

“Falsely are our churches accused of Abolishing the Mass; for the Mass is retained on our part, and celebrated with the highest reverence. All the usual ceremonies are also preserved, save that the parts sung in Latin are interspersed here and there with German hymns, which have been added to teach the people. ...

The people are accustomed to partake of the Sacrament together, if any be fit for it, and this also increases the reverence and devotion of public worship. For none are admitted except they be first proved. The people are also advised concerning the dignity and use of the Sacrament, how great consolation it brings to anxious consciences, that they may learn to believe God, and to expect and ask of Him all that is good. This worship pleases God; such use of the Sacrament nourishes true devotion toward God.”

**(Augsburg Confession, Article 24:1–2, 5–8)**

“But it can readily be judged that nothing would serve better to maintain the dignity of worship, and to nourish reverence and pious devotion among the people than that the ceremonies be rightly observed in the churches.”

**(Augsburg Confession, Section 2:6)**

“In the beginning we must again make the preliminary statement that we do not abolish the Mass, but religiously maintain and defend it. For among us masses are performed every Lord’s Day and on the other festivals, in which the sacrament is offered to those who wish to use it, after they have been examined and absolved. And the usual public ceremonies are observed, the series of lessons, of prayers, vestments and other like things.”

**(Apology [Defense] of the Augsburg Confession, Art. 24:1)**

“In the first place we assert, it is not now, nor has it ever been, in our mind to abolish entirely the whole formal *cultus* [worship service] of God, but to cleanse that which is in use, which has been vitiated by most abominable additions, and to point out a pious use. For this cannot be denied, that masses and the communion of bread and wine are a rite divinely instituted by Christ, which was observed, first under Christ Himself, then under the apostles, most simply and piously and without any additions.”

**Martin Luther**

**Formula of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg (1523)**



**DECEMBER 2, 2019–JANUARY 4, 2020**

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## ***The Calendar***

<i>December 1</i>	<i>Advent 1</i>
<i>December 8</i>	<i>Advent 2</i>
<i>December 13 (F)</i>	<i>St. Lucy, Martyr</i>
<i>December 15</i>	<i>Advent 3</i>
<i>December 21 (Sa)</i>	<i>St. Thomas, Apostle</i>
<i>December 22</i>	<i>Advent 4</i>
<i>December 25 (W)</i>	<i>The Feast of the Nativity of our Lord</i>
<i>December 26 (Th)</i>	<i>Festival of St. Stephen, Martyr</i>
<i>December 27 (F)</i>	<i>Festival of St. John, Apostle, Evangelist</i>
<i>December 28 (Sa)</i>	<i>Festival of Holy Innocents</i>
<i>December 29</i>	<i>Sunday after Christmas</i>

### **FROM THE BISHOP**

DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST,

With this issue of *The Lutheran Herald*, we enter another new year of the Church. Once again, we begin the cycle of readings drawn from the Holy Scripture as these were appointed from of old for the instruction of the saints concerning the divine doctrine. The wisdom of the fathers in appointing these readings, and the accumulation of centuries of faithful sermons which have been preached drawing on them, have been a blessing to so many generations of the Church and I trust they will continue to be such a blessing to the end of the age. I look forward to the beginning of each year because it is another opportunity to strive to better understand, and set forth before the saints, the teaching which the Lord has imparted to His Church.

As noted in recent months, instruction in the practices of the Church is something which needs to be constantly revisited and renewed. Recently, we spent several months examining the use of historic vestments in the diocese. Now, we will have several articles by Pastor Sullivan on the sign of the cross. I hope that you will find them edifying!

A blessed new (Church) year to all of you!

In Christ,  
*Bishop Heiser*

dates, and the sign of the holy cross. Basil points out that these ceremonies, though unwritten, date back to the apostles themselves.

While we can't trace the practice of the sign of the cross to the apostles, we can trace it to 200 A.D. The earliest written record of Christians making the sign of the cross upon themselves is Tertullian's *The Crown*. In chapter 3, he lists several Christian customs not taught in Scripture but utilized by Christians, similar to Basil's list. At the conclusion of his list, he writes, "At every forward step and movement, at every going in and out, when we put on our clothes and shoes, when we bathe, when we sit at table, when we light the lamps, on couch, on seat, in all the ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign." The sign is the holy cross.

Tertullian describes the daily life of the Christian as one commended to the Lord who was crucified for our salvation. When we consider that Tertullian wrote this tract around 200 A.D. and that he mentions crossing oneself among the longstanding customs of the Church, we can confidently say that this practice is quite ancient, perhaps, as Basil later claimed, dates back to the Apostles themselves.

Another writing from the late third century, the Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena, depicts St. Paul's time in Spain. Before he enters Xanthippe's village, he prays and crosses himself (paragraph 7) and uses the the sign of the cross in his ministry (paragraph 14). Although this story is apocryphal, it shows how Christians in the mid-third century viewed the practice of crossing oneself. Far from being an invention of the Roman Catholic Church, the sign of the cross was, from its beginnings, a practice of Christ's Church, perhaps even as Basil wrote, "by tradition of the apostles."

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS  
REV. JOSH SULLIVAN

THE ANTIQUITY OF THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

Making the sign of the holy cross upon oneself has always been a part of Lutheran piety. Dr. Luther teaches us to cross ourselves twice a day in the Small Catechism. His form of morning prayer begins: “In the morning, when thou risest, thou shalt make the sign of the holy cross, and say: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.” Then we are to recite the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and Luther’s morning prayer. The form of evening prayer begins the same way. While discussing the proper use of God’s name in the Large Catechism, Luther commends the practice of children crossing themselves and praying, “Help, dear Lord Jesus!” when they see or hear something monstrous or terrible (LC 1.74). It is also common practice to cross oneself at the invocation of the Triune God, as well as at the end of the Creed.

