

week in support (\$260 a year), we would meet and surpass this need.

The pastors agreed at our 2010 diocesan synod that we would endeavor to raise one year's support—\$50,000—before opening the seminary. At present, the diocese has nearly half of those funds on hand.

Financial issues are only one element of opening St. Ignatius seminary. The search continues for the best candidate for a future headmaster, and we are also in need of firm commitments from future seminarians so that we may begin instruction as soon as possible.

Please keep the diocese and our efforts toward establishing St. Ignatius seminary in your prayers! The preparation of future pastors is vital to sustaining the congregations of our diocese with the Word and Sacrament and providing missionaries to continue to proclaim the Word to those who have not heard, or who do not yet have an orthodox Lutheran congregation which they can attend.

Support for the diocese and seminary may be sent to:

*ELDoNA Seminary Support
c/o Trinity Lutheran Church
1000 North Park Avenue
Herrin, Illinois 62948*

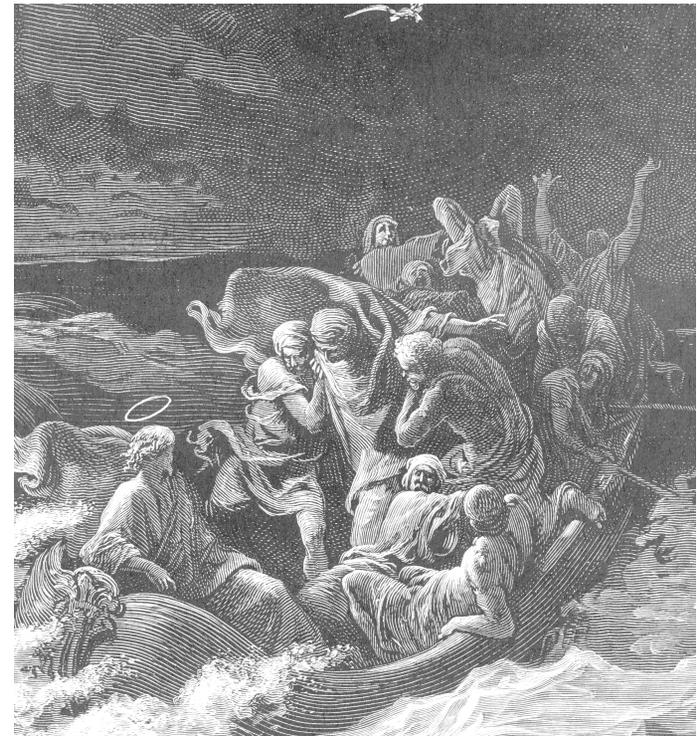
Potential students and other inquiries may be addressed to the bishop:

*Bishop James Heiser
Salem Lutheran Church
718 HCR 3424 E
Malone, Texas 76660*

You may also contact the bishop by email: hunnius@mac.com

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THE LUTHERAN HERALD



“Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?” (from the Gospel for Epiphany 4)

FEBRUARY 2011

(4TH S. AFTER EPIPHANY—SEXAGESIMA)

The Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of North America

Grace and peace to you in Christ Jesus!

The Gustave Doré print which adorns this month's cover is one which has fascinated me for years; it seems to capture the anguished cry of the disciples: "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" The tempest filled them with fear, and in their panic they blurted out words which probably felt pretty foolish a few moments later. Their reason and senses screamed to them that they were *doomed*, even as it seemed that Jesus would do nothing to save them from imminent death.

To my eyes, the image well captures the Church Militant. Christ Jesus is with His people in the holy Ark of Christendom, feeding and caring for His Church by means of His Word and Sacrament. Far from abandoning us in the midst of the tumult of this world, the Lord saves us and continues to provide for us—and yet, how often and how quickly we panic. "Lord, save us! We are perishing!"

Jesus has not left us—and He knows and provides for our every need, before we even know that for which we should be praying. Our need for food and clothing, and our fear of suffering and death, are not needs of which our Lord is somehow unaware. In fact, such needs and fears—and the Lord's gracious provision—are often occasions for us to behold Jesus' loving care for us. The One who died and rose again for His Church will not permit her to be tried beyond hope; the gates of Hades cannot prevail against her. Despite our frequent doubts, still the Lord provides, and with a word He stills the storm.

The precious means of grace are thus given so that our sins would be forgiven, and our faith strengthened. I am confident that the Church will not lack these blessings, because the Lord has assured us that He will be with us to the end of the age.

