

**Clergy of the ELDoNA,
affiliated congregations and missions**

Rt. Rev. James Heiser

Salem Lutheran Church, Malone, TX

Rev. Jeffrey Ahonen

Good Shepherd L.C., Tony, WI; Apologia Lutheran Mission, Deer Park, WI; Peace L.C., Ironwood, MI; Pure Blessings Lutheran Church, Brandon, WI

Rev. Jerald Dulas

Sts. Peter & Paul L. C., Simpsonville, SC; All Saints Lutheran Mission, Myrtle Beach, SC; St. Michael & All Angels Lutheran Mission, Martinez, GA; St. Bartholomew Lutheran Mission, Fort Myers, FL; St. Luke Evangelical Lutheran Mission, UAC, Ormond Beach, FL

Rev. Douglas Handrich (Emeritus)

Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Peoria, IL

Rev. Kent Heimbigner

Charity Lutheran Church, Burleson, TX

Rev. Benjamin Henson

Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Peoria, IL

Rev. Michael Henson

Trinity Lutheran Church, Herrin, IL

Rev. Martin Jackson

Lamb of God Ev. Lutheran Church, Rogers, AR

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Faith Lutheran Church, Tualatin, OR

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St. Boniface Lutheran Church, Niles, MI

Rev. Josiah Scheck

Christ Lutheran Church, Richmond, MO

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Rev. Timothy Tolar

St. Luke Lutheran Church, Kenai, AK; Homer Lutheran Mission, Homer, AK

Rev. Brandon Warr

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Trinity Lutheran Church, Herrin, IL

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St. Henry Lutheran Mission (WI and MI), especially Apologia Lutheran Mission, Deer Park, WI

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Sts. Peter & Paul Lutheran Church, Simpsonville, SC; St. James Lutheran Mission, Knoxville, TN

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The Calendar

The Lutheran Hymnal (1941): TLH; 2022 Supplement: ASBH

(Monday: M; Tuesday: T; Wednesday: W; Thursday: R; Friday: F; Saturday: S)

December 31	1 st . S. a. Christmas	ASBH 6
January 1 (M)	Circumcision	ASBH 7
January 6 (S)	Epiphany	ASBH 9
January 7	Epiphany 1	ASBH 10
January 14	Epiphany 2	ASBH 11
January 19 (F)	St. Henry	ASBH 73
January 21	Transfiguration	ASBH 15
January 24 (W)	St. Timothy	ASBH 74 (in Jan. 2023 Herald)
January 25 (R)	Conver. of St. Paul	ASBH 75
January 26 (F)	St. Titus	ASBH 76
January 28	Septuagesima	ASBH 16
February 2 (F)	Presentation	ASBH 77

Update on the *Augustana Service Book and Hymnal* (2024)

Work continues on all aspects of the Church Order project as preparation continues on the draft hymnal for consideration at the 2024 Synod.

Approximately ten hymns are still needed to complete the list of Office Hymns; 55 hymns for the general section of the hymnal have been typeset for the draft hymnal. The following hymns have been added to the draft in the past month:

"He That Believes and Is Baptized"	TLH #301 (public domain)
"Jesus! Great and Wondrous Star"	Ohio #52
"Let Us All With Gladsome Voice"	TLH #97 (public domain)
"Light of Light, Enlighten Me"	Ohio #5
"Light of the Gentile Nations"	Ohio #55
"Lord, Keep Us in Thy Word and Work"	ELHB #274
"Now Let All Loudly Sing Praise"	TLH #28 (public domain)
"Now, the Hour of Worship O'er"	TLH #45 (public domain)
"O Blessed Day When First Was Poured"	TLH #115 (public domain)
"O Bride of Christ, Rejoice"	TLH #57 (public domain)
"O Gladsome Light, O Grace"	TLH #101 (public domain)
"O Jesus, King of Glory!"	Ohio #54
"Oh, Come, All Ye Faithful"	TLH #102 (public domain)

Many more hymns are in the process of being prepared for inclusion in the draft.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 3: PRO. 14:21-31

SEPTUAGESIMA

Solomon says in Proverbs, "In the fear of the Lord there is strong confidence." This sounds like a paradox. Fear does not usually promote confidence. Fear causes mankind to shy away, to back down, to go the other way. How then can there be confidence in fear? But it is not just any kind of fear, but "fear of the Lord." Fear of the Lord produces confidence because of the fruits that come from that fear. Through fear of the Lord we have a place of refuge. Through fear of the Lord we have a fountain of life. Through fear of the Lord we have release from the snares of death.

All these things are given us through our Lord Jesus. He is our Refuge and Strength. He is our Fountain of Life. He is the One who released us from the snares of death by His own suffering and death. Through His innocent suffering and death He has opened for us the gates of Heaven. He has bestowed life and salvation upon us through the payment of our sins by His shed blood. Knowing we have such a loving and gracious Lord, we no longer fear sin, death, nor the devil. We no longer fear our enemies. Fear of the Lord produces confidence that our Lord and Savior has defeated our enemies once and for all, and He will take us to live with Him in heaven for all eternity.

Collect: O Lord, we beseech Thee favorably to hear the prayers of Thy people: that we, who are justly punished for our offenses, may be mercifully delivered by Thy goodness, for the glory of Thy Name; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, Who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever One God, world without end. Amen.