Many Protestants, including some Lutherans unfortunately, claim this practice is “too Roman Catholic” or even superstitious. Neither accusation is true. Crossing oneself is an ancient practice of Christians going back at least to the second century A.D. Knowing the antiquity of this practice, as well as early church’s use of it, can help us develop a better appreciation of it and help us integrate the practice into our daily piety.

Basil of Caesarea, writing in the 360s A.D., lists several ceremonies which aren’t commanded in Scripture but which the Church has received “by tradition of the apostles” (*On the Holy Spirit*, Book XXVII.66). His list includes ceremonies such as facing east for prayer, baptism using three applications of water, the renunciation of the devil by the baptismal candi-

Lesson from the Book of Concord  
First Sunday in Advent

Article VI.

Also they [the Lutheran theologians] teach, that this Faith is bound to bring forth Good Fruits, and that it is necessary to do good works commanded by God, because of God’s will, but not that we should rely on those works to merit justification before God. For remission of sins and justification are apprehended by faith, as also the voice of Christ attests: “When ye shall have done all these things, say: We are unprofitable servants” [Luke 17:10]. The same is also taught by the Fathers. For Ambrose says: “It is ordained of God that he who believes in Christ, is saved; freely receiving remission of sins, without works, by faith alone.”

—The Augsburg Confession

Part III, Article IV. Of the Gospel

We will now return to the Gospel, which not merely in one way gives us counsel and aid against sin; for God is superabundantly rich in His grace. First, through the spoken Word by which the forgiveness of sins is preached in the whole world; which is the peculiar office of the Gospel. Secondly, through baptism. Thirdly, through the holy sacrament of the altar. Fourthly, through the power of the keys, and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren, Matt. 18:20: “Where two or three are gathered together,” etc.

—The Smalcald Articles

*The selections from the Book of Concord are from H. E. Jacobs’ translation of the Book of Concord, and are taken from the table in volume two of suggested lessons for Sundays and Festivals of the Church.*

Our Lord teaches us humility by His Words, His actions, and His Spirit. The devil and the world constantly try to teach us otherwise. Pride and vanity are proclaimed as virtues by what the world says and does. The devil's falsehoods tell us that we ought to be wise in our own eyes and "prudent" according to popular opinions. But Jesus Christ shows us the Truth that comes from above.

Faith makes us humble. Fear, love, and trust in the true God makes us lowly in heart as we know our sinfulness and repent of it. The devil teaches us to justify our sins through wisdom and prudence, apart from simple childlike faith in Jesus Christ crucified. A faithful heart has no pride or boastfulness in itself, but it simply waits for the Lord's grace and mercy.

And faith in Christ makes us gentle, like He is. This gentleness is expressed in the love that we are made to show others in observing His commandments. His Spirit teaches us and enables us to serve as He exemplified in His own life. He comes to work through us as we do those acts of faith that the 10 Commandments set before us, which in turn give glory to our Father through the Son as we are part of His Body, the Church.

We pray: Stir up, we beseech Thee, Thy power, O Lord, and come, that by Thy protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Thy mighty deliverance; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

In our final meditation of this week we turn our attention to the final prophet of the Old Testament, who is also the first prophet of the New Testament. John the Baptizer fulfills both roles. John the Baptizer and his divine mission was foretold in the Old Testament because God has everything under control and works toward the fulfillment of His holy will. John's message of repentance is of great importance for both Old Testament and New Testament believers, for there can be no salvation without repentance. John also wore the traditional attire of Old Testament prophets so that the people and authorities knew what he was from his uniform—not unlike law enforcement or clergy today.

His work of baptism was also not something entirely new or strange. People knew the value of baptism because washings were common practice in the Old Testament and were divinely established as a means through which God bestowed blessings. Confessing their sins to John (a mere man) was not strange either, because the Levitical laws (Mosaic Law) had divinely established this as a practice.

The second half of our text presents the biblical concept of true faith bearing the fruit of repentance, for a faith without fruits and works is a dead faith. The final verse of the text points to the Second Coming of our Lord in power and glory, to deliver His holy and righteous judgment.

We pray: Heavenly Father, through Your abundant grace may we never be found compromising the true faith in our lives or among our brethren. Amen.

This section of the Gospel continues Matthew's practice of pointing his Jewish audience to the fulfillment of Messianic prophecy as it relates to Jesus. The words at the end of our reading refer to several Old Testament prefigurations and predictions that the Messiah would be despised, for in Jesus' day "Nazarene" was virtually a synonym for "despised". We see this reality in Nathanael's question to his brother Phillip, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" in relation to Jesus' city of origin.

While this all presents a picture of rejection and desperation, the opening verse makes it clear that God is in control, even when things appear bleak and hopeless. God intervenes directly with the earthly life of Jesus and those around Him. We also travel through a world that does not want us in its midst, and are surrounded by people who often despise us and our religion. Like our Lord, we are guided by divine providence and the heavenly Father's holy angels. The Lord's holy Word and His Holy Spirit will show us the proper path. This inspired text also presents the wholly human nature of the Son of God with the presentation of His dependence on His earthly father for travel arrangements.

We pray: Lord God, let Your Holy Spirit mercifully strengthen our faith while restraining the old man in us, that the new man may come forth in repentance and faithfulness to walk the path which You set through Your holy means of grace. Amen.

"And it shall be that every soul who will not hear that prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people."

Jesus Christ comes to us in order to bring us God's love and mercy. But His love and mercy are not indifferent toward sin and error. His teachings and commands state clearly that some things are wrong and destructive, and He wants us to stop doing them. Love puts away that which is harmful, so God's love will remove those who are unrepentant in their sin and error.

Faithful repentance is not a punishment. Our self-loving pride lies to us and tells us otherwise, but real humility is a blessing from God by His Spirit. He works faith in people so they may hear His true Words and love Him more than their own desires. To resist His commands and teachings is to resist the faith that His Spirit brings, and to resist His love. And if people resist the truth that our Lord Jesus Christ gives to us in Word and Spirit, then all that remains is the tragic destruction of being sent away because He never knew them (Matthew 7:23).

