

thou hast signed the cross. Whether in eating or in drinking, whether in sleeping or in waking, whether in thy house or on the road, or again in the season of leisure, neglect not this sign; for there is no guardian like it. It shall be unto thee as a wall, in the forefront of all thy doings. And teach this to thy children, that heedfully they be conformed to it” (On Admonition and Repentance, 17).

Cyril of Jerusalem encourages his catechumens: “Let us, therefore, not be ashamed of the Cross of Christ; but though another hide it, do thou openly seal it upon thy forehead, that the devils may behold the royal sign and flee trembling far away. Make then this sign at eating and drinking, at sitting, at lying down, at rising up, at speaking, at walking: in a word, at every act. For He who was here crucified is in heaven above” (Catechetical Lectures 4.14). Each of these admonitions is similar to Luther’s use of the sign of the cross in the Small Catechism in that they all include making the sign of the cross at the beginning and end of each day.

St. Jerome (347-420 A.D.) summarizes the early church’s attitude toward the ceremony in a letter to Eustochium, “In every act we do, in every step we take, let our hand trace the Lord’s cross” (Letter 22.37). May this be our attitude toward this ancient ceremony as well so that we daily remember our Lord’s death for our sins and His victory over death, Hell and the power of the devil.

THE LUTHERAN HERALD



JANUARY 6—FEBRUARY 1, 2020

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The Calendar

| | | |
|----------------|------------------------------|---------|
| January 1 (W) | Festival of the Circumcision | TLH 116 |
| January 5 | Sunday after New Year | TLH 131 |
| January 6 (M) | The Epiphany of our Lord | TLH 92 |
| January 12 | Epiphany 1 | TLH 105 |
| January 19 | Epiphany 2 | TLH 625 |
| | St. Henry of Finland, martyr | |
| January 24 (F) | St. Timothy | |
| January 25 (S) | The Conversion of St. Paul | |
| January 26 | Epiphany 3 | TLH 429 |
| | St. Titus | |

(Hymns of the Day are for the appointed Festival or Sunday. For January 19 and January 26, Epiphany 2 and 3 are observed, though the Collects for St. Henry and St. Titus may be used in addition to the appointed Collect.)

FROM THE BISHOP

DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST,
With this issue of *The Lutheran Herald*, we will begin providing the Hymn of the Day for the Sundays and some festivals of the Church Year. If you are not using *The Lutheran Hymnal*, please consult that hymnal to aid in finding the equivalent hymn in LSB or LW.

Also, at the conclusion of this issue of the *Herald*, you will find the conclusion of Pastor Sullivan's helpful study on the sign of the cross.

This month I will be making my visitation of Pastor Dulas and the saints of St. Peter and St. Paul Ev. Lutheran Church in Simpsonville, South Carolina.

Please mark your calendars with regard to the upcoming Synod and Colloquium: we will meet at Salem Lutheran Church in Malone from April 21 to 24. We will have a number of weighty matters to discuss, including several potential colloquies and planning for the new year of seminary beginning in September 2020.

In Christ,
Bishop Heiser

WHEN TO MAKE THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

The fathers of the church encouraged Christians to make the sign of the cross upon themselves at certain points in the Divine Service. Rufinus (340-410 A.D.) wrote in his Apology (Book 1.5), "At this point, as the custom is at the close of the Creed, we touch the forehead of this flesh with the sign of the cross." Although he's writing about the Apostles' Creed, this custom is carried on by *The Lutheran Hymnal*, which suggests on page 4 that the sign of the cross be made not only at the Trinitarian invocation but also during the at the words "the life of the world to come" in the Nicene Creed.

The Apostolic Constitutions (ca. 400 A.D.) dictate that the priest shall stand at the altar, "and make the sign of the cross upon his forehead with his hand, and say: The grace of Almighty God, and the love of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. And let all with one voice say: And with thy spirit" (Book 8.2.12). The priest crosses himself upon the forehead at the benediction. This practice continues today in our services as the pastor makes the sign of the holy cross on the congregation and individuals cross themselves during the benediction. Clearly the ceremony of making the sign of the cross was used in public worship even as it still is today.

Aside from public worship, many of the fathers encouraged its use on a daily basis. We have already read Tertullian's description of the Christian life in *The Crown*. The sign of the cross was a ceremony for Christians to use on every occasion of everyday life. Fathers in the fourth century said similar things. Ephraim the Syrian (306-373 A.D.) writes, "With the sign of the living cross, seal all thy doings, my son. Go not forth from the door of thy house till

Lesson from the Book of Concord The Epiphany of our Lord

Article XVIII. Of Free Will.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem (315-368 A.D.) elaborates on the power of the sign of the cross. He writes, “Great is that preservative; it is without price, for the sake of the poor; without toil, for the sick; since also its grace is from God. It is the Sign of the faithful, and the dread of devils: for He triumphed over them in it, having made a shew of them openly; for when they see the Cross they are reminded of the Crucified; they are afraid of Him, who bruised the heads of the dragon.” (Catechetical Lecture 13.36).

According to Cyril when demons see the sign of the cross they’re reminded of Christ and His triumph over them by the cross. St. Paul writes of the cross in Colossians 2:15, “Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.” This is why demons flee at the sign of the cross. That is where Christ bruised the serpent’s head for us and our salvation.

