when He saw her He said, “Be of good cheer, daughter; your faith has made you well.” And the woman was made well from that hour.

When Jesus came into the ruler’s house, and saw the flute players and the noisy crowd wailing, He said to them, “Make room, for the girl is not dead, but sleeping.” And they ridiculed Him.

But when the crowd was put outside, He went in and took her by the hand, and the girl arose. And the report of this went out into all that land.

THE COLLECT

Stir up, we beseech Thee, O Lord, the wills of Thy faithful people that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may of Thee be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

In today’s reading we’re given a litany of all the things God does for His people. The prophet Isaiah gives us a descriptive picture of God going to great lengths to serve His people. “Now let me sing to my Well-beloved a song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard: My Well-beloved has a vineyard on a very fruitful hill. He dug it up and cleared out its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in its midst, and also made a winepress in it; so He expected it to bring forth good grapes...” (vs 1-2a)

All of this is done solely for man’s benefit. All of God’s attention is directed toward us and our salvation. How did ancient Israel react to such attention? “...but it brought forth wild grapes.” (v 2b) And how did God respond? “And now, please let Me tell you what I will do to My vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it shall be burned; and break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will lay it waste; It shall not be pruned or dug, but there shall come up briars and thorns. I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain on it.” (vs 5-6)

God expends maximum effort to save us. His grace is overwhelming. Let us never forget all He has done and continues to do for us. With such remembrance, we will ever treasure His all-sufficient grace.

Today we hear even more astonishing words through Isaiah's vision. God is said to have "forsaken His people." Can mankind ever get so rotten that God turns His back on us? Consider the evidence with Old Testament Israel: "...Because they are filled with eastern ways; they are soothsayers like the Philistines, and they are pleased with the children of foreigners. Their land is also full of silver and gold, and there is no end to their treasures; their land is also full of horses, and there is no end to their chariots. Their land is also full of idols; they worship the work of their own hands, that which their own fingers have made." (vs 6-8)

It was easy for the Israelites to fall in love with things of their own making. We face the same temptation, craving our "adult toys." Our idols take the form of the internet, a weekend cabin at the lake, our retirement portfolio, and the list goes on. Such things in moderation, and in the right priority, are well and good. But all too often they grow in size and attention, taking the place of where our hearts should be. Without realizing, we can, and do, turn our backs on God.

Let us always be wary of where we stand with our God—and be eager to meet Him face to face. Let us long to hear the comforting words of blessing that close the Divine Service: "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace." (Num. 6:24-26)

Just as the Sadducees and the Pharisees, in turn, attempted to parade their superior intellect and to discredit Jesus regarding God's Word, so also faithful Christians are challenged on all sides by those who would try to bend the Word to suit their agenda and their lives. "Show me in the Bible where it says 'closed Communion'," they might challenge; or, "Where in the Bible does Jesus say women should not be ordained?" We might well detect a hint of slither and sibilance in their protests. "Has God indeed said ...?"

"We all by disposition and nature inherit from Adam a heart, feeling, and thought that are, according to their highest powers and the light of reason, naturally inclined and disposed directly against God and His chief commandments. Yes, they are hostile toward God, especially in divine and spiritual things. For in other respects, regarding natural, outward things that are subject to reason, a person still has power, ability, and to a certain degree understanding--although very much weakened. All of this, however, has been so infected and contaminated by original sin that it is of no use before God." (Formula of Concord: Solid Declaration I:11-12)

As Saint Paul counseled Saint Timothy, we also, by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us through the means of grace, are to safeguard that "good thing," the Word of God, which has been committed to us. We also once were numbered among the rebels, but when the kindness and the love of God our Savior appeared, we were renewed and strengthened by the Holy Spirit, who guides us into God's Word of truth and keeps us in the one true faith.