*In Christ,
Rt. Rev. James D. Heiser
Bishop, the ELDoNA*

Thus far, the diocese has nearly completed the preliminary description of courses, including text books, for a three-year period of seminary instruction. As the seminary will be hosted by a parish affiliated with the diocese, seminarians will be observe every element of faithful pastoral practice throughout their seminary education. The pastor of the hosting congregation will play a very important role in seminary instruction.

Throughout the three years of instruction, seminarians will receive a thorough education in Greek, the study of the Scriptures, and biblical doctrine (especially as set forth in the confessional documents of the Book of Concord). Seminarians will also learn the history of the Church, and will be taught historic Lutheran practice with regard to the conduct of the Divine Service, catechesis, and other aspects of the calling of the pastoral office.

The needs of our diocese are humble, by worldly standards. We anticipate that a seminary intended to serve the needs of our diocese (and those of our sister synod, the Association of Confessional Lutheran Churches) are modest, but it does require the support of the pastors of our diocese and the congregations which they serve.

First, we ask that men give consideration to devoting themselves to study as students at St. Ignatius. Truly, the fields are white for harvest, but the laborers are few! Those whom the Lord calls to the ministry in this age face many challenges, but all of our pastors will readily testify that it is a blessing to have the opportunity to serve Christ's people, bringing them the means of grace for the forgiveness of their sins and strengthening in faith.

Second, the seminary is also in need of financial support in both the near term and on a long term basis. Supporting a headmaster, steadily building a theological library, and providing for the occasional transportation costs of our "adjunct faculty" (that is, the pastors of our diocese) is likely to cost approximately \$50,000 a year. We do not want to burden our students with large financial debts, and so our intention is to keep tuition low. However, if 200 individuals would commit to only \$5 a

St. Ignatius Lutheran Theological Seminary

*A Confessional Lutheran Seminary Preparing Men for Service in the
Office of the Holy Ministry*

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in North America stands at a critical moment in her history. While many “Lutherans” are carried away by every wind of false teaching emanating from the “mega-churches” and permitting the shallowness of our post-modern, post-Christian culture to define their agenda, a few congregations and pastors uphold a consistently biblical and confessional doctrine and practice.

The Church needs bold, confessional pastors to confront the darkness of this age by teaching God’s Word in its truth and purity and administering the Sacraments according to Christ’s institution.

To meet the ongoing needs of congregations served by the pastors of this diocese, and to send more men into the home mission field, the diocese has been working for several years toward establishing St. Ignatius Lutheran Theological Seminary.

St. Ignatius Seminary is named for a first century bishop of Antioch who wrote letters of instruction and encouragement to the churches even as he was being taken to Rome to suffer martyrdom for the sake of the Gospel. Bold confessors of the early centuries of Christ’s Church and from the Reformation and Post-Reformation Ages exemplify the character which the diocese desires to inculcate in candidates for the holy office.

In the ELDoNA, the pastors will play a central role in the education of seminarians. A headmaster will be responsible for a significant proportion of the instruction, but all of the pastors will also be instructors, either teaching periodic two-week intensives, or on an ongoing or occasional basis by video conference.

From the Propers for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

The GOSPEL

St. Matthew 8:23–27 (NKJV)

Now when He got into a boat, His disciples followed Him. And suddenly a great tempest arose on the sea, so that the boat was covered with the waves. But He was asleep. Then His disciples came to Him and awoke Him, saying, “Lord, save us! We are perishing!”

But He said to them, “Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?” Then He arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. So the men marveled, saying, “Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?”

The COLLECT

Almighty God, who knowest us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright, grant to us such strength and protection as may support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

Monday, January 31: Matthew 11:11–24 4th S. after Epiphany

“You just can’t win.” That phrase pretty much sums up Jesus’ thoughts concerning what it is like for God to deal with this sinful world. God sent His prophet John the Baptist who lived a very austere life and kept to himself. What was the people’s response to John the Baptist? “He has a demon.” Today, people might say that John lacked people skills. Jesus came into the world and was very sociable. He was the consummate “people person.” Jesus was willing to hang out with anybody and everybody because He came to die for the sins of all people. What was the people’s response to Jesus? “Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!”

Whether it was John or Jesus, made no difference. The messenger is rejected because of the message. As different as John’s public image was from that of Jesus, the message from both John and Jesus was the same: Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand.

Such is the problem with sin and sinners. They do not want God’s Law because it only accuses the sinner of sin. Nor do they want His Gospel because it tells them that God has done everything for salvation and the sinner can add nothing to the Gospel.