We have reached the fortieth day after the Nativity of our Lord. On this festival day our Lord Jesus is presented at the temple as His mother, Mary, fulfills the purification rite that was commanded by the Lord God through Moses. It is easy for us to picture our Lord Jesus as a full-grown man, for that is what we see Him as most in holy Scripture. But the brief glimpse we get of our Lord as a small child shows us His love and sacrifice for us. Here we have a forty-day-old child who is the creator of the heavens and the earth. This baby is the ruler of the world come down from heaven to dwell with us in our flesh.

This shows us how impossible it is for us to save ourselves from sin. It shows us how powerful our Lord and Savior truly is. The Lord God told Gideon that the Israelite army was too great. Thirty-two thousand was too many. Ten thousand was too many. We are often tempted to think we can save ourselves. But our Lord proves that He is the one in complete control. Three hundred Israelites would defeat the Midianite army—which was as numerous as locusts—not because of man's strength, but because of the Lord's work. Our Savior also comes to His temple today to redeem us by His work alone.

Collect: Almighty and Everliving God, we humbly beseech Thy Majesty, that as Thine Only-Begotten Son was this day presented in the Temple in the substance of our flesh, so we may be presented unto Thee with pure and clean hearts; 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.

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

Hidden within this tragic passage is the promise of the resurrection from the dead. The Lord Jesus, even though a child according to His human nature, was also almighty according to His divine nature. He could have saved those children from Herod. Why didn't He? Because He did not come to save men from earthly suffering, but to save men from sin. Suffering and persecution last only a short time, but sin kills forever.

When our Lord was circumcised, He was the Savior of all the circumcised—including those murdered boys of Bethlehem. Because He lives, they live in Him. And, because He rose from the dead, they will rise from the dead also. Circumcision was for the Old Testament; God's people today are united to Christ in Baptism, but the same promise applies. When the Christ was baptized, He was the Savior of all the baptized. Because He lives, the baptized live. Because He rose from the dead, the baptized will rise from the dead. Our lives on earth are short and insignificant compared with the glory of the resurrection.

Collect: O merciful and eternal God, heavenly Father, who didst cause Thy Son to endure circumcision and to be made subject to the Law, that we might be redeemed from the curse of the Law: We beseech Thee, grant us grace to become partakers of this redemption and thus obtain eternal salvation, through the same, Thy beloved Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, one true God, world without end. Amen.

Our Lord God loves us so much that He sent prophets, apostles, and ministers to preach His Word to us. He desires that we should be His people. The prophet Jeremiah was sent to the rebellious and sinful people of Judah. Jeremiah would prophesy about the approaching exile in which Judah would find itself. They remained in their sins and were exiled to the land of the Chaldeans. In His love He sends Jeremiah to lead them into repentance.

Jeremiah does not think he is worthy for such a task. However, it is not him that is doing the work, but the Word of the Lord God. Jeremiah may be a youth, but by the Word of God he would “root out and pull down.” He would “destroy and throw down.” And he would “build and plant.” Jeremiah was the mouthpiece by which the Lord God would preach the Law and the Gospel to the rebellious people of Israel.

We have also been sent ministers to preach the Law and Gospel into our ears so that we might repent of our sins, and cling in faith to our Lord and Savior Jesus. These men sent by the Lord may be young or old, experienced or inexperienced. Their worthiness does not come from who they are, but whose Word they preach. They are sent to warn us of our sin and proclaim the glories of the Lord.

Collect: O Lord, we beseech Thee favorably to hear the prayers of Thy people: that we, who are justly punished for our offenses, may be mercifully delivered by Thy goodness, for the glory of Thy Name; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, Who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever One God, world without end. Amen.

Our Lord God loves His creation. He loves His people. He had made Israel to be His people. From them would be born the Savior of the whole world. The relationship that the Lord God has with the people of Israel is an example to us of how much He loves the true Israel—all those who cling in faith to Him and His Son, the Lord Jesus. He had given them His Law, which declared them to be His people, and He would be their God. His Law is a manifestation of His love to them and us.

The Israelites promised on this last day of Moses' life that they would be the Lord's people. We come to church and profess this too. We do this in our daily lives whenever we confess our faith in Him. Unfortunately, the people of Israel only remained faithful to the Lord God until Joshua had died. The Lord would have to send Judges, and then the Prophets, to call the people of Israel back into repentance. We also daily sin much and make the same mistake. We have been sent the Apostles, whose doctrine we cling to in faith. We have been sent faithful ministers who also preach the Apostles' doctrine. All these have been sent by the Lord God in order that He might show His love for us, that He wants us to be His people, that He might be our God.

Collect: O Lord, we beseech Thee favorably to hear the prayers of Thy people: that we, who are justly punished for our offenses, may be mercifully delivered by Thy goodness, for the glory of Thy Name; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, Who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever One God, world without end. Amen.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament. The Old Testament Law commanded that every firstborn male, either man or animal, was to be given to the Lord. However, a son was not to be sacrificed, but redeemed—that is, bought back. This taught them that there was something unique about first-born sons. It pointed to the person of the Christ—the Savior of mankind—who is both the only begotten Son of God and the first-born Son of Mary.