Just as it is not forbidden that a pastor be called “pastor” because our Lord Jesus is the one and only Good Shepherd, so also Jesus is not issuing an edict in this text that no servant of the Gospel should ever be addressed as “teacher” or “father.” Whereas we might, in proper piety, refer to a pastor as “undershepherd,” there is no tradition for the use of the terms “underteacher” or “underfather.” Indeed, as Saint Paul wrote to the Ephesians, our Lord Himself “gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers” (4:11). What is more, he tells the Church at Corinth that he had become their father in Christ Jesus through the Gospel (1 Corinthians 4:15).

Luther, in the Large Catechism, concerning the Fourth Commandment, says that in addition to fathers in blood and fathers in office there are also spiritual fathers. “They are not like those in the papacy, who have had themselves called fathers but have performed no function of the fatherly office. For the only ones called spiritual fathers are those who govern and guide us by God’s Word.”

Those who serve as teachers and spiritual fathers do well to carry out their tasks with all humility, remembering that they also are forgiven sinners. They are called, nevertheless, to watch over their flocks, not by means of encumbering decrees, nor for their own glory, but by means of the Good News. The Good Shepherd laid down His life and took it up again that we might live in freedom and the forgiveness of sins in the sure hope of everlasting life.

Today’s reading begins with “the vision of Isaiah.” But note the words that follow do not originate with the prophet. Rather, they come from God, Who wishes to communicate with His people directly. We’re reminded of these well known words of St Peter: “for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.” (2 Pet 1:21)

So what is this vision all about? It is a word of rebuke—stern rebuke. God calls on the heavens and earth as witnesses of His ongoing benevolence. They alone can testify that God has dealt graciously with His people generation after generation. But in the midst of God’s never-ending grace, Israel has not responded as she should. God describes her response as follows: “The ox knows its owner and the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, My people do not consider.” (v 3) How pitiful that the animals of God’s creation have a better understanding of their place in the world than man! Even an animal knows Who takes care of it, but man is so distorted by sin that He is not only *ignorant* of his Creator and Provider, but *rebels* against Him.

God goes on to plead with His people to repent, promising to forget their scarlet sins and consider them cleansed anew. But if they continue in their stubborn ways, eternal punishment awaits. May we be unlike those Israelites—and repent of our sinful ways. And let us not repent to avoid destruction, but because God is so gracious to forgive.

As the book of Revelation closes, John continues to record his spectacular vision. Note the similarity this view has with the place where time began. Back in Eden, there was plenty of everything—including two very important trees. One of those trees, the tree of knowledge of good and evil, became infamous in the dawn of sin. The other, the tree of life, would be guarded until the end of time. Then there'll be no need to safeguard man from eating its fruit. Confirmed in holiness, man can partake of the tree of life to his heart's content. Truly, Heaven is a paradise far greater and more secure than Eden ever was.

Heaven will not only be great, it will be inviting. Note the welcoming language in verse 17: "And the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely." Three times in this one verse we hear a plea from various parties to "come." God wants us to be there—and invite others to join us. He knows that as sinners our throats are parched and our lips split. We're all damned without partaking of the river of life.

But sadly, not all are aware of their condition. Without the work of the Law, man will find alternate sources to quench his thirst. He fools himself by applying salve to his conscience, as he tries to sooth his troubled soul. Thanks be to God for the Ten Commandments which expose our terrible thirst, and for the refreshing water of the Gospel which brings us life eternal.

The hypocritical scribes and Pharisees made a great display of their lofty piety, but their hearts were centered on gold and other gifts on the altar, despising Him who sanctifies both altar and gifts. Today there are those in the ministry who express fear that the government will remove tax benefits from churches and pastors in the effort to bring them in line with a godless social and political agenda. "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," hymn 262 in *The Lutheran Hymnal*, speaks to this issue: "And take they our life, Goods, fame, child, and wife, Let these all be gone, They yet have nothing won; The Kingdom ours remaineth."