Making the sign of the holy cross upon oneself ultimately reminds us of the purpose of the cross. St. John Chrysostom (350-407 A.D.) preached, “When therefore thou signest thyself, think of the purpose of the cross, and quench anger, and all the other passions. When thou signest thyself, fill thy forehead with all courage, make thy soul free” (Homily 52.7 on Matthew). The sign of the cross fortifies us in the midst of temptation to sin, doubt, and despair because it calls to mind that Christ has died for our sins and raised us to new life. The sign placed upon our foreheads and hearts at our baptism remains sure and certain. By faith we belong to the crucified one who atoned for our sins and conquered the Hell and the devil. When we use the sign of the cross with this in mind our faith is fortified and the demons shutter.

The eighteenth article Of Free Will the adversaries receive; although they add some testimonies not at all adapted to this case. They add also a declaration that neither with the Pelagians is too much to be granted to the free will, nor with the Manicheans is all freedom to be denied it. Very well; but what difference is there between the Pelagians and our adversaries, since both hold that, without the Holy Ghost, men can love God and perform God’s commandments with respect to the substance of the acts, and can merit grace and justification by works which reason performs by itself without the Holy Ghost? How many absurdities follow from these Pelagian opinions, which are taught with great authority in the schools! These Augustine, following Paul, refutes with great emphasis, whose judgment we have recounted above in the article Of Justification. Nor indeed do we deny liberty to the human will. The human will has liberty in the choice of works and things which reason comprehends by itself. It can to a certain extent render civil righteousness or the righteousness of works, it can speak of God, offer to God a certain service in outward works, obey magistrates, parents; by a choice of outward works can restrain the hands from murder, from adultery, from theft. Since there is left in human nature reason and judgment concerning objects subjected to the senses, choice between these things, and the liberty and power to render civil righteousness, are also left. For Scripture calls that righteousness of the flesh which the carnal nature, i.e. reason by itself without the Holy Ghost, renders. Although the power of concupiscence is such that men more frequently obey evil dispositions than sound judgment. And the devil, who is efficacious in the godless, as Paul says (Eph. 2:2), does not cease to incite this feeble nature to various offences. These are the reasons why even civil righteousness is rare among men, as we seen that not even the philosophers themselves, who seem to have aspired after this righteousness, attained it. But is is false that the man does not sin, who performs the work of the commandments without grace. And they add further that such works merit *de congruo* the remission of sins and justification. For human hearts without the Holy Ghost are without the fear of God; without trust toward

God, they do not believe that they are hearkened to, forgiven, benefited, and preserved by God. Therefore they are godless. For “neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit” (Matt. 7:18). And “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb. 11:6).

Therefore, although we concede to free will the liberty and power to perform the outward works of the Law, yet to the free will we do not ascribe these spiritual matters, viz. truly to fear God, truly to believe God, truly to be confident and hold that God regards us, hearkens to us, forgives us, etc. These are the true works of the First Table, which the heart cannot render without the Holy Ghost, as Paul says (1 Cor. 2:14): “The natural man,” i.e. man using only natural strength, “receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God.” And this can be decided if men consider how hearts are disposed toward God’s will, whether they are truly confident that they are regarded and hearkened to by God. Even for saints to retain this faith is difficult, so far is it from existing in the godless. But it is conceived, as we have said above, when terrified hearts hear the Gospel and receive consolation.

Therefore such a distribution is of advantage, in which civil righteousness is ascribed to the free will, and spiritual righteousness to the governing of the Holy Ghost in the regenerate. For thus the outward discipline is retained, because all men ought to know equally both that God requires this civil righteousness, and that after a manner we can afford it. And yet a distinction is shown between human and spiritual righteousness, between philosophical doctrine and the doctrine of the Holy Ghost, and it can be understood for what there is need of the Holy Ghost. Nor has this distribution been invented by us, but Scripture most clearly teaches it. Augustine also treats of it, and recently it has been well treated of by William of Paris, but it has been wickedly suppressed by those who have dreamt that men can obey God’s law without the Holy Ghost, but that the Holy Ghost is given in order that respect to that which is meritorious may be added.

—The Apology of the Augsburg Confession
The Book of Concord

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS REV. JOSH SULLIVAN

THE PURPOSE OF THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

The practice of crossing oneself is ancient, if not apostolic. Like all ceremonies in the Church, it isn’t motion for movement’s sake. It serves a purpose. The early church fathers encouraged Christians to make the sign of the cross upon themselves because of the great benefit it offered.

This benefit is seen clearly in the Life of Anthony, written by St. Athanasius (296-373 A.D.). Anthony is the ideal desert monk Christian. Having fled to the desert to pursue a life of prayer, Anthony is regularly attacked by demons. Friends visit Anthony and hear demons attempting to attack Anthony. The monk “besought them to depart and not to be afraid, ‘for thus,’ said he, ‘the demons make their seeming onslaughts against those who are cowardly. Sign yourselves therefore with the cross, and depart boldly, and let these make sport for themselves.’ So they departed fortified with the sign of the Cross” (13). The sign of the cross fortifies their faith because it serves as a reminder of Christ crucified, conqueror of demons. Later in the Life of Anthony, he explains, “But we by the mention of Christ crucified put all demons to flight, whom you fear as if they were gods. Where the sign of the Cross is, magic is weak and witchcraft has no strength” (78). For Anthony, the sign of the holy cross isn’t a thoughtless ceremony, it accompanies “the mention of Christ crucified.” Anthony’s words echo Athanasius’ words in his most well-known work, *On the Incarnation* when discussing pagan oracles, “For by the Sign of the Cross, though a man but use it, he drives out their deceits” (47.2).