Thanks be to God that He has raised up His Servant Jesus to bless us and turn us away from our iniquities.

We pray: Stir up, we beseech Thee, Thy power, O Lord, and come, that by Thy protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Thy mighty deliverance; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

God uses His divine mysteries to show us the reality of His grace and mercy. Jesus Christ crucified is the clear, profound image of God coming to us to heal and save us. Baptism is a visible work that He does to show that we are cleansed from sin and given faith, even faith like a child, by familiar water and His explicit Word. His Holy Supper is the real food and drink that are also the true manifestation of His Body and Blood, and a picture of faithful unity in confession. And the Ministry of His called and ordained servants is how He continues to be heard, how He continues to give His gifts, and how He performs these actions.

God's mysteries are not some puppet show or theater drama. He's not trying to hide blessings from us or form some elitist club. He comes to us in these divine mysteries to show us precise images of the Truth on His terms. In them He teaches us to be humble and receive His holy blessings as He gives them, not as our grubby, sinful hands would grab them or twist them.

His blessed mysteries give us the real picture of His love and peace. As we are made faithful members of His mystical Body, the Church, we are to be strengthened by them, and we are to use them to help others see His clear images of life and salvation in Jesus Christ our Lord!

We pray: Stir up, we beseech Thee, Thy power, O Lord, and come, that by Thy protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Thy mighty deliverance; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Here we see one of the first manifestations of the severe hatred of the world toward God's Son and the Gospel proclamation He brings into the world. Herod desires the destruction of Jesus so greatly that he strikes at all who have any possibility of being God's promised Redeemer. Many struggle to make sense of this slaughter of infants which has become known in the Church's liturgical calendar as the Feast of the Holy Innocents.

The purpose of this being recorded by the Apostle is not to mark the passage of time, but to understand more fully the entire mystery of Jesus Christ, from His incarnation and birth until His ascension, to the day of Pentecost, and the expectation of His return in glory. In that purpose Scripture must interpret Scripture, as Saint Matthew points to this horrific event fulfilling the prophecy of Jeremiah. In Jeremiah's prophecy this terrible lamenting of Ramah foreshadows the Lord bringing forth a New Covenant of grace and mercy which will be a source of great joy throughout time for His elect. It also points to the reality that throughout time the New Testament Church will always be at odds with the fallen world, sinful man, and the devil. She will always be pursued and persecuted by the world, man, and the devil—but she, like her Lord, will not be destroyed, because God protects and guides her.

We pray: Lord, through the witness of Your holy Word and the working of Your Holy Spirit may we always be guided and comforted in this world, and finally be graciously received into Your holy kingdom to come. Amen.

This single short verse ushers in the fullness of Jesus' earthly life of perfection under the Old Covenant Law of Israel. It is a life that must be flawlessly executed if He is to be the true blameless, without blemish or stain, Lamb of God—who is to be sacrificed for the sins of the world. These are the first acts of submissive obedience by Jesus Christ as He is officially, ceremoniously, sacrificially, sacramentally brought under all the provisions of the Mosaic Levitical Covenant established between God and the children of Abraham. We sometimes forget that Jesus lived His entire earthly life as a devout Jew, obeying every law and statute of the Old Testament.

Within that reality, circumcision on the eighth day showed incorporation into Israel (the children of Abraham by faith through grace), and included the eschatological (end times) hope of life in the age to come. We see this historic continuity materialize throughout the New Testament and the Early Church, where the Sacrament of Holy Baptism is performed on the eighth day because Saint Paul frames it in this context in Colossians 2:11-12. Every Jewish male child entered Israel and the hope of the new heavens and earth in his circumcision. In Christ's circumcision the entire world enters into this hope as part of the fulfillment of all that must be accomplished for the world's salvation.

We pray: Almighty Heavenly Father, we give You thanks that You have graciously invited Your Elect to be joined to You by grace through faith, and sealed us by Your chosen means of grace, presented in simple earthly items and acts. Amen.

People have a natural desire to see and know God. Many describe themselves as “spiritual” and want to experience blessings from a “higher power”. But when they hear the truth about God, sinfulness makes a lot of people look in all the wrong places.

God has given us profound spiritual knowledge in His Word, and He has given us a very clear image of His love and righteousness in His only begotten Son. Sinful hearts have second thoughts about being spiritual or seeking a higher power when they are confronted with “the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person.” But by His grace He still seeks to come to us, and by His power and Spirit He works to give us faithful eyes to see and ears to hear. True faith creates a real desire to be spiritual and to know the One who is higher than us.

The Jews tried to find spirituality in Moses and the prophets while resisting Jesus. It didn't work. People today continue to seek spirituality apart from Christ and His Church, and it won't work either. Only faith makes us able to truly see and appreciate the spiritual blessing of God coming to us and saving us from our sin and death. This is the greatest and truest gift that anyone can receive from on high.

We pray: Stir up, we beseech Thee, Thy power, O Lord, and come, that by Thy protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Thy mighty deliverance; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

**FRIDAY, DECEMBER 6: HEBREWS 2:1-4 1<sup>ST</sup> SUNDAY IN ADVENT**

We are taught to pray “Thy will be done” in the Lord’s Prayer. His will is made clear in His Scriptures and in His Sacraments. His will is that all people should repent and fear, love, and trust in Him above all. His will is that we should believe in Jesus Christ, who was crucified for our sins. His will is that we should believe and be Baptized, being washed in Christ and connected to His Church. His will is that we should eat and drink and live by His Body and Blood, and confess His death and forgiveness until Jesus comes again in glory. His will is that all the signs and wonders of His Church be taught clearly and truthfully so that all nations might be made disciples of His Word.