So what has changed since Jesus spoke His Word of condemnation to Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum? Nothing! People still reject Jesus’ call to repentance and blame God’s messengers for the message. Be thankful that God has opened your ears to hear both His Law and His Gospel.

a deliverance, perhaps highly applauded, on the floor; whether it be in the arrangement of a mere local council), where, along the line, the most un-Lutheran statements, practices, proposals, will break out; or, at least, ooze out. In a union of this kind, where we are the one branch of a different family (and, in conventions and ecclesiastical diplomacy particularly, the remaining branches cleave together in spirit, expression and action), if true to ourselves, Lutherans must be under the appearance of putting their own views on a higher plane of importance than those of all others. Nearly every sound Lutheran who has been on the floor in a general body of Protestants and tried to be consistent there, would, we suppose, at some moment recall some such feeling and experience.

There is a reason for all this. The Lutheran church cannot go very far with the Reformed churches without finding something in the atmosphere, or even in the pathway, that is prejudicial to her principles, or that becomes a strain on them. Is there any Lutheran who really in his heart believes that the Puritans, the Church of England men, and the sectarians of the East and West, will go *with him*, and will follow *his way* in such a Federation? If they will not, then he must either go their way, or both must choose a new way,—neither of which things can happen and he remain true to his Lutheran faith.

[TO BE CONTINUED IN THE MARCH ISSUE]

—from *The Confessional Principle and the Confessions of The Lutheran Church as Embodying the Evangelical Confession of the Christian Church*, by Theodore E. Schmauk and C. Theodore Benze, (Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1911), p. 895–899

Gospel of Christ, but a Unitarian [J. C. Jaynes], writes:—

“The Church is tempted to abandon its real mission in the world. It is in danger of being misled by specious programs of agitators and of transforming itself into a civic forum, a therapeutic hospital, a dispensary of charities, an institution for visible social betterment. The church stands as the specific antidote of materialism, safeguards the reverence of life, cares for the moral visions of the soul and pronounces every god-ward aspiration of heart and mind as the noblest expressions of manhood and womanhood. Its legitimate work is not to supply new social furniture, but to make men righteously efficient, and then to trust them to go out with wisdom and consecration to improve in their own way the social conditions of life.”

THE DANGERS IN COOPERATION.

We believe that the reader will conclude with us that our continuous alliance or connection with an American Protestant Federation is out of the question. In such an environment the Lutheran Church will find herself in a situation in which she will be unable to preserve either her Confessional principle or to conserve her practical interests. It is a fact that all the Protestant churches in America, save our own, are *Reformed* in descent, and that they together, by nature, breathe out a Reformed spirit. Therefore, when radical measures are adopted by a general organization to which they all belong, even though these measures are not approved in any instance by some part of them, they do no violence to their fundamental Reformed principle. The plan may be most vigorously disputed and denounced, but if it be carried by a majority, there is no serious and deep-seated principle injured in living under it.

But the Lutheran Church is the conservative Protestant Church of this country. She is the Church that holds on to the good of history, as well as of Scripture, and that cannot take into her bosom any form of radicalism. Therefore Lutheranism is capable of being injured indirectly at almost every point, in a common attempt at organization or action among American Protestants; and its fundamental principle in any such gathering is nearly always strained by some radical action.

For every Federation or cooperation is no more conservative than its weakest point. No one knows, in connection with any such organization (whether it be in a general plan of action proposed, whether it be in

Tuesday, February 1: Matthew 12:1–21 4th S. after Epiphany

“No good deed goes unpunished,” so it was when Jesus did good and healed a man “with a withered hand.” Jesus showed “mercy” and as a result “the Pharisees went out and plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him.”

How could the Pharisees be so cold-hearted toward this poor man with a deformed hand? Well, the thought process of the Pharisees was echoed by Jesus own disciples when they asked Jesus about another man with a physical problem, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” The idea was that people who didn’t suffer from such afflictions were good people who were being blessed by God because they were being good. Those who did suffer afflictions were bad people who were being punished by God. So is it any wonder that the Pharisees didn’t care about the guy “with a withered hand.” In their minds, they were observing the Sabbath and were being good. The man with the withered hand... well... he was getting what he deserved and certainly wasn’t worthy of any sympathy from the Pharisees. To the Pharisee, Jesus was on the wrong side of this issue.

Thankfully God has been merciful to us and has given us faith to believe our sins are forgiven for Jesus’ sake. We are to imitate God’s mercy when we deal with our fellow man because the needed sacrifice for sin has taken place on the Cross of Christ.