It also taught that there is a sharp difference between man and animal. You absolutely do not sacrifice human children, because human life is infinitely more sacred than animal life. For, the Son of God did not become any animal, but He became Man. He has not redeemed the animals, justified the animals, or promised the resurrection of the dead to animals. But all these promises are offered to man through the Gospel. This is not because of any inherent goodness in man, as though God thought we were “worthy” of saving, for all men are born and corrupted with sin. Instead, it was God's merciful choice from the beginning that man should be the special object of His love, and sin is not able to cancel it. For this reason, He taught the Israelites to redeem their children, because God had chosen to redeem mankind by the obedience and death of the Christ in man's place.

Collect: Almighty and Everlasting God, direct our actions according to Thy good pleasure, that in the Name of Thy beloved Son, we may be made to abound in good works; 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.

The name of Simeon's song (verses 29-32) is the *Nunc Dimittis*—Latin for the opening words, "Now, You dismiss". The *Nunc Dimittis* is used in the Divine Service every Sunday (TLH, 29-30; ASBH, 33-35); it is the song which the congregation sings together after they have received the body and blood of Jesus Christ in the Lord's Supper. By singing the *Nunc Dimittis* after the Supper, we confess that we have truly handled the flesh and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, as certainly as Simeon did when he took the divine Child in his arms. Having received this gift and having made this confession, we, like Simeon, are prepared to die in peace.

Where is God found today? There are many who seek Him in nature, others who seek Him in dreams and visions, and still others insist He is only in heaven. But Christians have true fellowship with Him in the eating of the Lord's Supper, for the Christ took bread and said, "This is My body" (Matt. 26:26), and He took wine and said, "This is my blood... for the remission of sins" (Matt. 26:28). God is found where He promises to be, and the Christ—who is God in the flesh—promises to be found in His Supper. Those who eat the bread and drink the wine of His Supper receive also His body and blood and, believing this, receive His peace.

Collect: Almighty and Everlasting God, direct our actions according to Thy good pleasure, that in the Name of Thy beloved Son, we may be made to abound in good works; 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.

Consider all the work that Isaiah's well-beloved puts into the vineyard. He plants it on a fruitful hill so that it would receive sunlight from all directions. He took the time to work the soil and remove the rocks and debris. He planted a choice vine, meaning he purposely planted a culture of grape vines that would produce good grapes. He also built a tower in the midst of it so that he could observe it and be ready to take whatever necessary action to protect and nurture it quickly. Finally, he built a winepress so that he could harvest the grapes and make delicious wine. But the vineyard only produced wild grapes, that is, sour, harsh, and small grapes; grapes not fit for consumption.

This is the care that the Lord had given to His people Israel. He cared for them deeply, but they remained a rebellious nation. Our Lord continues to care for His creation. He gives us His Word and Sacraments; He draws us to Himself to receive His gifts that He richly provides for us. But even from our first parents we have been rebellious. We are nothing but wild grapes—small, bitter, and harsh. This is how full of sin we are. We cannot produce good fruit. Our Lord Jesus, however, came and purified the vine with His own flesh, so that all those who believe on Him might be good grapes and produce good wine.

Collect: O Lord, we beseech Thee favorably to hear the prayers of Thy people: that we, who are justly punished for our offenses, may be mercifully delivered by Thy goodness, for the glory of Thy Name; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, Who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever One God, world without end. Amen.

After the death of Moses, the servant of the Lord God, Joshua, the son of Nun, was commanded by the Lord to go over the Jordan River and take possession of the land that was first promised to Abraham, the father of the Israelites. This land of Canaan was also promised to those Israelites who had been wandering in the wilderness the previous forty years. The Israelites were now ready to go in and take possession of this promised land. Our Lord tells Joshua a wonderful thing while giving him the command to go and take possession of this land. He tells him that wherever the Israelites would go, He would be with them.

We have this same promise given to us by the Lord Jesus. He told His Apostles before His Ascension that He would never leave us nor forsake us. For He would be with us wherever two or three were gathered together in His name. Our Lord is with all of us who have entered into the vineyard of the Church to labor in that vineyard. Just like the Lord God had chosen Israel to be the people from which our Lord Jesus would be born, He also has gone into the marketplace of the world to call us to be His special people. He is with us wherever we go, and He will never leave us nor forsake us.

Collect: O Lord, we beseech Thee favorably to hear the prayers of Thy people: that we, who are justly punished for our offenses, may be mercifully delivered by Thy goodness, for the glory of Thy Name; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, Who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever One God, world without end. Amen.

The book of Hebrews emphasizes that Jesus is the Christ. The baby born to Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem is indeed the true King of kings and Lord of lords, who fulfills God's promises to the people of Israel from the prophets.

This book speaks especially to those Jews who know the teachings of God's Word, but are slow to see and hear. It seeks to teach those who are descended from the Old Testament fathers, and save these descendants from the darkness and evil that ensnared so many like the Pharisees, chief priests, and others who knew the Law, but resisted God's Spirit.

Jesus fulfilled so many prophecies just in the Christmas story alone. This baby was born in the line of David, surrounded by marvelous events, and worshiped by the very angels in the presence of men! "For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (see Luke 2:8 and following). These events, and the rest that took place during the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, all exemplified righteousness and faithfulness to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The true sons of God would not resist His Spirit and truth, but see, hear, believe in Jesus Christ, and be saved according to His mercy!