The widespread rejection of Jesus' apostles which we heard about in today's reading would not take place during this first sending, but it would certainly take place later, and at various times until the end of the world. Peter and John would be the first to be arrested, interrogated, and beaten. James would be the first apostle to be put to death. And countless other Christians, both ministers and laity, would be unjustly targeted and brutally tortured and killed within the next three hundred years. During much of that time, there would be nowhere in the world where it would be safe to be a Christian.

And yet Jesus promises divine help to give an answer and to make the good confession. He assures His Christians that they matter to Him, even when it looks like they've been abandoned, and that He will be their Avenger, too, though not at once.

This is the way it must be on this earth. Those who confess Christ must be made to resemble Him, first before God, through faith, in perfect righteousness and holiness; then before men, through confession, in great humility and shame. No one and nothing can come before Him—not our families, not even our own life. But the rewards He promises after this life are so great that they cannot be compared with these present sufferings. This is why we commemorate the martyrs of every age, that we may be encouraged by their example and trained to imitate it.

We pray: Lord Jesus, strengthen us to confess You before men. Grant us wisdom and a mouth to speak, that Your name may be glorified and Your Church edified through Your Spirit's work in us. Amen.

“What shall I, frail man, be pleading? Who for me be interceding when the just are mercy needing?” (TLH 607:7)

Having heard John's declaration, the people wonder how they can survive God's judgment. Consider what he prescribes: To everyone who has, he instructs them to demonstrate trust that the Lord will continue to provide apart from “any merit or worthiness in me” by being His instrument to provide for others. To those who work for the occupying Roman government (and are often known for abusing their office) he teaches them to demonstrate trust that the Lord will continue to provide by helping their neighbor to improve and protect his income, rather than seeking to get ahead by robbing him (even if with legal justification), or by taking away his good name before the governing authority.

In short, John teaches each to do what the Commandments say to his station in life, but not in the way the Pharisees do (not praying publicly for social acclaim, and so on). Rather, they are guided to do the work of the Commandments from fearing and loving God, who has made it clear from the beginning of the Decalogue that we are to “fear, love, and trust in Him”—the Lord our God, who delivers us from bondage—“above all things.”

All the faithful should live rejoicing in the truth of today's festival: in the name of Jesus, even you who were Gentiles according to the flesh now have the one righteousness that surpasses that of the Scribes and Pharisees—the Christ Himself!

We pray: “King of majesty tremendous, who dost free salvation send us, Fount of pity, Thou befriend us!” Amen. (TLH 607:8)

John condemned King Herod for his adultery and other evils. When John proclaimed the Messiah's coming reign of righteousness, Herod "added this, above all," and put John in prison. Why? Herod's kingship was under the occupation of the Roman Empire. He and Pilate were enemies until Pilate outwardly deferred to Herod during the trial of Jesus (Luke 23:12). But John never deferred: only the Christ's coming could restore Israel. Herod took John as undermining his authority, as if he wished Herod to "burn with unquenchable fire"!

So great is the fear of righteousness enforced by law that it can cause people to miss or reject the true righteousness given freely in Christ. Misconception drives non-Christians to assume that our glory is in declaring others as chaff, rather than see our hope to have sinners gathered as "wheat into His barn" by grace alone, through faith alone.

We are called to believe, teach, and confess as John did. No matter what acclaim we may have in this world, we do not consider ourselves worthy to loosen Jesus' sandal strap. Our own need of the Gospel is always to be in our view when we proclaim the Law, whether as pastors, or as parents, or as neighbors, or in any other vocation. Remembering that our worthiness is as little as others', our need as great as theirs, fixes our eyes on Jesus—and on proclaiming His cross—even under threat of prison and execution. As John did, we simply apply what God the Holy Spirit uses to accomplish His work; the power and the glory belong to our Triune God alone.

We pray: O Triune God, grant us perseverance as the world misunderstands Your desire to give righteousness and life everlasting to all, that, clinging to the cross of Christ, we humbly proclaim the same. Amen.

See what happens when a person prays the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest! Sometimes the one who prays becomes the answer to his own prayers.

That was the case for the twelve apostles. Out of the multitudes of disciples who followed Jesus, learned from Jesus, and believed in Jesus, He chose some—only some—to be apostles, "sent ones." These were the ones who were to go out and preach His Gospel. In this first sending, they were not to go into all the world. They were to go "first to the Jew" (cf. Romans 1:16). Such was the privilege of being of that race. They had been entrusted with the very Words of God. They were the recipients of His promises of the coming Christ, the invited guests to the marriage feast. Therefore, they were to be the first to hear the call to the feast, "All things are ready! Come to the wedding!" (Matthew 22:4).

In the words of today's reading, Jesus establishes a precept that remains in place for those whom He sends to preach: "A worker is worthy of his food" (Matthew 10:10, cf. 1 Corinthians 9:3-14). His preachers have a right to receive a decent wage from those to whom they preach, and their hearers have an obligation to give it. Some, like the Apostle Paul, would not use this right, but all have it alike. Even more importantly, those who hear the Word of Christ from His messengers have the obligation to receive it, to believe it, and to obey it.

We pray: O Lord, we thank You for giving some to be ministers of Your Gospel among us. Help us never to despise this gift, but to use it, and to support those whom You send. Amen.