Jesus is our most priceless treasure. In Matthew 13:44-46, Jesus tells two short parables describing the kingdom of heaven compared to treasure hidden in a field, which the finder appropriates with great joy, and to a pearl of great price, which surpasses all other pearls in value. It is not about the money. It is all about Jesus. Indeed, "you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, ... but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:18-19).

We should live out our lives not fretting about what we shall eat or drink or what we shall wear, trusting that our heavenly Father will give us everything we need to support this body and life, rejoicing that Christ is our Savior. "Pain or loss, or shame or cross, shall not from my Savior move me since He deigns to love me" (TLH 347).

Fourteen years ago, in 1999, fear gnawed at the hearts of many people that at the stroke of midnight on December 31st our life would be forever altered. The much-feared “Y2K” would dawn in chaos and disaster. For some, there was the dread that a worldwide computer problem would bring our entire digital infrastructure to a grinding halt. Others were convinced that Jesus would return and that in the ensuing “Armageddon” there would be great tribulation.

There was tremendous tribulation for the people of Jerusalem 40 years after Jesus’ prophecy when, following the Roman general Titus’ siege, Jerusalem finally fell. Starvation resulted in cannibalism and pitched battles produced rivers of blood and, with other unimaginable horrors chronicled by Josephus in gruesome detail, Jesus’ prophecy that the city would be dismantled was fulfilled.

Fearing a repeat of this calamity on a global scale, not a few lifted their voices to proclaim, “Jesus is coming! Jesus is coming!” Indeed He is. He has promised it. He will return on the clouds of heaven, just as He departed. In the meantime—and this is why those who confess the true presence of Christ in Holy Communion faced that particular New Year without fear—Jesus comes to us every time we gather to eat and drink the body and blood of Christ. He comes to us in the blessed Sacrament to forgive our sins and to strengthen our faith. In faith we look forward with joy and confidence to the consummation of Christ’s promise, relying on the Holy Spirit to keep us till the end when we shall receive a crown of life.

In today’s text, John elaborates on his vision of Heaven. Granted an “angel’s eye view,” it’s a sight that overwhelms the mere mortal. From this unique vantage point, John struggles to describe the indescribable. Everything about this “New Jerusalem” is bright and strong. This is no surprise, of course, because of the close proximity of God Himself. All His attributes permeate the walls, gates, and foundations.

On Earth, God came to us in toned-down humility, for sinful man cannot tolerate the full-blown glory of God. In meekness, He came as man. And today, He continues to shroud Himself in Word and Sacrament. But in Heaven, the sinner in us is purged, and there’s no restraint on God’s glory. We will bask in a light before unknown to us. “The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light.” (v 23)

Interestingly, of all God’s remarkable qualities that could provide the source of the light, what John notices is “the Lamb.” The quality of *sacrifice* is what’s highlighted above all others. The One Who gave up His life is the center of this glorious city. The hallmark event of history is Jesus’ willing obedience in giving Himself up on the Cross. Without Calvary—without the “old Jerusalem” and her catalysts of crucifixion—there could be no “New Jerusalem.” Thanks be to God, Who used the designs of evil men to give us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Lesson from the Book of Concord

The Last Sunday after Trinity

ARTICLE XVII.

Also they teach, that, at the Consummation of the World, Christ shall appear for judgment, and shall raise up all the dead; He shall give to the godly and elect eternal life and everlasting joys, but ungodly men and the devils He shall condemn to be tormented without end.

They condemn the Anabaptists who think that there will be an end to the punishments of condemned men and devils. They condemn also others, who are now spreading certain Jewish opinions that, before the resurrection of the dead, the godly shall take possession of the kingdom of the world, the ungodly being everywhere suppressed (exterminated).

—The Augsburg Confession

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 8: ST. MATTHEW 24:29-51

TRINITY 24

Jesus prophesied that, as in Noah's day, people will be eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, when He returns. It is not that these things are sinful but that the people of Noah's day had turned a deaf ear to God's Word and were not prepared for the flood. So also people today have not set their mind on things above, but on things of the earth (Colossians 3:2).