Collect: Almighty and Everlasting God, direct our actions according to Thy good pleasure, that in the Name of Thy beloved Son, we may be made to abound in good works; 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.

The sons of God are not defined according to maps or bloodlines. They are defined according to faith in Jesus Christ. Cultures and politics will be necessary concerns until the end of the age when our Lord Jesus comes again in glory. However, we are not to confuse these things of the world with the truth of God's Word and Kingdom.

God's Word teaches us the Law so that we may know how to do those good works that He prepares for His people. But the Law and the works are not what make us sons of God. Faith is the only thing that does that, specifically faith in Christ Jesus. Outward works are like maps and bloodlines. If they are observed according to the one true faith that clings to Christ crucified for our justification and life, then they are good and useful! But if the faith which saves us is ignored or rejected, all other things are still empty, broken parts of a world that is dead in its sinfulness.

The joy of every Christmas season is that His true Church proclaims that there is hope for true peace among men and nations, but it must be found in Jesus Christ! That baby who was born in the city of David and shook the events of that part of the world is the fulfillment of God's promises to His true faithful people, and the glorious expression of His goodwill toward men!

Collect: Almighty and Everlasting God, direct our actions according to Thy good pleasure, that in the Name of Thy beloved Son, we may be made to abound in good works; 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.

neither from reason nor from the Law of God, which would lead either into a dissipated, dissolute epicurean life, or into despair, and would excite in the heart of men pernicious thoughts (and such thoughts cannot be effectually guarded against as long as they follow their own reason), so that they think to themselves: "If God has elected me to salvation, I cannot be condemned, although I do whatever I will." And again: "If I am not elected to eternal life, it matters not what good I do; for my efforts are nevertheless all in vain."

9. But the true judgment concerning predestination must be learned alone from the Holy Gospel concerning Christ, in which it is clearly testified that "God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that He might have mercy upon all," and that "He is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (Rom. 11:32; Ez. 18:23; 33:11; 2 Pet. 3:9; 1 John 2:2).

10. To him, therefore, who is really concerned about the revealed will of God, and proceeds according to the order which St. Paul has observed in the Epistle to the Romans, who first directs men to repentance, knowledge of sins, to faith in Christ, to divine obedience, before he speaks of the mystery of the eternal election of God, this doctrine is useful and consolatory.

11. That, however, "many are called, few are chosen," does not mean that God is unwilling that all should be saved, but the reason is that they either do not at all hear God's Word, but wilfully despise it, close their ears and harden their hearts, and in this manner foreclose the ordinary way to the Holy Ghost, so that He cannot effect His work in them, or when it is heard, they consider it of no account, and do not heed it. For this [that they perish] not God or His election, but their wickedness is responsible (2 Pet. 2:1 sqq.; Luke 11:49, 52; Heb. 12:25 sq.).

12. Moreover, a Christian should apply himself to the article concerning the eternal election of God, so far as it has been revealed in God's Word, which presents Christ to us as the Book of Life, which, by the preaching of the holy Gospel, He opens and spreads out to us, as it is written (Rom. 8:30): "Whom He did predestinate, them He also called." In Him, therefore, we should seek the eternal election of the Father, who, in His eternal divine counsel, determined that He would save no one except those who acknowledge His Son, Christ, and truly believe on Him. Other thoughts are to be entirely banished, as they proceed not from God, but from the suggestion of Satan, whereby he attempts to weaken or to entirely remove from us the glorious consolation which we have in this salutary doctrine, viz. that we know that out of pure grace, without any merit of our own, we have been elected in Christ to eternal life, and that no one can pluck us out of His hand; as He has promised this gracious election not only with mere words, but has also certified it with an oath, and sealed it with the holy sacraments, where we can call to mind in our most severe temptations, and from them comfort ourselves, and thereby quench the fiery darts of the devil.

Lesson from the Book of Concord

Septuagesima Sunday

CHAPTER XI. OF GOD'S ETERNAL FOREKNOWLEDGE [PRE-DESTINATION] AND ELECTION.

Concerning this article no public dissension has occurred among the theologians of the Augsburg Confession. But since it is a consolatory article, if treated properly, and by this means the introduction in the future of a controversy likely to cause offence may be avoided, it is also explained in this writing.

AFFIRMATIVE

The Pure and True Doctrine concerning this Article.

1. First of all, the distinction between foreknowledge and predestination, that is, between God's foreknowledge and His eternal election, ought to be accurately observed.

2. For the foreknowledge of God is nothing else than that God knows all things before they happen, as it is written (Dan. 2:28): "There is a God in heaven that revealeth secrets and maketh known to the king Nebuchadnezzar what shall be in the latter days."

3. This foreknowledge is occupied alike with the godly and the wicked; but it is not the cause of evil or of sin, so that men do what is wrong (which originally arises from the devil and the wicked, perverse will of man); nor the cause of their ruin, for which they themselves are responsible; but only regulates it, and fixes to it a limit how long it should last, and that everything, notwithstanding that in itself it is evil, should serve His elect for their salvation.

4. The predestination or eternal election of God, however, is occupied only with the godly, beloved children of God, and this is a cause of their salvation, which He also provides as well as disposes what belongs thereto. Upon this [predestination of God] our salvation is founded so firmly that the gates of hell cannot overcome it (John 10:28; Matt. 16:18).

5. This is not to be investigated in the secret counsel of God, but to be sought in the Word of God, where it is also revealed.