The blind men in today's reading trusted in Jesus to heal their eyes, but not to command their mouths, as they flagrantly disobeyed His order to keep their mouths shut about this particular healing. Another man's mouth was opened by Jesus, and the crowds were amazed at how easily He was able to command the demon. But the Pharisees were quick to attribute His power to the devil instead of God. Jesus tirelessly taught and preached and healed in all the cities and villages of Israel, but the people of Israel remained weary and scattered, like sheep without a shepherd, and His heart went out to them. His teaching was clear, and yet many did not obey. His preaching was pure, and yet many charged Him with false doctrine. His shepherding was perfect, and yet the sheep were prone to wandering.

If the Son of God could suffer so many setbacks in His earthly ministry, why do we imagine that we should see fewer? Sin has so corrupted our race that we are barely kept within the fold by even the best ministry. And yet the ministry of the Word, instituted and regulated by Christ, remains the only thing that stands between us and eternal death. It is still Christ's tool on earth for gathering His sheep into His holy Church and keeping them gathered there. The harvest may not be as plentiful in any one place as it was at the time of Jesus, but there are now more places to live and more people scattered throughout the world. The need for laborers, and for prayers for laborers, remains just as great!

We pray: Lord of the harvest, send laborers into Your harvest field, and sustain them in the face of both opposition and apathy. Amen.

The Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begins with a cry forbidding resistance to His entry, bidding His reception. How shall we make straight His way and smooth His path? By giving up life's comforts and pleasures, like John? John still said, "[Christ's] sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose." Even in John's preaching and applying water, the strength is in the Coming One, who actually pours out the Holy Spirit through it.

The Coming One both earns and pours out the forgiveness of sins that those who come confessing must have to welcome Him aright. Jesus gives the Holy Spirit through the means of His Word and Sacraments so that the faith of the penitent is in Him and His work that earns forgiveness for all.

To those who had not perfectly waited with lives of obedient expectation for Messiah's coming, John cries out what is necessary—the removal of what stands in the way of Messiah judging you as righteous—and both proclaims and dispenses it through the means which God provides. "He that believes and is baptized shall see the Lord's salvation; Baptized into the death of Christ, he is a new creation. Through Christ's redemption he shall stand among the glorious heavenly band of every tribe and nation." (TLH 301:1)

"With one accord, O God, we pray: Grant us Thy Holy Spirit; look Thou on our infirmity through Jesus' blood and merit. Grant us to grow in grace each day that by this Sacrament we may eternal life inherit." Amen. (TLH 301:2)

There are those who see something in today's reading that is not there; and there are those who miss what is.

The latter are those who fail to see the Holy Trinity as present at the baptism of Jesus. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are seen all at once, distinct from one another. There can be no nonsense about the name of each Person being just a title or mode of operation of God (the way today's "oneness Pentecostals," or ancient Sabellian and other "modalists" would teach). Rather, at the Jordan we see each at the same time, and when Jesus commands His Church to baptize He asserts that all three are nonetheless One: "...baptizing them in the name (singular) of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

The former are those who wish to see in "immediately, coming up from the water" a prescription for the mode of Baptism. They try to force this to mean that Jesus came up from underneath the water, having been dunked into it, and inappropriately they teach dunking a person to be a requirement of Baptism. They miss, however, that in Acts 8:39 it is not only the baptized eunuch, but Philip as well, who are described as coming "up out of the water." If their contention were correct, both the one being baptized and the one doing the baptizing would have to be submerged in water.

We pray: Enlighten our minds, we beseech Thee, O God, by the Spirit which proceedeth from Thee, that, as Thy Son hath promised, we may be led into all truth; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus didn't only perform outward healings. His ministry was mostly spiritual. He called sinners like Matthew to leave their sinful life and follow Him, and they did. He went to the houses of sinners and ate and drank with them, showing them that they were safe with Him—not safe to go on living in sin, but safe to confess their sins, with the assurance of full and free forgiveness with Him and from Him. He had come to call sinners to repentance. To them He opened wide the doors of heaven, and He still does.

At the same time, He slammed the door shut on those who pretended to be righteous or healthy. To them, religion was about external deeds, of which they thought they had done plenty. Their pride had two tragic consequences. It prevented them from receiving help from Jesus, and it caused them to begrudge His help to others whom they considered to be unworthy.

Even John the Baptist's disciples, who were familiar with repentance, were fixated on external religion, outward piety. They couldn't understand why Jesus' disciples didn't openly fast, as they did. Jesus used the parables of the cloth and the wineskins to illustrate that the new covenant is different from the old. The Gospel is focused on mercy, not man's sacrifice; obedience from the heart, not faithless external ceremonies; true repentance and faith in Christ, not a perfunctory show of religiosity. The joy of the Gospel of Jesus' compassion is too big to be confined to a strict schedule of obligatory fasting.

We pray: Lord Jesus, great Physician, You are righteous. We are not. Blot out our sins and heal our souls, for Your mercy's sake alone, and stay with us until the end to keep attending to our healing. Amen.

The account of Jesus casting the Legion of demons out of the men and into the herd of pigs is the most vivid, detailed account of Jesus' interactions with demons in the Bible. The other Evangelists record the superhuman strength of the possessed man, along with the violence he displayed toward himself and others. But Jesus did not have to fight against the demons. He stood as Almighty God, unthreatened and unafraid. Indeed, the demons were the ones who cowered in fear of Him, because they knew who He was. They knew that He had the power to torment them even then, before the Last Judgment when He will cast them into the everlasting fire, prepared originally, not for men, but for unclean spirits like these.