The world has a grip on people. People's consciences warn them regarding the difference between right and wrong, and the Word tells us that the things of the world are temporary. Peter, citing the Old Testament, warns that the flesh is like grass. Blossoms fall, plants wither, and only the Word of the Lord remains forever (1 Peter 1:24-25). The Word is certain, but people persist in risk-taking behavior. This is well illustrated in Augustine's infamous prayer: "Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet." Country singer Joe Diffie sang a hit song in 1993, "Prop Me Up Beside the Jukebox If I Die." The refrain contains the words, "Lord, I wanna go to Heaven, but I don't wanna go tonight." We do not know the day or the hour, but we are armed in our battles against temptation and indifference through Word and Sacrament.

Being both saints *and* sinners, we do not win all the skirmishes, but the victory is ours in Christ. There is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the Father's love for us in Him.

One might prepare for church on Sunday morning using an inventory. “Clean shirt?” *Check*. “Shiny shoes?” *Check*. “Offering envelope?” *Check*. But there are other questions. “Hungry and thirsty for the righteousness that is ours only in Christ?” *No response*. “Sorrow for sinning against God?” *No response*. “Eager to be transformed and reassured in the words of Holy Absolution?” *No response*.

Paul warns Timothy, and us, in 2 Timothy 3:1-5: “in the last days perilous times will come. For men will be ... unthankful, unholy, ... having a form of godliness but denying its powers. And from such people turn away!” The five foolish virgins had a form of godliness, their lamps, but they denied the lamps’ power by neglecting to carry oil with them. They were like people going through the motions of religiosity but lacking saving faith in Christ’s redeeming work. From them the wise virgins turned away.

“We must not trust that the saints’ merits are applied to us, ... for we receive forgiveness of sins only by Christ’s merits when we believe in him. ... no one can be aided by the works and merits of another, because it is necessary for everyone to buy oil for his own lamp” (Apology of the Augsburg Confession XXI:29-30).

Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life, asked Martha whether she believed. Her response was, “Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world” (John 11:27). As you prepare for worship tomorrow, “may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).

THE GOSPEL

ST. MATTHEW 25:1-13 (NKJV)

Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish. Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept.

And at midnight a cry was heard: “Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!” Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps.

And the foolish said to the wise, “Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.”

But the wise answered, saying, “No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.”

And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut.

Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, “Lord, Lord, open to us!”

But he answered and said, “Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.”

Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.

THE COLLECT

Absolve, we beseech Thee, O Lord, Thy people from their offenses, that from the bonds of our sins which by reason of our frailty we have brought upon us we may be delivered by Thy bountiful goodness; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever One God, world without end.

This chapter presents the ultimate judgment and defeat of the devil, coupled with the final victory of Christ's Church. The thousand years (millennium) refers to an undetermined period of time, and describes the current reign of the souls of deceased believers with Christ in heaven during the present time. The present form of God's kingdom will be followed by Christ's return, the general resurrection, the final judgment and Christ's continuing reign over the perfect kingdom on the new earth in the eternal state.

The thousand years (10 symbolizing completeness, and a thousand being the cube of 10) represent a complete period of time, and its length is firmly fixed by God—it is the entire NT period, beginning with Jesus' vicarious atonement and Great Commission, and ending with his second advent at the day of judgment. The short time in which the devil is released refers to the last days of the world's history, characterized by widespread apostasy as Jesus predicted.

The living and reigning with Christ is called "the first resurrection" of believers, for the conversion of the sinner is spoken of in the Bible as a resurrection. The second resurrection is the bodily resurrection, which will take place on the last day. Man is saved and acquitted solely by the grace of God, Who has chosen him freely and inscribed his name in the Book of Life, and saves him from judgment unto the same fate of death and the devil.