6. But the Word of God leads us to Christ, who is the Book of Life, in whom all are written and elected that are to be saved, as it is written (Eph. 1:4): "He hath chosen us in Him" [Christ] "before the foundation of the world."

7. Thus Christ calls to Himself all sinners and promises them rest, and He is anxious that all men should come to Him and permit Him to help them. To them He offers Himself in His Word, and wishes them to hear it, and not to stop their ears or despise the Word. He promises besides the power and efficiency of the Holy Ghost, and divine assistance for perseverance and eternal salvation.

8. Therefore we should judge concerning this our election to eternal life

SATURDAY, JANUARY 6: EPHESIANS 1:3–6

EPIPHANY

Sometimes people get confused about "predestination". But the confusion usually comes from missing the point of the concept. Predestination is about God's will, not ours! Man wants to make God conform to our understanding. If we are to understand predestination properly, we must submit in faith to the idea that God's will is perfectly holy, and His wisdom is far beyond ours. That is why He taught us to pray, "...Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven..." Predestination is about accepting that Almighty God knows and does that which is good, and thanking Him for blessing us with it!

Christmas and Epiphany are seasons that remind us that God makes His will happen among us, and that we simply need to believe and give thanks for His mercies. We did not make Him become a baby, nor could we compel Him to live and sacrifice Himself for us. And even though sinful men tried to dictate the terms by which He should reveal His glory, He alone decided how to show His glory and power among us. His will and works are done for us so that we may be blessed with wisdom and power according to the grace manifested in our Savior Jesus Christ. For all His holy blessings we should say "Amen, and thanks be to God!", whether or not we understand all the details.

Collect: O God, who by the leading of a star didst manifest Thy Only-begotten Son to the Gentiles: Mercifully grant, that we, who know Thee now by faith, may after this life have the fruition of Thy glorious Godhead; 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.

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.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 27: 2 COR. I:12-22 TRANSFIGURATION

People in the past believed that one should never boast about anything. It was considered bad manners and a lack of dignity. St. Paul here does not have the same opinion, at least when it comes to boasting about the things of God. That is the key difference. A braggart is still off-putting. But St. Paul can boast of what Christ has done, and he does not mind relating things about his behavior when it aligns with Christ's example.

However, he doesn't just do it randomly, but in relation to the pettiness of some of the Christians in the congregations. Their small-minded gossip maligned his motives. He has no problem telling them that his motives are pure. This is not some ungodly boasting. St. Paul still glories in the grace given to the Corinthians, and all Christians, in baptism ("...who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee"). St. Paul knows what his office is, and who placed him in it. He gives clear witness to the glory of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Collect: O God, Who in the glorious Transfiguration of Thy Only-begotten Son, hast confirmed the mysteries of the faith by the testimony of the fathers, and Who, in the voice that came from the bright cloud, didst in a wonderful manner foreshow the adoption of sons: Mercifully vouchsafe to make us coheirs with the King of His glory, and bring us to the enjoyment of the same; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, every one God, world without end. Amen.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old.”

The Jews were constantly interpreting Jesus’ words according to their preconceived ideas about the Old Testament framework. They constantly saw religion in the form of reward and punishment according to one’s deeds—that is, according to the Law. But they are not unique in this perspective. All men fall back into such thinking. It is our default setting: moralism and legalistic religion. We all desire to focus on our own works and efforts. But Jesus teaches something completely different.

Jesus overturns our natural legalism. Every tribe conceives of gods rewarding or punishing men for their actions. No one anticipated a God who receives punishment for His creature’s sins and then gives away ultimate rewards to undeserving recipients. Christianity is not like any other religion. It turns the relationship between men and God on its head. God doesn’t demand atonement from us. He gives it to us. This Christian faith is truly otherworldly.

Collect: O God, who didst adorn St. Titus with apostolic virtues, increase in us a spirit directed to a life of duty and justice which is the fruit of a faith which trusts in our Savior, Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

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

“And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him.”

Muslim apologists have used this verse to try to prove that the Lord Jesus is not God, saying the verse doesn’t make sense logically. If God is infinite and immutable, how can He grow up? This objection shows how false religions and unbelievers do not properly consider the incarnation.

The Lord Jesus Christ is both true God and true man by His incarnation. If Jesus was not true man, then He would not need to grow in wisdom and strength. If Jesus was not fully man, then He would not be the perfect mediator between God and man. If Jesus is not fully God, then he could not perfectly fulfill the Law; and if He was not fully man, then He would not be able to offer His perfect life for our sins.

We marvel over this mystery of the incarnation, especially during the season of Epiphany. The Lord Jesus grew up and was like us in every way, except without sin. Therefore, we can rejoice that He has reconciled God and man by being the God-Man that takes away our sins.

Collect: 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.

The secrets of the kingdom and the salvation of God have been given to some and not to others. It’s not that Jesus didn’t atone for the whole world by His death on the cross; He did. But not all will listen. It is a deep and profound mystery that those who are inheriting eternal life have been chosen by God for that salvation. This mystery cannot be understood by man’s logic. We don’t know why God desires all to be saved and yet only some are chosen.