In their fear and desperation not to be cast immediately into hell, they begged to be cast into a herd of swine, and Jesus granted their request. The pigs drowned, and, apparently, the demons were free to go back to "going through dry places, seeking rest" (Matthew 12:43). Why would He grant this request, or any request on their part? Perhaps because Jews had no business keeping unclean animals in the first place. Perhaps as a sobering reminder that God is not yet ready to rid the world entirely of the devil's assaults. In any case, Jesus' sovereign power and authority are highlighted for us. That power caused the people of that region to fear Him and to want to be rid of Him. But for those who have been baptized into His name, it gives the greatest comfort. Not even a legion of demons can touch us, as long as we are close to Him.

We pray: O Lord Jesus, be ever our mighty Defender against the crafts and assaults of the devil! Amen.

Considering Wednesday's reading and the fact that John was baptizing "for the remission of sins," we might wonder at the sinless Jesus going out to John to be baptized. While St. Matthew's account addresses John bringing this very objection, St. Mark's Gospel does what it usually does and allows the bare action of God to inform our belief: "Then a voice came from heaven, 'You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.'"

It is obvious that Jesus didn't need Baptism to bring Him forgiveness. The Father was well pleased in His perfect righteousness before Jesus' Baptism, and now proclaims this status in terms of Jesus actively standing in our place. The Father was pleased in the Son, and would have been forever. By taking on manhood, though, the Son is now well pleasing as Man and for mankind. This is God's Son who was "born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the adoption of sons" (Galatians 4:4-5). The Son states His mission: "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28, Mark 10:45). In this action, as in all others, in Jesus the Father is well pleased; therefore, we may believe that in all that Jesus does or suffers to be done to Him, the Father's pleasure is to be found—and found for us.

We pray: Lord Jesus, we thank You that You fulfilled all righteousness for us, keeping every Commandment, paying for every sin by Your holy Passion, even perfectly receiving Baptism so that every defect in our understanding or trust was atoned for by You! Amen.

Luke’s “as was supposed” means: “Since people supposed Jesus was Joseph’s son physically, I’ll show you that God’s Son’s legal descent declares Him to be Abraham’s, Judah’s, and David’s Son—as is required for the Messiah—just as Matthew showed you the same about His physical descent through Mary” (Matthew 1:1–17).

The Holy Spirit establishes the ancestry of Jesus in both ways because (besides demonstrating the Bible’s historical trustworthiness) Judaism has debated for 1,900 years if being Jewish is determined by whether one has a Jewish mother, or a Jewish father. Generally, status as Jew or non-Jew was reckoned to your mother’s status, and of what tribe you are a member was determined from your father’s line. (Jesus would be considered Jewish through Mary, but “the Lion of the tribe of Judah” through Joseph.) The Holy Spirit disallows any real debate on whether Jesus qualifies as the Messiah of the Jews.

Even more, Luke traces to “Adam, the son of God.” Adam was not eternally begotten of the Father, nor born of a woman by the Holy Spirit. Like Jesus, though, he had no father physically. And like us who are “sons of God” (Galatians 3:26–29), he was heir of God’s creation (Genesis 1:26–28; Matthew 5:5; Romans 8:16–17), being a son legally by creation/adoption. This reading fittingly concludes Epiphany week, because in establishing Jesus as “the Second Adam” (Romans 5:12–19), we see Him as “the firstborn from the dead” (Revelation 1:5) who redeems not only those of Jewish descent, but all of us who have been born in the fallen image of dying Adam (Genesis 4:1; Romans 5).

We pray: We thank You, O Holy Spirit, for enlightening us in the Word and keeping us with our savior Jesus Christ in the one true faith. Amen.

Jesus spent a whole Sabbath day in Capernaum manifesting who He was: the Conqueror of demons, the Healer of the sick, the One who is kind and good and ready to help, at no charge, for no reward. Matthew is the Evangelist who ties Jesus’ goodness and His healing miracles to Isaiah’s prophecy of the Suffering Servant. We often think of Jesus “bearing our griefs and carrying our sorrows” (Isaiah 53:4) with reference to what He suffered for us on the cross and throughout Holy Week; and rightly so. But as Matthew explains, it also refers to the fact that the Christ would actually take away the pains of His people while He was with them on earth.

Christ is not with us so that we can go to see Him to have our every illness healed. But we do well to go to where He still makes Himself available to us in the ministry of the Word, not for the healing of earthly illnesses, but for the healing of our souls in the forgiveness of sins, in the strengthening of our faith, and in the protection He provides against the power of demons.

As the rest of today’s reading teaches, following Jesus in this world will not be easy; He does not offer earthly amenities. But following Him should be the most important thing in the world to us whose very life depends on the refuge He alone provides against sin, death, and the devil. And if we remain with Him to the end, He’ll take away all our pains and provide the perfect healing of our bodies and our souls in the resurrection.

We pray: Heavenly Father, have mercy on us in the midst of all our afflictions and make us ready to follow Jesus at all times. Amen.

Lesson from the Book of Concord The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

XVI.

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

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

—The Augsburg Confession

Lesson from the Book of Concord The First Sunday after the Epiphany

THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT.