If we think that His will needs to be feelings or private answers to our particular concerns, we are missing the bigger, greater picture. He blesses and teaches His people, past and present, to know and do His will for the sake of His kingdom and His righteousness. Let us pray that He grant us true faith and strength according to His Spirit, so that we may never neglect the greatness of His salvation for us, nor neglect His will to proclaim that saving message to others!

We pray: Stir up, we beseech Thee, Thy power, O Lord, and come, that by Thy protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Thy mighty deliverance; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

**TUESDAY, DECEMBER 31: MATTHEW 2:13-15 CHRISTMASTIDE**

The verses we look at today continue the theme of the section immediately preceding them. They further focus the hearer on the two natures of Jesus Christ, human and divine, while shining a light on the somewhat obscure personage of Joseph. In the conclusion of verse 15, “...that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, ‘Out of Egypt I called My Son,’” Saint Matthew points to the Old Testament to prove Jesus Christ’s divinity and His claim as the Messiah.

The Apostle Matthew references the Scriptural prophecies about the Messiah throughout his Gospel to his predominantly Jewish audience as proof that Jesus is who He claims to be, and that God is always in control. The quotation from Hosea 11:1 originally referred to God’s calling the nation of Israel out of Egypt in the time of Moses—but Matthew, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, applies it also to Jesus. We see the history of God’s people reiterated in the life of the Son of God. Just as Israel as an infant nation went down into Egypt, so the infant Jesus went there—and as Israel was led by God out of Egypt, so also was Jesus. Matthew presents the will of God, which was expressed in the act of the Exodus, as reaching its fulfillment in the coming of the incarnate Son to effect the final exodus, the final full deliverance of His people.

We pray: Thank You Lord for mercifully working through all persons and circumstances throughout time to fulfill Your will in our lives. Amen.



Simeon hails the Child in his arms as the Lord's salvation in person. This salvation comes by the ministry of a Servant Messiah who is to serve and suffer for the salvation of all peoples, for the Gentiles, as well as the people of Old Testament Israel. Even Jesus' parents marveled at this revelation, which for the first time speaks of the universal mission of Mary's Son. Jesus is to be the Servant Messiah who endures substantial and diverse opposition, and goes through severe persecution to His ultimate and universal redeeming triumph.

He will be a sign of God's present gracious working, but a sign often spoken against. Men will fail or refuse to see in Him as the Lord's salvation, and the ways of mankind will divide before Him. Some will stumble at Him in unbelief, and so fall in their unbelief. Others will see the saving arm of the Lord revealed in Him as He suffers and dies for the sins of all. Some will repent and believe, and will rise from their fallen state to find in Him a new life. Verses 29 and 30 are commonly known as Simeon's song, or the *Nunc Dimittis*, after the opening words in Latin. It is usually sung in the post-Communion liturgy where we join this prophet in joyfully declaring that we too have seen and touched our promised Redeemer in the most blessed elements of our Lord's Holy Communion.

We pray: Almighty Heavenly Father, allow us to see fully Your abundantly gracious love revealed in our Redeemer, and through Your chosen means of grace be comforted and strengthened to boldly confess that reality with Simeon. Amen.

God's eternal purpose was that man be blessed. After man fell into sin and rebellion, His purpose did not change; it was focused on blessing us with salvation through the Virgin's Son.

As He spoke through promises and prophecies in former generations, especially to His people of Israel, His purpose did not change. His lessons, illustrations, and messengers changed, but His purpose did not. It all pointed forward to Jesus Christ and the power of His Gospel.

His purpose continues to be the same. He continues to give us His Word, His signs, His wonders, and His blessings, which all point toward man's salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. If Paul sincerely declares his lowliness compared to the saints before him, who are we to think we are greater than him by changing or ignoring the very Word and Gospel that he preached and taught? Whether it is St. Paul or us, our accomplishments are not the focus, nor are they an excuse to compromise God's Word and purpose. The Lord's will is to be done. Like Paul, we are to repent of our sins against Christ's kingdom and simply be the servants and fellow heirs that He calls each of us to be according to His own divine purpose, to the glory and proclamation of Christ crucified for our life and forgiveness.

We pray: Stir up, we beseech Thee, Thy power, O Lord, and come, that by Thy protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Thy mighty deliverance; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

## Lesson from the Book of Concord Second Sunday in Advent

### Article XVII.

Also, they [the Lutherans] 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

## Lesson from the Book of Concord Sunday after ChristMass

### Chapter XIII.

In the town of Eisenach in Thuringia there was, to our knowledge, a monk, John Hilten, who thirty years ago was cast by his fraternity into prison, because he had protested against certain most notorious abuses. For we have seen his writings, from which it can be well understood what the nature of his doctrine was. And those who knew him testify that he was a mild old man, and serious indeed, but without moroseness. He predicted many things, some of which have thus far transpired, and others still seem to impend, which we do not wish to recite, lest it may be inferred that they are narrated either from hatred toward one or from partiality to another. But finally when, either on account of his age or the foulness of the prison, he fell into disease, he sent for the guardian, in order to tell him of his sickness; and when the guardian, inflamed with pharisaic hatred, had begun to reprove the man harshly on account of his kind of doctrine which seemed to be injurious to the kitchen; then, passing by the mention of his sickness, he said with a sigh that he had borne these injuries patiently for Christ's sake, since he had indeed neither written nor taught anything which could overthrow the position of the monks, but had only protested against some well-known abuses. "But another one," he said, "will come in A.D. 1516, who will destroy you, neither will you be able to resist him." This very opinion concerning the downward career of the power of the monks, and this number of years, his friends afterwards found also written by him in his Commentaries, which he had left, concerning certain passages of Daniel. But although the issue will teach how much weight should be given to this declaration, yet there are other signs which threaten a change in the power of the monks, that are no less certain than oracles. For it is evident how much hypocrisy, ambition, avarice there is in the monasteries, how much ignorance and cruelty among all the unlearned, what vanity in their sermons and in devising continually new means of gaining money. And there are other faults, which we do not care about mentioning. Although they once were schools for Christian instruction, now they have degenerated as though from a golden age to an iron age, as the Platonic cube degenerates into bad harmonies, which Plato says brings destruction. All the most wealthy monasteries support only an idle crowd, which gluttonizes upon the public alms of the Church. Christ, however, teaches concerning the salt that has lost its savor, that it should be cast out and be trodden under foot (Matt. 5:13). Wherefore the monks by such morals singing their own fate [requiem]. And now another sign is added, because they are, in many places, the instigators of the death of good men. These murders God undoubtedly will shortly avenge. ...

—Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Art. XXVII, §1–7

The beginning of the life of our Lord is marked by the death of the Martyred Innocents at the hand of King Herod. These martyrs testify to who the Lord Jesus--the baby born in Bethlehem--truly is. He is the Son of God, begotten before all worlds, and He is true Man born of the Virgin Mary.

Our Lord Jesus, the Christ, is the eternal Only-Begotten Son of God. He is God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God. He is begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father before all worlds, as we confess in our Creeds. He has no beginning and no end, by virtue of His divinity. And yet, the Evangelist St. Matthew begins his Gospel with the words, "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ."

How can God have a genealogy? Our Lord Jesus is both God and man, so then, this genealogy given to us by the Evangelist St. Matthew is a testament that the eternal, immutable, Only-Begotten Son of the heavenly Father is not only true God, but He is also true man, born of the Virgin Mary into the lineage of King David, the descendant of the Patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

St. Matthew begins his Gospel by introducing us to the God who was man—our Lord Jesus. The Holy Innocents are martyred because the devil and all evil does not want us to hear about this man who is God, who brings salvation to all who believe on Him.

We pray: O God, whose Martyred Innocents showed forth Thy praise not by speaking but by dying, mortify all vices within us that our lives may in deed confess Thy faith which our tongue uttereth; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

Athens was a great and glorious city. It had its greatest days some five hundred years earlier, but it was still marvelous for its art and architecture, its philosophy and literature. It must have been an impressive place to see at that time. But as with any great and beautiful scene, if it is dominated by unbelief and false religion, it leaves a sour taste in one's mouth. Like the national cathedral in Washington, or the Uppsala cathedral in Sweden; as beautiful as they are, they are spoiled.

Perhaps Paul toured the great city when he first got there, as any of us would. He saw all the beauty of the city, but noticed that it was virtually smothered in idols. The Roman satirist, Petronius, said, "in Athens it was easier to find a god than a man." Paul's "spirit was provoked within him" by what he saw. That is, he abhorred the idolatry he saw. His spirit was stirred to jealousy, jealousy for God's name. He was disturbed and revolted by the lies and the darkness that masqueraded as truth and glory. Are we ever distressed to see the idolatry in our own cities? Paul did not see the various expressions of religion as equally valid. He didn't look at the Greek Olympian gods as "just the Greek way of expressing the essence of truth." Jesus did not take up residence in one of the temples of Athens. Jesus was above every other god.

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

Although we do love non-Christians, this is not John's primary emphasis. John primarily is talking about love of our Christian brothers and sisters; love that has its origin in Christ. "God is love" is often read by our world as if it said "Love is god." The first statement is, of course, true. The inverse is not. Love is an attribute of God's essence, it is part of who He is. Without that attribute God would not be who He is.

However, love is but one attribute of the whole--a completely integrated and undivided whole. To make one attribute the totality of God is to create a caricature, a cartoon. Many people want "God is love" to mean that God is ultimately and boundlessly permissive. This is a grotesque distortion, and simply a false notion, of God. God's justice and righteousness does not allow that sort of permissiveness. Permissiveness is not love. "God is love" in that He would sacrifice Himself for us. This love is the natural core of His being. Love is not primarily feelings. It is actions. Christ loved us by dying for us. We love by crucifying our flesh and serving others.

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

St. John the Evangelist bore witness to the Light—the Lord Jesus Christ. St. John the Baptizer prepared the way for the Light of world—the Dayspring on High. Both Johns brought the Light to the people through the preaching of the Word. They proclaimed what our Lord Jesus Christ will do, has done, and continues to do for His people, the Church--all those who believe on His Name and hope to attain the light of everlasting life.

The Feast of the Nativity of our Lord and its season is often called the season of Light. Our salvation from the darkness of sin is revealed in the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. He comes into this dark, sinful world to enlighten us, who sit in darkness and the shadow of death. His holy Word enlightens all those who cling in faith to the promises preached in that Word.

By the working of the Holy Ghost we are filled with the Light of the Christ, so that the darkness of sin no longer has any more hold over us. St. John the Baptist proclaimed to the people of Israel that this Light was coming into the world, and would be revealed as the One upon whom the Spirit would rest. St. John the Evangelist proclaimed that Jesus of Nazareth was that Light, and He suffered and died to bring us who believe on Him into the gates of eternal life.

We pray: Merciful Lord, we beseech Thee to cast the bright beams of Thy light upon Thy Church that it, being instructed by the doctrines of Thy Blessed Apostle and Evangelist Saint John, may attain to the light of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

On this day of the protomartyr—the first martyr for preaching the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ—St. Stephen, we read of the birth of another man who would be martyred for his preaching the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ—St. John the Baptist.

His mother, Elizabeth, would have him be called “John.” The name John means “the grace of God,” or “in whom there is grace.” This child is to be named the one “in whom there is grace” because He would go before the Lord and prepare the way for Him. He would be the one giving out the Lord God’s grace by preaching repentance toward the forgiveness of sins, and baptizing all those who came to him.

St. John the Baptist would deny himself the pleasures of the flesh, putting on a camel’s hair garment tied with a leather belt, and eating locusts and honey, because his preaching was not to be about him. People were not to be drawn to him because of his fancy clothes and fine foods, but were to be drawn to him because of who he preached—the One whose sandal straps he was unworthy to loosen, and who would bestow grace upon all those who believed.