As Christians we need to come to terms with the hard reality that not all are chosen for eternal life. If we are worried and ask ourselves the question, “How do I know that I am one of the elect?”, don’t fear. God has not made this an impossible game; He gives you this doctrine of election for your comfort. If you wonder whether you have been given the secrets of the kingdom of God, just ask yourself, “Do I believe the Gospel that I’ve heard? Have I been baptized?” If you can answer yes, then you are one of the elect. If you believe, you are one to whom the secrets of the kingdom of God have been given. He who has ears to hear, let him hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Collect: Merciful Lord, we beseech Thee to cast the bright beams of Thy light upon Thy Church, that it being instructed by the doctrine of the blessed Apostles, may so walk in the light of Thy truth, that it may at length attain to the light of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Jesus wants us to strive to enter through the narrow gate, but this striving is not the striving of good works. It is the striving of repentance. It is the ongoing life of repentance of those who are baptized. It is the ongoing life of faith of the believer.

Jesus said strive because there would be many who will seek to enter and will not be able. Those who are not able to enter are those who depended on some lineage or some past event to save them, but were not willing to live the life of repentance and faith. They wanted to be their own god, to create their own standard, to be responsible to no one. But striving in faith is the only way to enter the kingdom of heaven.

This striving faith is not easy to live out. It often calls on us to do things that we don't necessarily like doing. It also makes us hated among our neighbors. But Jesus gives us the strength to carry on through the striving life of faith. He strengthens us with His Word and Sacraments. He lets us know that He will supply all our needs.

Collect: O Lord, as Thou didst preserve faithful Timothy to a steadfast confession of Thy Holy Word, even as he instructed those who would be set apart for ministry in Thy Church, we pray that Thou wouldst so bless Thy people in this generation with steadfast confessors, through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

The Epiphany season is about the Lord Jesus being revealed in various ways. In yesterday's reading, Jesus is revealed as true man who grew in wisdom and stature. In our reading today, Jesus is revealed as true God. Jesus is not just revealing His ability to heal the man with the withered hand; His primary purpose is to show His authority as God in the flesh.

First, the Lord Jesus reveals that He knows the thoughts of those who are trying to test Him, waiting to see what He would do so the Pharisees can accuse Him. Jesus reveals that He knows their thoughts by asking, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" Second, by healing the man, Jesus shows that He has authority over the Sabbath. Since God established the Sabbath, it is God who determines what is lawful on the Sabbath. Jesus provides this healing as the proof that He has authority over the Sabbath because He is true God who can heal the man with the withered hand.

Despite this very public revealing, the Pharisees and Herodians plot to destroy Jesus. The Lord grieved at their hardness of heart just before He performed the healing. May the Holy Spirit continue to open our hearts when the Lord is revealed to us in His Word.

Collect: 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.

It is interesting to see the questions of the crowd in our reading today. The crowd asks our Lord what sign would He provide so they may believe Him. Remember, this is the same crowd of five thousand that were miraculously fed by Jesus earlier in the chapter. Was that sign not enough? This is why Jesus says in verse 22, “Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled.”

The crowd was not interested in believing the Gospel; they wanted to be satisfied. Jesus tells them that He is the Bread of Life, yet they complain. When someone asks why God won’t reveal Himself so that everyone will believe, point to this passage of Scripture. How many times does our Lord Jesus Christ have to show these signs of who He is before it is enough for those who refuse to believe?

The truth is that all of us have been stubborn and slow to believe the Lord’s Word. This is why the Holy Ghost must change our hearts and minds so that we can come to Christ and have faith. Faith is a gift. As the Lord says, “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.”

Collect: 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.

How can the same Word of God produce so many different reactions and levels of faith? Jesus’ teaching in this parable reveals that the answer to the question is not really that simple. The different reactions to the same Word, the different levels of commitment, and even whether or not one is truly a believer, is a much more mysterious thing. Jesus gives us an explanation of what happens, but He doesn’t completely unveil the mystery for us.

What He does tell us is that the various negative reactions are the result of human action, not because God did not sow good seed. God’s seed, His Word, is always good and life giving. God’s Word is never impotent, never inadequate. Where God sows His seed there should be a full, abundant, and healthy crop. But when there is not, it is not His fault. The fault must be laid squarely at the feet of Satan, and especially at the feet of sinful men who do not hear or value the Word.

Collect: O God, Who in the glorious Transfiguration of Thy Only-begotten Son, hast confirmed the mysteries of the faith by the testimony of the fathers, and Who, in the voice that came from the bright cloud, didst in a wonderful manner foreshow the adoption of sons: Mercifully vouchsafe to make us coheirs with the King of His glory, and bring us to the enjoyment of the same; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, every one God, world without end. Amen.

Divisions can hinder the growth of sin. “And the LORD said, ‘Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them.’” Man engages in self-idolatry when he tries to force his notions of peace, unity, and paradise upon our current world. Such utopian efforts bring misery and disaster. The divisions of man, it could be argued, fulfill God’s creative desire for a plurality of nations, united in Christ, by maintaining their separate existence.

Race is not an evil to be overcome, but part of the way God created this world. So, the scattering of Genesis 11 is at least as much a positive fulfilling of God’s creation and a protection for man as it is a punishment for sinful pride. The coming of the Holy Ghost in Acts 2 certainly has a connection to this passage in Genesis. In Acts, the hearing of the Gospel in the many languages of the nations points to ultimate unity of all people in the Body of Christ, but it does not, in pointing to that spiritual unity, bring the various nations to an end. All believers find their eternal dwelling in heaven, even as they have their earthly dwellings among their own tribes.