The parental estate God has especially honored above estates that are beneath Him, so that He not only commands us to love our parents, but to honor them. For with respect to brothers, sisters and neighbors in general He commands nothing higher than that we love them; so that He separates and distinguishes father and mother above all other persons upon earth, and places them next to Himself. For to honor is far higher than to love, inasmuch as it comprehends not only love, but also modesty, humility and deference as though to a majesty there hidden, and requires not only that they be addressed kindly and with reverence, but most of all that both in heart and with the body we so act as to show that we esteem them very highly, and that, next to God, we regard them the very highest. For one whom we honor from the heart we must truly regard as high and great.

We must, therefore, impress it upon the young that they should regard their parents in God's stead, and remember that however lowly, poor, frail and strange they may be, nevertheless they are father and mother given them by God. And they are not to be deprived of their honor because of their mode of life or their failings. Therefore we are not to regard their persons, how they may be, but the will of God who has thus appointed and ordained. In other respects we are, indeed, all alike in the eyes of God; but among us there must necessarily be such inequality and distinction with respect to order, and therefore God commands that you be careful to obey me as your father, and that I have the precedence. ...

God knows very well this perverseness of the world; therefore He admonishes and urges by commandments that every one consider what parents have done for him, and he will find that he owes to them body and life, as well as sustenance, support and rearing, since otherwise he would have perished a hundred times in his own filth. Therefore it is a true and good saying of old and wise men: *Deo, parentibus et magistris non potest satis gratiae rependi*, that is, to God, to parents and to teachers we can never render sufficient gratitude and compensation. He that regards and considers this will indeed without compulsion do all honor to his parents and cherish them as those through whom God has done him all good.

Besides all this, it should be a great inducement to influence us the more to obedience to this commandment, that God adds to the same a temporal promise and says: “*That thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.*” ...

In connection with this commandment it is proper to speak further of all kinds of obedience to persons in authority who have to command and to govern. For all authority flows and is propagated from the authority of parents. For where a father is unable alone to educate his child, he employs a schoolmaster that he may instruct it; if he be too weak, he obtains the assistance of his friends and neighbors; if he depart, he confers and delegates his authority and government to others who are appointed for the purpose. Likewise he must have domestics, man-servants and maid-servants, under him for the management of the household, so that all whom we call masters are in the place of parents and must derive their power and authority to govern from them. Hence also they are all called fathers in the Scripture, as those who in their government perform the functions of the office of a father, and should have a paternal heart toward their subordinates. As also from antiquity the Romans and other nations called the masters and mistresses of the household *patres et matres familiae*, that is housefathers and housemothers. So also they called their national rulers and chiefs *patres patriae*, that is fathers of the country, for a great sham to us, who would be Christians that we do not call them so, or, at least, do not esteem and honor them as such. ...

Thus we have two kinds of fathers presented in this commandment, fathers in blood and fathers in office, or those to whom belongs the care of the family, and those to whom belongs the care of the nation. Besides these there are spiritual fathers; not like those in the Papacy, who have indeed caused themselves to be so designated, but have not performed the functions of the paternal office. For those are to be called spiritual fathers who govern and guide us by the Word of God. Of this name St. Paul boasts (1 Cor. 4:15), where he says: “In Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the Gospel.” Because they are fathers indeed they are entitled to honor above all others.

—Large Catechism, the Book of Concord, §105–8, 129–131, 141–142,
158–159

The world, our sinful flesh, and the devil bring about a constant (yet futile) search for anything to give us security, while ever avoiding and excluding the very One who is the source of our security. This understanding is proclaimed in God’s Holy Scripture: “For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope” (Romans 8:20).

The key words of that sentence are that God subjected creation to futility “in hope.” Christ and His fully atoning merits are that secured hope! Yet, how can one hear of—and by God’s grace have—such secured hope? Only by receiving the proper teaching of God’s Holy Scripture, which, through God’s Law and Gospel, brings one to repentance and belief!

Jesus’ sermon on the mount has delved into things to expect in the coming kingdom, namely, future honors and comforts. In today’s text Christ concludes His sermon by dealing with the here-and-now, and the emphasis is on faith having its proper object. Jesus reveals how life is befallen with tumultuous trials, tensions, and suffering. Security isn’t found in trusting earthly idols. The proper believing, teaching, and confessing children of God, however, are rightly focused. For, right in the midst of life’s tribulations, Christ and His teachings are the rock through which comes true security and peace!

We pray: Almighty and everlasting God, who governs all things in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the prayers of Your people and grant us Your peace through all our days; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Jesus continues His exhortation on the importance of God-created, rightly focused faith. Man's flesh is legalistic by its very nature. It is always thinking better of itself than it ought. Luther called this belief of the flesh "presumed righteousness," which simply means that man's flesh believes itself to be so good (or good enough) that no help is needed when it comes to righteousness—including, and especially, any help from outside of itself.

Does anyone really believe that they haven't been (nor will ever be) judgmental toward their neighbor? It is Christ who points out that anyone possessing such a Pharisaical, presumed righteousness—conceited enough to think that one can measure others against oneself—is considered a hypocrite by God Himself! Christ remedies such trust in the flesh by wielding His "plank in your own eye" Law language.

So how do planks get removed? By having that Old Adam, through daily contrition and repentance, drowned and die! By confessing those planks and vanquishing them through the Gospel of Christ's fully atoning merits, promised through God's means of Word and Sacrament, and received through faith alone. With Christ having made full satisfaction for sins—and on-going plank possessors trusting alone in Him who is the narrow gate—then it is the gracious gift of the Father in Christ Jesus that rescues from the specks that ail them.