We pray: Grant, O Lord, that in all our sufferings here upon Earth for the testimony of Thy truth we may steadfastly look up to Heaven and by faith behold the glory that shall be revealed; and, being filled with the Holy Spirit, may learn to love and bless our persecutors by the example of Thy first martyr, Saint Stephen, who prayed for his murderers to Thee, O Blessed Jesus, who stands at the right hand of God to help all those who suffer for Thee, our only Mediator and Advocate. Amen.

The pagan Greco-Roman world did not have the same view of time or history that the Christians did. For the pagans, time and history didn’t have any goal or meaning. There was nothing in the future that they were looking forward to. This is quite different from the text of Colossians, where it says: “... your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints; because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven.” The Colossian Christians had a belief in the future because there is a future. They had a future to look forward to. That future was “laid up for you in heaven.” All the events in this life are connected to that future goal.

Our lives of faith in this world are one thread with the glory of our lives in heaven. What we do here matters there. What we suffer for Christ here redounds to our glory there. We are on a pilgrimage toward our heavenly home, and our lives as Christians have meaning and purpose. When the world collapses around us, we do not despair. Destruction of earthly dreams cannot destroy “the hope which is laid up for you in heaven.”

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

This passage speaks of obedience. We should not see this only as obedience to St. Paul personally. The Philippians were obedient in that way, certainly, but it is also about obedience to the Word of God. St. Paul admonishes them to hold “fast the word of life.” Obedience to God’s Word is where life is found. The Christian bows his heart and his mind to the Word of God. He or she accepts that holy Word as authority, and does not sit in judgment over what God has said. Of course, we understand any given passage of Scripture in its context. This is simply sound interpretation. But after one understands the context of any given passage, one does not try to evade or rationalize away the implications of that Scripture. No matter how inconvenient or uncomfortable, God’s Word remains, and it speaks truth in our dark world. We do not have the right or ability to stand in judgment over His Word.

The proper response to God’s Word is humble obedience. Humble obedience, whether we understand His will or not. Humble obedience, whether it makes sense to us or not. Humble obedience, whether the rest of the world calls it humble obedience, or denounces it as ignorance, arrogance, bigotry, or hatred. Christians follow the way of humble obedience to Christ regardless of the criticism or opposition.

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

In the previous verses of St. Luke’s gospel Elizabeth tells the Blessed Virgin Mary that she would be blessed because she believed the words spoken to her by the angel Gabriel. The Virgin Mary tells us that all generations will call her blessed. She is blessed because she is the Theotokos, the “God-bearer.” She is the Mother of God. She gives birth to God in the flesh.

Our first mother, Eve, allowed herself to be deceived by the serpent, the Devil, and so with her husband, Adam, cursed all of us, her offspring. Eve led us to be cursed, but through the Babe in the womb of Mary we are blessed. For He in His mercy comes down from Heaven to take upon Himself the flesh of mankind, in order that He may defeat the deceiving serpent, and win for us forgiveness, life, and salvation by His suffering and death on the tree of the holy cross.

We are blessed through His perfect fulfilling of the Law and innocent suffering and death, all because He chose to humble Himself by putting on our flesh. He purifies the flesh that was corrupted by sin, so that all those who are baptized into His flesh and believe on His name will be saved and live with Him for all eternity. Therefore, let us rejoice on this Feast of the Nativity of our Lord, for our Lord Jesus removed the curse from us, and made us blessed for all eternity.

We pray: Grant, we beseech Thee, Almighty God, that the new birth of Thine Only-Begotten Son in the flesh may set us free, who are held in the old bondage under the yoke of sin; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

This night before the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord is a night for proclaiming the Good News of our Lord Jesus' birth. The Blessed Virgin Mary has just been informed by the angel Gabriel that she will be the Mother of God. What is her first instinct? To run to the hill country to tell Elizabeth, the very woman whom Gabriel had said was going to bear a son even though she had been considered barren. Elizabeth would bear the forerunner of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Upon Mary's greeting the babe in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy. Mary's arrival also meant the arrival of the Messiah and the Savior. The babe in Elizabeth's womb could not contain his joy over the presence of the Lord in the Virgin's womb. St. John the Baptist's mother, Elizabeth, also is compelled to proclaim the Good News of the Savior and the woman who bears Him. The fruit of the Blessed Virgin's womb held our Savior.

Tonight, the Church also leaps for joy over the Savior in the Virgin's womb. Bells are rung, hymns are sung, and candles light up the night dispelling the darkness. For the Church now is gifted with her Redeemer in swaddling cloths. That which was foretold to the Blessed Virgin Mary is fulfilled, and we are blessed by the birth of this baby, who is God in the flesh come to be our Savior.

We pray: O God, who hast made this most holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light, grant, we beseech Thee, that, as we have known on Earth the mysteries of that Light, we may also come to the fullness of its joys in Heaven; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

John Wesley, in his book *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, argues that Christians may reach sinless perfection. He says, "Perfection is loving God with all the heart, mind, soul, and strength. This implies that no wrong temper, none contrary to love, remains in the soul; and that all the thoughts, words, and actions, are governed by love." Later he says in regard to involuntary sins: "A person filled with the love of God is still liable to these involuntary transgressions. Such transgressions you may call sins, if you please; I do not."

How very different from what St. Paul says here: "Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected..." We Christians are afflicted with sin constantly. We cannot go a few seconds without sinning. And yet we do not live in despair. We do not live in hopelessness. We have been freed from the weight of our sins because of Christ's atoning sacrifice. We "press on." We live freely and confidently in Christ. We know our sorry state. We know the truth about our sinful hearts and minds, but we are even more aware of the Champion who is ours and has secured eternal life for us. We keep heaven before our eyes so that our path may be straight.