Collect: O God, Who in the glorious Transfiguration of Thy Only-begotten Son, hast confirmed the mysteries of the faith by the testimony of the fathers, and Who, in the voice that came from the bright cloud, didst in a wonderful manner foreshow the adoption of sons: Mercifully vouchsafe to make us coheirs with the King of His glory, and bring us to the enjoyment of the same; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

The Lord not only reveals who He is and what He has come to do, but He also reveals the cost of following Him. This cost is not a cost to obtain salvation, but it is the inevitable outcome of trusting Christ for salvation.

The cost of the soul cannot be counted. The soul goes on even after this life. Life is temporary, but the soul is not. It cost our Lord His precious blood to redeem us from sin. For us, this salvation is given freely, yet we are then called to take up that cross. It is easy to slip back into stubbornness and unbelief when the road grows narrow. The Lord Jesus knows that our pride will lead to a fall.

Depending on ourselves leads us to try to find our life in our own opinions or feelings, while losing our soul in the process. But faith and trust in Christ teaches us to forsake all things for Christ, to repent by the assistance of God the Holy Ghost. As the Catechism teaches in the article on Baptism, “...the old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts, and, again, a new man daily come forth and arise; who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”

Collect: 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.

We see, once again, the delusion of the unbelieving mind in our reading today. The unbelieving Jews are getting ready to stone the Lord Jesus for blasphemy as He is claiming equality with God. This should not be hard for them to understand, after all, the Lord Jesus revealed that He is true God and true man by the works He has done. Yet they still do not believe.

Jesus tells them that the Scripture cannot be broken, and even makes a reference to earthly leaders being called 'gods' in Psalm 82:6. If that is the case for earthly rulers, how much more so for the Lord Jesus Christ who is called God, not as a title or designation, but because He is actually God; the second person of the Trinity.

By this, our Lord shows that those who wished to stone Him were simply not believing the Scriptures. The Scriptures cannot be dissolved, cannot be broken, cannot be put aside. The Scriptures are fulfilled in the miracles and works of Jesus, in His public ministry, and in His death and resurrection. Therefore, the core of unbelief is rejection of the Word of God. When the unbeliever cannot explain the works of Christ, which show evidence of who He is, then they will attack the Scriptures themselves.

Collect: 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 Transfiguration Sunday

Article III.

Also they teach, that the Word, that is, the Son of God, did take man's nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin Mary, so that there are Two Natures, the divine and the human, inseparably conjoined in one Person, one Christ, true God and true man, who was born of the Virgin Mary, truly suffered, was crucified, dead and buried, that He might reconcile the Father unto us, and be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but for all actual sins of men. He also descended into hell, and truly rose again the third day; afterward He ascended into Heaven, that He might sit on the right hand of the Father, and forever reign, and have dominion over all creatures, and sanctify them that believe in Him, by sending the Holy Ghost into their hearts, to rule, comfort and quicken them, and to defend them against the devil and the power of sin. The same Christ shall openly come again to judge the quick and the dead, etc., according to the Apostles' Creed.

—The Augsburg Confession

The divine character is made manifest by ways contrary to the ways of man. On the one hand, the Jews expected to be overwhelmed by signs, which make repentance and faith unnecessary. The Greeks expected to be convinced by debate. They wanted to pick the “salvation solution” that was the most reasonable. But to these seekers of signs and wisdom, Paul now presents the ultimate “hard pill to swallow”: “But we preach Christ crucified.”

Rather than giving them the signs and wisdom they demand, even though God has plenty of such things to give, they get weakness and folly. Indeed, “Christ crucified” is a contradiction in terms. It’s of the same category as “terribly good.” One may have a Messiah or a crucifixion, but you cannot have both, at least not from the perspective of human understanding. For “Messiah” means power, splendor, and triumph to them. “Crucifixion” means weakness, humiliation, and defeat. Little wonder, then, that both Jew and Greek alike were scandalized by the Christian message.

The two “schools of thought”—that of man and that of God—have been called the “Theology of Glory” and the “Theology of the Cross.” Such terms were coined by Luther himself in his Heidelberg Disputation of 1518. In thesis 20 of that essay, Luther cites verses 21 and 25 of our text, and then concludes: “It is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in His glory and majesty, unless he recognizes Him in the humility and shame of the cross.”

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, who dost govern all things in heaven and earth, mercifully hear the supplications of Thy people and grant us Thy peace all the days of our life; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

“For with authority He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him.”

The Lord Jesus Christ reveals His authority, and the crowd takes notice. We have seen throughout the readings this week that the crowds are willing to take notice of the Lord’s works in His ministry. In this passage, they state that Jesus has authority to command the evil spirits and they obey Him. The people’s observation is correct. But, as we saw in the reading yesterday, a mere observation of the Lord’s work and authority is not enough to overcome the uncleanness of sin and unbelief. The man with the unclean spirit was in the synagogue when the demon lashed out.

It is only by the Word and working of Christ that the demon obeys and comes out of the man. It is by the power of God alone, through His Word, that we poor sinners are given faith as a gift. We are made able to repent by the working and assistance of the Holy Ghost. We are fed and strengthened by the Sacraments.