Wednesday, February 2: Matthew 12:22–50 4th S. after Epiphany

Jesus had no more than healed the man with the withered hand that “the Pharisees went out and plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him.” But it is as Paul wrote, “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.” Jesus, knowing all things, “doubles down” and heals the man who was blind and mute. The Pharisees increase in sin, and the grace of our Lord abounds all the more. Nothing, especially a bunch of self-righteous Pharisees, will stop Jesus from being Jesus.

As we see, things continued to escalate between the Pharisees and Jesus. There was a somewhat heated exchange of words between the Pharisees and Jesus. They call Him the “Prince of Demons” and that the miracles Jesus performed were of the devil. Jesus calls them a “brood of vipers,” thus linking them to their father the “Serpent.” Sinners will do whatever it takes to

In Luther’s Heidelberg Theses, #21, he wrote, “A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.” And isn’t that the case going on in today’s reading. The Pharisees gloried in themselves and their own righteousness and as a result called goodness of Jesus evil and their self-righteousness good. Just because we are Christians doesn’t make us immune from being self-righteous. Were it not for God delivering us from evil, from our own sinfulness, we would be as lost as the Pharisees.

“THE CONFSSIONAL PRINCIPLE OF THE BOOK OF CONCORD AND CHRISTIAN COOPERATION.”

THE SPHERE OF THE CHURCH IN CIVIL
REFORM.



It [the Lutheran Church] by no means agrees with the Reformed Protestantism of the American Protestant Federation, as to the task of practical reform assumed by that body. It does not agree in enforcing such reform with stringency upon the civil government, and in finding its justification thereunto either in positive Biblical ordinances, or in the name of humanity. This is admitted by Seeberg. Neither can the Lutheran Church enter into relations or covenants with the civil authority which would involve an attitude, if not a subordination of the State to the ordinances of the Church.

The Lutheran Church cannot enter into reforms on the Calvinistic principle. Obedience to the sovereign will of God is not the content of Christian life and the State and Society at large are not agencies for the enforcement of divine law. The Calvinistic or Reformed attitude of the Church toward the State, with all its magnificence of holy zeal, is that of Augustine and the Middle Ages. The Confessional principle of Lutheranism does not attempt to reform the State or the world by the application of law.

To enter the civic field and secure the amelioration of social or spiritual conditions by legislation is not the work of the Church. This is in the sphere of the State and belongs to Christian citizens in their organized capacity in practical politics. It is not the work of the ministry, a spiritual office, which must not be used to the gain of even worthy earthly ends. The Federation’s conception involves ultimate entanglements of Church and State.

That such a conception of the Church is diverting it from its original purpose is discerned by the spiritual minded soul, even though it be outside of the Evangelical Faith. Thus one not rooted and grounded in the



Some of the wonderful members of St. Timothy (Williamsburg), who provided the meals—and coffee!—that kept the convention going.



Rev. Robert Lawson, Sr. (Christ-Princeton, MN) delivered the convention essay: “Reverence in the Divine Service of Word and Sacrament.” There was also an extended discussion of a portion of Martin Chemnitz’s *Enchiridion* and the doctrine of the divine call.

Following the Wednesday evening Vespers service at which Supt. Lawson spoke on the theme of the sanctity of life, Pastor Stefanski offered a presentation on his work in Sri Lanka assisting the education of the pastors of the Lutheran Church in Lanka.

The next scheduled opportunity for the pastors of the ACLC and ELDoNA to gather will be the annual ELDoNA synod in May in Malone, Texas.

It hasn’t been all that long since we celebrated Christmas. If I only had a dollar for every time I heard, “Jesus is the reason for the season” or “Let’s keep Christ in Christmas” with the lament about how Christmas has become too commercialized. In our reading for today, there are some things to be learned from our Lord that will help us next Christmas as well as throughout the year.

What Christians need to remember is that God is the One who delivers people from sin. He does this as His Spirit works by way of Scripture as it preached and taught and by of the Sacraments as they are rightly administered. Without the work of the Holy Spirit, there can be no faith in Christ.

There is one word within our reading that helps us to understand this: blessed. Blessing is an outward action from one toward another. One cannot bless oneself. The understanding of God’s Word is a blessing from God and not a matter of “our own reason or strength.” He opens our ears to hear and our eyes to see and with their opening He brings understanding.