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

At first we might get the impression that St. Paul is telling us to ignore our physical life. Perhaps we should forget that we are material beings, like the Gnostics would say. After all he says, “Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.” And again he says, “put to death your members which are on the earth.” At first he seems to denounce the physical body, but look at what follows--a list of sins of the flesh. It is the sin that is condemned. We must acknowledge the good creation of God, including our physical bodies, and cherish them. We must conform both our minds and bodies to Christ so that both mind and body might glorify Him.

From that perspective we can then understand what Paul means when he says, “there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free.” Clearly Jews and Greeks still existed in racial terms. Slaves still woke up the next day as slaves. St. Paul isn’t denying God’s creation. The passage simply tells us that we are all one with regard to our standing before God. We are all equally justified in Christ, no matter our racial or social distinctions. We all should fulfill our vocations, as we were created, to God’s glory, and we are all justified one way through our one Christ.

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

St. Matthew records for us that the Virgin Mary was “found with child.” In the eyes and mind of St. Joseph this was a sin that forbade him from remaining betrothed to Mary. He could have easily brought this sin out into the light of the public square, where Mary would have been stoned to death as the law required for those caught in adultery. But Joseph is a “just man.” We are told exactly what that means by St. Matthew. He did not want Mary to be publicly shamed, but resolved to divorce her secretly. In short, he covered over her apparent sin.

Joseph is told in a dream the facts of the case. The Child she carries was conceived of the Holy Ghost, and He will save His people from their sin. Joseph would be the guardian father of the Lord Jesus. His actions with Mary reveal that he is the best earthly father the Son of God could have. For Joseph does exactly what our Lord Jesus does for us—He covers over our sins.

The Lord Jesus in His righteousness does not want us to bear the burden of our sins. Therefore, He comes down from Heaven, humbles Himself to be born into our flesh, and fulfills the Law that we are guilty of breaking daily. Furthermore, He endures the punishment of death that we deserve, so that we—the Church—might be His Bride, and He takes us into His heavenly home to dwell with Him for all eternity.

We pray: Stir up, O Lord, we beseech Thee, Thy power, and come and help us with Thy great might, that by Thy grace whatsoever is hindered by our sins may be speedily accomplished through Thy mercy and satisfaction; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.



## Lesson from the Book of Concord Fourth Sunday in Advent

### Article IX.

Of Baptism, they [the Lutherans] teach, that it is necessary to salvation, and that through Baptism is offered the grace of God; and that children are to be baptized, who, being offered to God through Baptism, and received into His grace.

They condemn the Anabaptists, who allow not the Baptism of children, and say that children are saved without Baptism.

—The Augsburg Confession

### V. Of Baptism.

Baptism is nothing else than the Word of God [with mersion] in the water, commanded by His institution, or as Paul says: “A washing in the Word”; just as Augustine also says: “The Word comes to the element, and it becomes a sacrament.” Therefore, we do not hold with Thomas and the monastic preachers or Dominicans, who forget the Word (God’s institution) and say that God has imparted to the water a spiritual power which, through the water, washes away sin. Nor do we agree with Scotus and the Barefooted monks [Minorites or Franciscan monks], who teach that, by the assistance of the divine will, baptism washes away sins, and that this ablution occurs only through the will of God, and by no means through the Word and water.

Of the baptism of children, we hold that children ought to be baptized. For they belong to the promised redemption made through Christ, and the Church should administer it to them.

—The Smalcald Articles, Part III.

## Lesson from the Book of Concord Third Sunday in Advent

### Article V.

That we may obtain this faith, the Office of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who worketh faith where and when it pleaseth God in them that hear the Gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ’s sake, justified those who believe that they are received into favor for Christ’s sake.

They condemn the Anabaptists and others, who think that the Holy Ghost cometh to men without the external Word, through their own preparations and works.

—The Augsburg Confession

### Article XVI. Of Political Order.

The sixteenth article the adversaries receive without any exception, in which we have confessed that it is lawful for the Christian to bear civil office, sit in judgment, determine matters by the imperial laws, and other laws in present force, appoint just punishments, engage in just wars, act as a soldier, make legal contracts, hold property, take an oath when magistrates require it, contract marriage; finally, that legitimate civil ordinances are good creatures of God and divine ordinances, which a Christian can use with safety. The entire topic concerning the distinction between the kingdom of Christ and a political kingdom has been explained to advantage in the literature of our writers, that the kingdom of Christ is spiritual, to wit, that it is in the heart the knowledge of God, and fear and faith in God, beginning eternal righteousness and eternal life; meanwhile it permits us outwardly to use legitimate political ordinances of every nation in which we live, just as it permits us to use medicine or the art of building, or food, drink, air. Neither does the Gospel bring new laws concerning the civil state, but commands that we obey present laws, whether they have been framed by heathen or by others, and that in this obedience we should exercise love.

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, §53–55a

This text calls Christians to endure until Christ's return. To endure is to willingly suffer persecution for the Faith—even to welcome the persecution—because it is better to suffer for the Faith than to have worldly happiness without faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This persecution comes in many forms: the world tempts with false doctrine, the devil literally wants to kill Christians, and the Christian's own body betrays his faith through sinful desires and laziness. This life would be smoother without faith in Christ. But it would also lead to judgement and eternal death. He who endures in the Faith till the end will receive eternal life.

Endurance of this kind requires firm confidence in the promises of God. This confidence does not come from us, but from the Holy Spirit working through Word and sacraments. Verse 23 of the same chapter says, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful." Our confidence lies in the faithfulness of God, whose Word can never be broken.

Endurance is the theme of Advent. The Church directs her thoughts to her Lord, Jesus Christ, who will return on the Last Day as He promised. The proof of this is that He came the first time, as a divine baby born in Bethlehem. We know He will keep His promise now because He kept His promise then. We know that He will raise us from the dead because He rose from the dead. In this confidence, and by the Holy Spirit, we can endure all persecution.