THE GOSPEL

Matthew 24:15–28 (NKJV)

"Therefore when you see the 'abomination of desolation,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place" (whoever reads, let him understand), "then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let him who is on the housetop not go down to take anything out of his house. And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes.

"But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! And pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened.

"Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. Therefore if they say to you, 'Look, He is in the desert!' do not go out; or 'Look, He is in the inner rooms!' do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together."

THE COLLECT

Almighty God, we beseech Thee, show Thy mercy unto Thy humble servants, that we who put no trust in our own merits may not be dealt with after the severity of Thy judgment, but according to Thy mercy; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

Lesson from the Book of Concord

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Trinity

XIV. Of Monastic Vows.

As monastic vows directly conflict with the first chief article, they ought to be absolutely abolished. For it is of them that Christ says (Matt. 24:5, 23 sqq.): “I am Christ,” etc. For he who makes a vow to live in a monastery believes that he will enter upon a mode of life holier than the ordinary Christians, and by his own works wishes to earn heaven not only for himself, but also for others; this is to deny Christ. And they boast from their St. Thomas [i.e., Thomas Aquinas, of the 13th century] that a monastic vow is on an equality with baptism. This is blasphemy against God.

—Smalcald Articles, Part III

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 22: REVELATION 19:1-21 SECOND LAST

The center and heart of Satan’s power known as “Babylon” is judged and destroyed with the holy announcement of God’s judgment upon all those outside of Christ and the Church. The utter defeat of those arrayed against God and aligned with the antichrist spreads from this unholy capital to include all nations and peoples not at the Lord’s banquet table. These are the true words of God in which we may all rejoice exceedingly: “Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!”

The multitude of heaven appears, not armed for battle, but in the white robes of victory; so sure is the outcome of the battle. The battle has already been fought and won by the One who is called the Word of God. His name is King of kings and Lord of lords; He is the One before whom no antichrist or antichristian ruler can stand.

Now the Church is crowned with the holy title of “bride.” The Church is here described under a new figure, since the Church’s union and communion with the Lamb is to be emphasized. This prophetic vision beams forth the divine reality of “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31). The joyous proclamation of “Allelujah! Salvation and glory and honor and power belong to our God!,” with which this chapter opens, rests upon the sure foundation of Him who died for your sins and rose again. The Lamb of God who is victorious over death and the devil now ushers in the final day of this age and the beginning of eternity.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 21: REVELATION 18:1-24 SECOND LAST

Revelation, chapter 18 depicts the fall of “Babylon,” that great and powerful city that is meant to be representative of all those who resist God and turn toward all things that are opposed to Christ. The vision depicts God’s final judgment against the antichrist, and the destruction of Satan’s earthly agents. It is a dramatic portrayal of the fall of the enemies of Christ’s Church.

A substantial list of commodities are enumerated that represent the earthly pleasures, wealth, and splendor that this sinful center of power wallows in while fulfilling its every lust and desire. To the world and the casual human observer this great and sprawling center of temporal goods appeared to be a paradise that everyone on earth traded with, and thus grew comfortable due to its commerce in all things that the world sees as good or pleasing. It is a stark portrayal of the reality that what appears to be true to the natural senses and human reason does not necessarily represent divine truth or the holy will of God. While the city appeared bright and gleaming, the divine reality is that it is destined for judgment and destruction because of its rejection of God and persecution of His saints.

The enumeration of commodities is countered by an equally lengthy list of joys and blessings that shall never again be found within the confines of this metropolis. This prophetic warning ultimately calls all to flee sin and the devil, and to seek God and His will.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 11: MATTHEW 25:31-46 THIRD LAST

“When?” This key word in today’s lesson first directs our attention to the future, to make us mindful of the time of our judgment. When the Son of Man comes in His glory all will be gathered before Him and He will separate the faithful from the unfaithful. When the sheep are gathered together He will say to them, “Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom.” When the goats have been separated out He will declare to them, “Depart from Me, you cursed.” By this our attention is directed to this future event so that each one of us might be ready to face it—and to face Him—when He comes.