So, should we be surprised that Christmas is misunderstood by so many people in the world? You have been blessed by God with what you need to remember from this parable: the problem is not with the Word of God but with the soil. Thank your Lord that He has broken up your stony hearts and given you a new heart to believe what Jesus has spoken, “Your sins are forgiven.”

Where does one begin? There are so many points that could be discussed. John the Baptist is beheaded because he spoke the truth about Herod's sinful marriage. Respectfully, John's disciple bury him and go and Jesus what had happened. Troubled by this, Jesus withdraws "to a desolate place by Himself." But as we are told, the people follow. Jesus could have ignored them but He cannot deny Himself and has compassion upon them. Miraculously He feeds the multitude with "five loaves and two fish."

The people eat their fill and Jesus again withdraws so that He might pray. In the middle of the night, He walks across the lake to the boat in which were His disciples. His disciples think He's a ghost but Jesus stems their fear. Then there is Peter, impetuous Peter. It is not enough for Peter to just know it is Jesus. He has to walk on the water, too. He takes his eyes off Jesus and begins to sink. Jesus, being Jesus, saves Peter. Jesus then moves on to another region but His fame preceded Him. People from all over the region are brought to Jesus to be healed by simply touching his garment.

Where does one begin? There are so many points to discuss. Maybe it is as simple as this: Truly you are the Son of God! And with these words all discussion ceases as we simply stand in awe of Him who does all things well.

ELDoNA PASTORS ATTEND ACLC CONVENTION IN IOWA

At the invitation Superintendent Robert Lawson, Jr. and the members of the ACLC, Bishop Heiser and three other pastors of the diocese attended the annual convention of the Association of Confessional Lutheran Churches. The convention took place at St. Timothy Lutheran Church in Williamsburg, Iowa from January 18 through 20.

Fellowship was recognized between the ELDoNA and the ACLC at the synod and convention of the two bodies last year following several years of fruitful theological discussion. At present, the ACLC and ELDoNA are exploring cooperation on various mission endeavors and the diocese's plans to open a seminary in the near future.

A large portion of the convention's agenda was devoted to worship, and to theological discussion.



Pastors present for the ACLC Convention: (l. to r., back row) Rev. Karl Heck (host pastor-ACLC), Rev. Stephen Schmidt (ACLC), Rev. Michael Henson (ELDoNA), Rev. Eric Stefanski (ELDoNA), Rev. Anthony Oncken (ELDoNA); (l. to r., front row) Rev. Robert Lawson, Jr. (Superintendent, ACLC), Rev. Steven Brockdorf (ACLC), Rev. Robert Lawson, Sr. (ACLC), Rt. Rev. James Heiser (Bishop, ELDoNA)

“Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God!”

It is not wealth by itself that is the problem. Truly, all of the worldly riches that any man possesses has come to him from God Himself, Who provides daily bread – “everything that belongs to the support and wants of the body, such as meat, drink, clothing, shoes, house, homestead, field, cattle, money, goods . . .” -- to all men (SC III). These come from God’s own hand, and are divine blessings indeed.

The issue for the rich man – and for the poor man -- is not these riches. It is the placing of his *trust* in riches that places one’s soul in grave danger. It is one’s *love* of money that is “a root of all evil” (1 Tm 6:10). It is man’s *fear* of poverty that leads him to serve mammon as his lord (Mt 6:24). Truly, it is hard – in fact, it is impossible – for the man who does not fear, love and trust in God above all things to enter the kingdom of the One True God.

Yet, with God, all things are possible. God commands all to look to Him as the source of all worldly wealth – or die – and kills the mammon worshiper. God invites all to see Him as the gracious and generous Giver, Who gave His Only-Begotten Son to save even idolaters from sin and death and to raise them up to new and everlasting life. God provides His Word and Sacraments through which He gives His Holy Spirit to rich and poor alike, “so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and lead a godly life here in time and yonder in eternity” (SC III) and thus receive the very Kingdom of God!

The Pharisees continue to hound Jesus. Like mangy junkyard dogs, they keep biting at the heels of Jesus. They keep looking for a point of vulnerability. Now the complaint is about Jesus’ disciples not following the tradition established by the Pharisees.

Is this nagging ever going to end? Well, yes! It will end when God allows these people to have Jesus crucified. The Pharisees, like their father the devil, will finally get what they want... Jesus dead. Throughout this past week we have read over and over again about the anger of the Pharisees toward Jesus. They thought they were godly because they thought they lived lives that were good enough to please God. But as Jesus says, “it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person.”