We pray: Lord, we beseech Thee, give ear to our prayers and lighten the darkness of our hearts by Thy gracious visitation; through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Back in Genesis chapter 3 God promised that sin and the devil would be crushed by the seed of a woman. He says to the serpent, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel" (Genesis 3:15). This prophecy is fulfilled in today's text from Luke. The Savior—the Lord Jesus Christ—entered the world not through the natural union of a man and a woman, but through the woman alone—and this by the miracle of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the Christ is the only man ever to be born without the seed of a man. It was foretold from the beginning that the Savior would be the Son of a virgin. That miraculous conception has now taken place, which is the doom of sin and the devil.

Martin Luther writes on Genesis 3, "It is as if [God] were saying: 'Through the woman you, Satan, set upon and seduced the man, so that through sin you might be their head and master. But I, in turn, shall lie in wait for you by means of the same instrument. I shall snatch away the woman, and from her I shall produce a Seed, and that Seed will crush your head'" (Luther's Works, vol. 1, p.193). The Christ is that Seed of the woman, He has defeated sin and death for all time, and He is coming again to judge the living and the dead. All who believe in Him on that day will be saved.

We pray: Lord, we beseech Thee, give ear to our prayers and lighten the darkness of our hearts by Thy gracious visitation; through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Advent and Christmas often get confused. Advent begins around the beginning of December and goes through December 24th. The twelve days of Christmas, then, begin with December 25th (Christmas Day) and end January 5th. In the liturgy of the Church, Advent is the season of fasting and repentance which prepares the hearts and minds of the saints for the coming of Christmas—the revelation of the Christ. For this reason, the season of Advent has often been connected with the person of John the Baptist, whose conception we just read. John the Baptist was born first, in order to prepare the hearts of the people through repentance and Baptism. Likewise, Advent—the first 24 days of December—is a time to reflect upon our sins and our need for Christ’s forgiveness, then to receive that forgiveness in faith through the Absolution of the minister and the Lord’s Supper.

Advent is also a time of rejoicing. When we reflect upon and repent of our sins, we do so with the confidence that those sins will be forgiven through faith in Christ. The repentance of Advent is coupled with hope and the joy of knowing that Christmas is almost here. The angel Gabriel said to Zacharias, “You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.” This is because John’s birth means that the Savior is near, for John the Baptist, by the Holy Spirit, will “make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” Though we await the Lord’s second coming, now we are prepared the same way: by repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

We pray: Lord, we beseech Thee, give ear to our prayers and lighten the darkness of our hearts by Thy gracious visitation; through Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the parallel passage of Matthew we find these words: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14). First, there is the Gospel, and then, the end; and the more important of the two is the Gospel.

In this passage from Luke the Lord Jesus Christ makes a division between two kinds of events: 1) disasters that point to the end of the age, and 2) events which serve the spread of the Gospel. In the first group are “wars and commotions,” “great earthquakes... famines and pestilences.” Of these, the Lord says, “Do not be terrified; for these things must come to pass first.” But the events which serve the Gospel are these: “They will lay hands on you and persecute you... You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers... and they will put some of you to death.” Of these things, the Lord says, “But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony.”

The Lord Jesus could appear at any moment for the judgement; we have seen the signs—wars, earthquakes, famines—and know that the end is near. The Christian has no need to fear such things, because the end is his salvation. But, until then, all Christians must testify to the Gospel. Our message has not changed since the days of the apostles: the Christ is risen from the dead and is coming again for judgement. All who believe in Him will be saved.

We pray: Lord, we beseech Thee, give ear to our prayers and lighten the darkness of our hearts by Thy gracious visitation; through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's keyword is "urgency". There is very little time left. We do not know when the Lord will return for judgement, but we know it will be soon. All men must urgently repent, now, while there is still time. Verse 58 describes this life as a journey to the court with one's legal adversary. Without Baptism and faith, God is our adversary, and when we die we will appear before Him, who is also the divine Judge. If we are not reconciled to God by the time we die, He will cast us into hell, the eternal prison which we deserve.

God gives us opportunity to repent and be reconciled to Him through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This present life is not for spending on pleasure; it is the short journey to the courtroom—an opportunity to be reconciled with God before the judgement. If we repent of our sins and trust in the holiness of Christ on our behalf, we will not be condemned, but justified and saved.

This message is for the believer as much as for the unbeliever, because the Christian life is a repeating pattern of repentance and faith. We confess in the Small Catechism: "[Baptism] signifies that the old Adam in us is to be drowned and destroyed by daily sorrow and repentance, together with all sins and evil lusts; and that again the new man should daily come forth and rise, that shall live in the presence of God in righteousness and purity for ever" (Part IV: Baptism).

We pray: Lord, we beseech Thee, give ear to our prayers and lighten the darkness of our hearts by Thy gracious visitation; through Jesus Christ. Amen.

As yesterday's keyword was "urgency", today's keyword is "patience". There is urgency concerning repentance because one must repent and be baptized while there is still time. However, if one is already in Christ—by Baptism and faith—than he is already reconciled to God. All that is left for him to do is to wait patiently for the Last Day to arrive.

Verse 7 says, "See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain." A farmer cannot make the rain come; the rain comes in its own time. If his field is plowed and sown, then it is ready for the rain, but he does not know how long he must wait. In the same way, the Holy Spirit prepares us for the coming of the Lord by planting faith in us through Baptism. After that, we must wait, for we do not know when the Lord will return.

But, while we wait, the Holy Spirit is still active. "Do not grumble against one another," writes St. James, "lest you be condemned." Anger and disunity among the members of the Church can cause some to fall from the Faith, as St. John warns: "he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?" (1 John 4:20). Therefore, the Holy Spirit continues to work through orthodox preaching and sound doctrine, that the whole Church of God may be one in the confession, the Faith, and the doctrine of Christ.

We pray: Lord, we beseech Thee, give ear to our prayers and lighten the darkness of our hearts by Thy gracious visitation; through Jesus Christ. Amen.