“Lord, when?” The question asked by both the righteous and the unrighteous at the time of judgment returns our attention to the present to make us mindful that the crucial time concerning our judgment is now. We will be judged by the Lord on the basis of the deeds done and the deeds left undone during our present lives. By this, our attention is directed to the present so that each one of us is ready to face this day—and to face Him—when He comes today.

Today, see the gracious Lord when he ushered you into his eternal kingdom at your baptism. Now, hear the Son of Man pronounce you “Not guilty!” in His absolution. On the Lord’s Day, eat and drink His very Body and Blood and take in the salvation and life that He gives in that moment. At the next opportunity, serve your neighbor faithfully, as though you were doing it unto your Lord--for truly you are, even now!

“The Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified.” God willed it, so it would be done; His Lamb would be sacrificed. What God desires is always accomplished, because He Himself oversees it. He governs the timing, He arranges the circumstances, and He directs all of the actors so that the final result is precisely that which He intends, working all things together for the good of those whom He loves and who love Him in return through faith.

Know, though, that God’s will can only be seen by means of His Word, and only in light of His entire work for us. We fall into sin with the chief priests, scribes and elders when we break God’s commandments and think that we serve God by doing so. We betray the truth when we excuse one like Judas assuming God works it out for good in the end, so that any path of action is justified. We err with the other disciples of Jesus when we fail to put the best construction on the actions of one like Mary, who poured the oil on Jesus and performed a good deed that the other disciples did not recognize at first.

God works through all things—even evil—to accomplish His will. Yet His people pray that His will would be done among them through His means of grace, to break and hinder every evil counsel arising from the perverse will of the devil, world and sinful flesh, and to strengthen and preserve us steadfast in His Word and faith unto our end. This is His good and gracious will indeed!

The supreme event of the Gospel is efficiently presented in a compact chapter of 20 verses. The chapter is full of the mystery of God, coupled with the revelation of His redemptive work in the world manifested in the tangible acts of Jesus Christ, the Church, and the Office of the Holy Ministry. The central message is that Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

In the historic narrative proclaimed by Saint Matthew, Christ is presented in His earthly ministry accomplishing the holy will of God through tangible means manifested in His divine words and deeds. Today He continues to accomplish that same holy will of God through His divine Means of Grace, found in His church and delivered through His divinely instituted Office of the Holy Ministry. In the Gospel purely proclaimed and the sacraments rightly administered, Christ continues to walk among His disciples and assures them continuously of the fact that He is with us always, to the end of the age.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 19: MATTHEW 27:57-66 SECOND LAST

The sinful, unrepentant world never stops hating, scheming against, and fearing Jesus. That is understandable, because God does not sleep and will not be mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. In the tomb the Son of God continues His work of redemption and salvation—much to the chagrin of the sinful world and the devil. We know this to be attested truth because the Holy Scriptures and the Creeds proclaim it to be so. So yes, the unbelieving world and the devil have much to fear from Jesus—even while He is in the tomb—because even in death, He is victorious.

In reality, His greatest victory is found in His death, for in the death of Jesus Christ is found the one sinless, blameless, unblemished, and perfect sacrifice that has the ability to atone for all the sins of the world. Nothing can restrain the glory of God demonstrated in the vicarious death of Jesus for the sinner. It is too late to change the course of events, for the Lamb of God has been sacrificed for the sin of the world. The pure and holy blood of Jesus has been spilled to make atonement for the countless sins of humanity.

Christ continues His redemptive work and the sinful world can sense it, can feel it, can hear and taste it. The devil and sin have been defeated. The old covenant has been fulfilled and a New Covenant has been declared. Our Lord could not be confined to the tomb!

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 13: MATTHEW 26:20-35 THIRD LAST

“When evening had come ...” As people of the Old Testament counted time this marked the beginning of a new day. This was in keeping with God’s own ordering of creation, in which evening came before morning. By this God was reminding His people that He had chased away the original darkness of nothingness with the dawn of His creation.