It is not enough for us to merely observe that Jesus does these things, but we must trust Him, believing He has the authority to take our sin on the cross, to rescue us from sin and death, and to keep us until the day of His coming.

Collect: 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

FRIDAY, JANUARY 19: ROMANS 5:1–5

ST. HENRY

It used to be that many grave markers bore the initials R.I.P. The letters stand for the Latin *requiescat in pace*, meaning “rest in peace.” They are words written above and spoken over those who died. But can there really be peace when someone lies in the grave, whether death has come violently or silently? Since the world never lives in peace, how can we die that way?

“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...” Being justified by Jesus means the Law has been completely fulfilled by Him for you. Peace with God means Jesus has taken away the discord of your sin. “R.I.P.” means resting in peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

And this we possess even as we live. In your baptism you’ve already died in Jesus (Romans 6:1-6). Jesus has made His death your death. Life will include suffering, but even when you suffer, such suffering produces endurance, which produces character, which produces hope. And certainly what we all need in this dying world is hope in our Savior Jesus.

We confess weekly there is “the resurrection of the body”—your body—and “the life everlasting.” Those confessed words are peaceful words. Those words are filled with hope and are worth inscribing on anyone’s tombstone who dies in the faith.

Collect: O God, who dost guide Thy Church through the faithful ministrations of Thy servants, grant that Thy ministers, like St. Henry, stand steadfast against those who would work iniquity; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

We live our lives under so many rules and laws. Many of us would agree things seem like they'd be so much simpler and easier with fewer laws. There are also those who try to do the same thing with God's Law. Some people would like to simplify what God has to say to suit their own agenda. Some just flat out deny certain teachings of Scripture. They "boil it down" until it contains just the right information they can swallow. But God says otherwise. "For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven..." (Matthew 5:18-19).

It sounds as if we're stuck. We need to obey the Law, and suffer the consequences when we do not. The answer? Jesus has done both—the work of "doing good" and "receiving bad." He's the one who must fulfill the law perfectly, as well as pay for our failed attempts at keeping it. What an impossible burden Jesus lifts from the beleaguered shoulders of His faithful people.

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, who dost govern all things in heaven and earth, mercifully hear the supplications of Thy people and grant us Thy peace all the days of our life; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Like so many people today, this woman at the well is interested in spiritual things; but that doesn't mean godly things, at least in any Biblical sense. She knows about religion, but not about real faith in a real God. She heard parts, and kept what fit her style. Should we then be surprised that she could manipulate her religious beliefs to accommodate five husbands, plus a live-in boyfriend? She was without a real God and wasn't even aware of it.

We need to become aware of—and welcome—spiritual thirst. That is where our God-given conscience comes in. All of us, believers and unbelievers alike, are given this inner voice. We know its calls to sorrow and makes threats of judgment. God's Word (especially Romans 1 and 2) affirms this fact. So when Jesus tells this woman to call her husband, it's not that He is eager to meet her "other half." By giving her this command, He's trying to expose her thirst.

We too may be going against God's will and not feeling badly about it. Our "inner clock" is no longer keeping "proper time." We need outside help. We need God's Law to confront our comfort. Only then can our consciences be awakened and focused to realize our standing before a holy and righteous God. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:8-9)

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, who dost govern all things in heaven and earth, mercifully hear the supplications of Thy people and grant us Thy peace all the days of our life; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 16: LUKE 19:1–10 2ND SUNDAY A. EPIPHANY

Zacchaeus had several challenges in his encounter with Jesus. He was short, he was a tax collector, and he was rich. As for his height, he easily overcame that obstacle by climbing a sycamore tree. His vocation as tax collector, however, had quite a stigma among the Jews; such stigma is well-documented throughout the New Testament (including verse 7 of our text). The fact that he was a wealthy tax collector would've made him even more removed, as it implied that he showed no mercy in his dealings, or perhaps overstepped his legal bounds. Wealth could also be a spiritual obstacle. Jesus Himself tells several parables in which men were caught up in their riches. And yet, Zacchaeus is eager to see Jesus, and is overjoyed when Jesus not only singles him out, but wishes to spend the day at his house—literally bringing salvation into Zacchaeus' home.

Jesus' mercy and salvation is meant for all, and therefore can and does break through barriers (whether real or supposed). Let us all be like Jesus, "for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, who dost govern all things in heaven and earth, mercifully hear the supplications of Thy people and grant us Thy peace all the days of our life; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 17: JOHN 1:15–18 2ND S. A. EPIPHANY

"John bore witness of Him and cried out, saying, 'This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.''" The apostle John records the words of the baptizer John, which seem to speak in contradiction. Jesus came after John, but was before John, and He would outlast and supersede John. How can such things be?

In fact, what it gives us is a restatement of John 1:1, where we are told the Word (Christ) was already in existence at the dawn of Creation. Christ is beyond the bounds of time, but became incarnate in time in order to be man's Savior. Because of His humanity, as well as His deity, salvation has been won by Jesus Christ, and is now ours through faith in Him. As verse 16 of our text says: "And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace." The writer John tells us that Jesus' grace is in limitless supply. He gives it, we consume it, and still more is given out. Sinful man is in constant need of God's repeated grace and forgiveness, which He assures us will never be exhausted.

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, who dost govern all things in heaven and earth, mercifully hear the supplications of Thy people and grant us Thy peace all the days of our life; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.