We pray: Almighty and everlasting God, who governs all things in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the prayers of Your people and grant us Your peace through all our days; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Spirit descended upon Jesus according to His human nature. He didn't need to receive the Spirit according to His divine nature because by virtue of being the Only-Begotten Son of God He already had the Spirit. Christ received this anointing of the Holy Spirit according to His human nature so that all who are baptized into Christ receive the same Spirit.

St. Peter preached at Pentecost after Jesus' resurrection, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). In Holy Baptism the Triune God forgives sins and bestows eternal salvation. He enters into a covenant of grace with us which He will not revoke (though we can forsake it). He also gives the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit creates faith in our hearts to believe the Gospel because we cannot, by nature, believe God's Word. The Spirit also dwells in our hearts by faith to lead us into good works, that we may know the things we ought to do, even as He gives us grace and power to do God's will. Therefore, walk by the Spirit, trusting Christ and seeking His will today.

We pray: O Lord, we beseech Thee mercifully to receive the prayers of Thy people who call upon Thee, and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfill the same; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 14: JOHN 1:35-42 1ST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Andrew brought his brother Simon to Jesus, having told him, “We have found the Messiah’ (which is translated the Christ).” Jesus immediately gave him a new name. “You are Simon the son of Jonah. You shall be called Cephas’ (which is translated, A Stone).” Cephas is the Aramaic equivalent of the Greek name “Peter.” This is not the first time the Lord has given someone a new name. He changed Abram’s name to Abraham. He changed Jacob’s name to Israel. In those instances, a new name shows a new status with God as believing confessors of the true God. The same is true of Simon. Christ calls Him Cephas because of the foundational confession of Christ he will make throughout his life.

Christ bestows a new name on all who believe in Him. He says in Revelation 2:17 to the one who overcomes, “I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.” He says in Revelation 3:12, “I will write on him My new name.” What is the new name He gives to those who believe in Him? He calls them sons of God. As sons of God by faith, Christ calls us to make the rock solid confession of Cephas, that Jesus is the Christ who takes away the sin of the world.

We pray: O Lord, we beseech Thee mercifully to receive the prayers of Thy people who call upon Thee, and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfill the same; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 23: MATTHEW 6:1-23 2ND SUNDAY A. EPIPHANY

Jesus’ sermon on the mount continues, and various topics are presented: good works, prayer, fasting, treasures, and the lamp of the body. In each of these Jesus is emphasizing genuineness—meaning no fence-riders, no imitators, will stand. The genuineness of God-created faith is the focus.

Jesus teaches His disciples to pray in such a way that forgiveness of sins be an on-going petition to the Lord. Forgiveness comes to us through genuine faith that clings to His atonement on the Cross. The fifth petition is not only asking for on-going forgiveness, it is a faith check as well! Having God-created faith in Christ’s fully atoning merits is so important that Jesus re-emphasizes it after the Lord’s Prayer, saying, “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” He would have us properly understand His grace, and also faithfully reflect it in our works of love and teaching toward others.

We pray: Almighty and everlasting God, who governs all things in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the prayers of Your people and grant us Your peace through all our days; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Jesus is delivering a summation of some of God's Commandments, the likes of which reveal how impossible it is for any man to say that he has never broken them. The mirror of God's Law unavoidably reflects brightly when it reveals that breaking His Commandments can occur simply within one's imagination—without action—coming from one's heart.

Jesus knows that God's Commandments have been, are being, and will be taught by sinners. Because of fallen, self-centered flesh, different slants on God's Commandments come about—sometimes as if they are only civil laws. Jesus wants His disciples to have a clear, beyond-worldly understanding that goes to the heart of His believers. Thus, Jesus frequently states: "You have heard that it was said to those of old... But I say to you..." Jesus is not contradicting or correcting Moses. Jesus came to fulfill the very Law that was given by Moses. Rather, Jesus is making sure that God's Law is not just a civil law for a civil court, but applied to the heart of every human.

As God's Law reveals the depravity of our hearts, it is those brought to recognize their sins and confess them who can stare at Christ the crucified and further confess, "His sacrifice (His fully atoning merits, His making full satisfaction) was for me; in His wounds is my peace!"

We pray: Almighty and everlasting God, who governs all things in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the prayers of Your people and grant us Your peace through all our days; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Jesus tells Nathaniel, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!" Nathaniel responds, "How do You know me?" Jesus says to him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Jesus could see what Nathaniel was doing because He is divine. The Lord says in Jeremiah 23:23, "Am I a God near at hand," says the LORD, "And not a God afar off? Can anyone hide himself in secret places, so I shall not see him?" says the LORD." David confesses in Psalm 139 that the Lord knows all his ways. He even understands our thoughts from afar. Sirach 42:20 says, "No thought escapeth him, neither any word is hidden from him." Nathaniel experienced Jesus' divine omniscience and confessed, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

Christ knows us as He knew Nathaniel. He is acquainted with all our ways. He even knows the thoughts that we hide from others. Knowing that God sees every thought in our heads and every imagination in our sinful hearts, we should repent of our sinful thoughts. Knowing that God knows us entirely, we can also pray with David, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties" (Psalm 139:23). He knows our anxieties and worries, and invites us to cast them upon Him because He cares for us.

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

THURSDAY, JANUARY 16: LUKE 4:1-13 1ST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

At Jesus' baptism God the Father said from heaven, "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased." Jesus is the Only-Begotten Son of God, begotten from all eternity. But God the Father said these words over you, too, at your baptism. Baptism regenerates you and adopts you as a son of God. Since you are a son of God you are an heir of all His heavenly blessings.