The beginning of this new day brought a particular darkness to the disciples of Jesus. The celebration of the Passover that evening turned somber when Jesus predicted his betrayal by one of his own disciples. This word filled all of them with sorrow--particularly because each one, knowing the darkness within the heart of fallen man, truly wondered whether he would be the one. Filled with dread over how He might answer, each disciple approached Jesus with the question, “Lord, is it I?”

But as surely as morning brings an end to the evening, the Light of the World would not leave His disciples in darkness. Jesus reveals to them the identity of the betrayer: Judas. He then reveals the passing of the Old Testament with the dawning of the New on that very night, with the Passover meal being transformed into the Holy Supper. As the faithful eat and drink His Body and Blood He enters their very hearts, ushering the sinful darkness out of their hearts and assuring them of His salvation. The Light of Life truly had come into the darkness of that evening, replacing the sorrowful questioning with the faithful confession: “Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!” God grant our hearts the same enlightenment!

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 14: MATTHEW 26:36-56 THIRD LAST

“Could you not watch with me one hour?” The truth was that Peter could not. Neither could James, nor John, nor any of the other disciples—nor, if we were there, could we. Although they knew the urgency of their situation and recognized that the time of Jesus’ end was drawing near, they simply could not muster the strength and the resolve to stay awake. Their bodies were exhausted; their minds needed rest.

To be sure, Jesus had done everything that His disciples had during the previous day and evening. Now, however, He was being put through the most excruciating test of physical and mental endurance. Jesus, like Israel of old, was wrestling with God. He was grappling with what His Father willed for Him—that Jesus would bear man’s sin, suffer punishment for man, and submit to death for man. Like Israel of old, Jesus endured this wrestling through divine strength alone, relying completely upon His Father’s Word of promise.

Yes, our flesh also is weak, but the Spirit remains willing. The Holy Spirit is ever willing to do for us what we, like His ancient disciples, simply cannot do for ourselves: “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation.” Coming to us through the means of grace, the Spirit makes the Word effective in our lives, enabling us to watch and pray in the midst of our temptations. He brings to weak flesh and to fearful minds His divine strength and His heavenly peace. Watch and pray through Him, and you will be led out of temptation, delivered from evil, and brought into the enjoyment of His kingdom, power, and glory forever and ever. Amen.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 18: MATTHEW 27:33-56 SECOND LAST

Jesus dies alone, and He tastes death to the full. “Numbered with the transgressors,” forsaken by God, refusing the drink meant to numb His senses, He is fully conscious to the last. Jesus’ refusal to drink the wine mingled with gall (to help deaden the pain) expresses His will to drink the cup of suffering right down to the dregs. The Son of God knows what is to happen, what must happen, for your atonement to be won.

The Father gives Him the cup to drink, followed by catastrophic darkness, the torn curtain of the temple, earthquake, and the rising of the saints from their tombs. The mockery Christ suffers from the cross is made to publish all that Jesus endures as the sacrificial Lamb of God, even to the point that a Gentile centurion is filled with awe at this crucified “criminal” and calls Him the Son of God. The language of the account is full of references to the prophecies of the Old Testament, for in all of these things Scripture is being fulfilled, God’s will is being done.

Jesus had gone this way in the assurance that it was God’s will. His purpose was to win forgiveness for sin. He departed from life consciously; His death was not some random misfortune that fell upon Him. It was His act of love and sacrifice for the sake of winning your eternal salvation through His atoning death, which secures the forgiveness of all your sins.

Lesson from the Book of Concord The Twenty-sixth Sunday after Trinity

CHAPTER III, ARTICLE VI.