After Jesus is baptized the Spirit leads Him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. This also happens to those whom God adopts as sons in Holy Baptism. He allows us to be tempted by the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. The devil says "If you are the son of God..." and thereby wants you to doubt your adoption. "If you are a son of God, why do you sin so much? Why can't you kick that one especially vexing sin? Why do you lack every good thing? Why don't you test God to see if He'll actually provide for you?"

Jesus, THE Son of God, rebuffs Satan's lies with the Scriptures. He defeats the devil's temptations there, and now He wants to defeat the devil in you, using the same Word. In temptation, remember that you are God's baptized child. Christ your brother has defeated our foe already, and promises to fight in us through His Word.

We pray: O Lord, we beseech Thee mercifully to receive the prayers of Thy people who call upon Thee, and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfill the same; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 21: MATTHEW 5:1-9 2ND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Upon reading these Beatitudes (or Blessings) one might think they don't sound very much like blessings. Being poor in spirit, mournful, meek, or hungry and thirsty aren't attractive to a way (or theology) of glory, which caters to sinful flesh—desiring to evaluate God's grace by sight and circumstance.

This is why the conclusion of the Beatitudes (beyond the assigned text) reveals God's way (or theology) of the cross, through which God brings the New Man to live by faith. At verses 11-12 Jesus proclaims: "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Christ is pointing out to all of the believing, baptized children of God who will hear His blessings repeated that—even as He fulfilled these Beatitudes for them, and in turn these sometimes uncomfortable blessings will again be exuded through believers—they need not be concerned while living in this fallen world which hates and rejects God. Rather, because God sees the believer's repentant faith in the fully atoning merits of Christ, such faith is imputed (accounted) to them as the righteousness of Christ, and they are, indeed, blessed possessors of great heavenly reward! Amidst all appearing tensions, Christ remains our peace!

We pray: Almighty and everlasting God, who governs all things in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the prayers of Your people and grant us Your peace through all our days; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Through these recruitments God is revealing that He planned all along to use men in the spreading of His New Testament. Why else recruit them? Of course, these lowly men (and the others to follow) will be equipped with the means of grace. Yet, because of God's Word, their words and the means will have power.

Christ's words that immediately precede the text for today carry weight: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). These are the very words of Christ that sank deep into the men that were recruited and converted by Christ. These same words will not only resound in keeping the Apostles in Christ, it is the means of grace that also refer back to these words. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" goes along with all preaching. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" goes along with Holy Baptism. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" goes along with confession and Holy Absolution. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" goes along with Holy Communion.

Although seemingly scarce, God does raise up faithful pastors to continue in the spreading of His very words, creating and sustaining repentant faith through the Office of the Holy Ministry and the means of grace that He instituted! Thanks be to God, indeed!

We pray: Almighty and everlasting God, who governs all things in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the prayers of Your people and grant us Your peace through all our days; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Son of God wasn't immune from the devil's temptations. His forerunner, John, was persecuted by the world and imprisoned on account of his preaching. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry the devil and the world were set against the Gospel. The devil and the world continually attacked Christ and His apostles throughout their ministries with temptations and persecutions, and those tactics have not changed.

Christ is the Head of the Body, which is His Church. As it goes for the Head, so it goes for the Body. Christ was tempted by the devil to doubt God's Word. The Church is tempted in the same way so that Christians put their trust in themselves, in the government, in anything other than their heavenly Father. Christ was persecuted, slandered, blasphemed, and eventually crucified. The Church through the ages has similarly been persecuted whenever she has remained faithful to Christ's Word and preached against the world's sin.

The Lord allows Satan to harass Christians, not to punish them, but to show His almighty power and teach them to flee to Him in all trouble. He allows the world to persecute and slander His Church so that she relies not on her own strength and resources, but on her Lord's promises. Don't fret over temptations and persecutions. God uses them to conform us to the image of His Son, the Church's Head.

We pray: O Lord, we beseech Thee mercifully to receive the prayers of Thy people who call upon Thee, and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfill the same; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 18: MATTHEW 4:12-17 1ST SUNDAY A. EPIPHANY

In the Old Testament the Jews of these areas chose the darkness of idolatry and sin. They chose to walk in the shadow of death rather than the light and life of God's Word. God mercifully prophesied that these people of His who had walked in darkness would again see a great light. That light dawns among them when John's imprisonment causes Jesus to depart for the region of Galilee, an area formerly belonging to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. God uses the persecution of John to fulfill His promise spoken through the prophet Isaiah hundreds of years before this. The Word of the Lord endures forever!

Jesus enlightens their darkness by preaching the Gospel. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Having sat in darkness for so long, many saw the light of the Gospel and rushed into the kingdom of God. Jesus' preaching still shines in our dark world. His Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. It enlightens our hearts by preaching repentance, showing us our sins for what they are--not things to be treasured or cultivated, but rebellions against God's will that lead us into the shadow of death. The Word enlightens our penitent hearts by showing us the kingdom of God coming near to us in Jesus, who graciously and mercifully takes away our sins through faith in His Gospel.

We pray: O Lord, we beseech Thee mercifully to receive the prayers of Thy people who call upon Thee, and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfill the same; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

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

XI. Of the Marriage of Priests.

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

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 that a monastic vow is on an equality with baptism. This is blasphemy against God.

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