But they [Romanists] object, that love is preferred to faith and hope. For Paul says (1 Cor. 13:13): “The greatest of these is charity.” Now, it is in accordance with this, that to justify is the greatest and chief virtue. Although Paul, in this passage, properly speaks of love toward one’s neighbor, and indicates that love is the greatest, because it has most fruits. Faith and hope have to do only with God; but love has infinite offices externally towards men. Nevertheless we grant to the adversaries that love towards God and our neighbor is the greatest virtue, because the chief commandment is this: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God” (Matt. 22:37). But how will they infer thence that love justifies? The greatest virtue, they say, justifies. By no means. For just as even the greatest or first Law does not justify, so also the greatest virtue of the Law does not justify. But that virtue justifies which apprehends Christ, which communicates to us Christ’s merits, by which we receive grace and peace from God. But this virtue is faith. For as it has been often said, faith is not only knowledge, but much rather to wish to receive or apprehend those things, which are offered in the promise concerning Christ. Moreover this obedience towards God, viz. to wish to receive the offered promise, is no less a divine service, λατρεία, than is love. God wishes us to believe Him, and to receive from Him blessings, and this He declares to be true divine service.

—The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, ¶104–107

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 15: MATTHEW 26:57-75

THIRD LAST

The chaos in today’s lesson well describes the present world during these last days. God is on trial within His own Church. Priests accuse God of blasphemy. Elders, called to gather the flock around the Good Shepherd, drive the lambs of the flock away through their lies about Him. Church councils ignore divine counsel and suborn perjury by encouraging witnesses to testify falsely against the Divine One. Even the faithful within the visible church seem to be invisible; like Peter, the faithful often follow Jesus at a distance, hiding among the observers of His trial, and are quick to deny Him when they face trial for being one of His disciples.

In the center of this chaos is the God Who remains God. Despite the false accusations against Him by people within His Church, God remains true to Himself, and to her. In spite of the lies about His Word, Christ remains true to His Word. Though a different spirit pervades the Church, the Spirit of Christ continues to abide in her. Surrounded by faithlessness, God in Christ remains faithful to His promises to His people. He endures all of the chaos, knowing the true end of it all. “Hereafter you will see,” He says, testifying to the truth of His resurrection, the truth of His abiding presence in His Church through His Word and Sacraments, and the truth of His coming again in glory. See Him as He comes to you now, through the faith He creates, restores and sustains. Look forward to seeing Him when He comes in power and glory, for He comes to bring you to Paradise in the world to come!

“When morning came . . .” It was a horrible morning. The plot to put Jesus to death was moving quickly to a conclusion as Jesus was sent to Pontius Pilate for trial, judgment and execution. Even Judas recognized the injustice of it all, confessing to the priests his sin in the shedding of innocent blood. On that day the very Son of God was condemned to die, and before that Friday ended He would indeed be dead. But what a contrast to be found on the following Sunday morning!

As every morning comes upon us we do well to consider the contrast between those two mornings, particularly in light of the Word of Christ in Psalm 31:15, “My times are in Your hand.” This is indeed a Word that sustains the Christian through a horrible morning; and through a great morning! This Word drowns out the false teaching that “bad things do not happen to true Christians,” and erases all doubts concerning God’s power. This Word proclaims His ongoing care for each of His faithful ones, bringing each through every circumstance of life, even as He delivered His own Son through death into life again! Truly, His mercies are new every morning, and at all times of your life!

“But as for me, I trust in You, O LORD; I say, “You are my God.” My times are in Your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies, and from those who persecute me. Make Your face shine upon Your servant; save me for Your mercies’ sake.” (Psalm 31:14-16) Amen!

THE GOSPEL**ST. MATTHEW 25:31–46 (NKJV)**

“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left.

“Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’

“Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’

“And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’

“Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’

“Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’

“Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’

“And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

THE COLLECT

O God, so rule and govern our hearts and minds by Thy Holy Spirit that, being ever mindful of the end of all things and the day of Thy just judgment, we may be stirred up to holiness of living here and dwell with Thee forever hereafter; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord who liveth and reigneth, with thee and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end.