Many times we have heard people say, “How could he do such a thing?” Well, Jesus has given us the answer: “out of the heart...” You and I and the whole world are descendants of Adam and Eve. The problem with sinners is not so much what they do, though the sins people commit are indeed awful. The real problem with sinners is who they are. The problem of sin lies within us, within our hearts. We do not have to learn from others about “evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.” These sins reside deep within us and rise up from within us.

The only answer for sin is that it must die. God placed the sins of the whole world upon His Son and they were crucified with Him on the Cross. Even though we have life in Christ, our “body of death” must die. But baptized into Christ we were buried with Him and, as promised, will be raised by Him to live with Him forever.

From the Propers for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

The HOLY GOSPEL St. Matthew 13:24-30 (NKJV)

Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared."

So the servants of the owner came and said to him, "Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?"

He said to them, "An enemy has done this."

The servants said to him, "Do you want us then to go and gather them up?"

But he said, "No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn."

The COLLECT

O Lord, we beseech Thee to keep Thy Church and household continually in Thy true religion that they who do lean upon the hope of Thy heavenly grace may evermore be defended by Thy mighty power; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son our Lord, who liveth and reigneth, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

From the Propers for Sexagesima Sunday

THE GOSPEL St. Luke 8:4-14 (NKJV)

And when a great multitude had gathered, and they had come to Him from every city, He spoke by a parable:

"A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell by the wayside; and it was trampled down, and the birds of the air devoured it. Some fell on rock; and as soon as it sprang up, it withered away because it lacked moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up with it and choked it. But others fell on good ground, sprang up, and yielded a crop a hundredfold." When He had said these things He cried, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

Then His disciples asked Him, saying, "What does this parable mean?" And He said, "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is given in parables, that 'Seeing they may not see, And hearing they may not understand.'"

"Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away.

"Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity."

"But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience."

The COLLECT

O God, who seest that we put not our trust in anything that we do, mercifully grant that by Thy power we may be defended against all adversity; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

Not many days have passed since the Church celebrated the Transfiguration, and now, as we prepare for the coming of Lent in a few brief weeks, we behold the Lord as He descended from the mount with His disciples. Jesus told them not to speak of what they had seen “till the Son of Man had risen from the dead,” but the disciples then asked Jesus a question about Elijah instead of addressing the matter which was on their minds: “So they kept this word to themselves, questioning what the rising from the dead meant.” (v. 10)

The father of the demon-possessed boy openly confessed the weakness of his faith: “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!” (v. 24) The seed of faith had been planted in his heart; though it was weak, still the Word had taken root and was growing. The fruit of faith within this man was to see how frail his faith truly was; the word which the Lord spoke to him—“If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes” (v. 23)—was a gift from Jesus which strengthened the man’s faith. The word accomplishes that for which the Lord has sent it; and thus the man could, in the midst of his weakness, still confess the faith.

The disciples, for a time, remained silent. The Lord gave them a precious word concerning His victory over sin and death, and yet they remained silent; “... they did not understand this saying, and were afraid to ask Him.” (v. 32) Behold the merciful way in which the Lord responds to the weak faith of the father of the demon-possessed child! As the Lord so graciously strengthens the faith of such a person, surely He will not abandon those whom He has made partakers of salvation through water and the Word. By His grace, the saving Word is proclaimed to us, so that we believe, teach and confess that which Jesus taught His disciples: that the Son of Man was betrayed into the hands of men, and that he was killed, and rose again the third day. We have peace with God because of this atoning sacrifice for the sin of the whole world. Though our faith is weak, still it is from faith that we pray to the Lord: “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!”

This miracle follows immediately upon the heels of the casting out the demon of the Canaanite woman’s daughter. From there our Lord goes up into a mountain, and the lame, blind, mute, and maimed are brought to Him to be healed. Here we see our Lord’s compassion, for St. Matthew the Evangelist tells us that He healed all that were brought to Him.

We also see in this the two-fold faith of the people. First they have faith that the Lord Jesus would heal them, for they bring their sick to be healed by Him. Second, they show their faith in that after they are healed, they stay—for three days—to hear His preaching.

Just as the people’s faith was two-fold so is our Lord’s compassion two-fold. For He first has compassion on them by healing their infirmities, but He shows further compassion on them in feeding them after they abided with Him for three days.

In this we see a picture of the Church, for we who are spiritually lame, blind, mute, and maimed come to the holy house of God, and laying our iniquities at His feet, that is, in confessing our sin in the faith that He will forgive them, He has compassion on us and heals us, that is, He forgives us our sin. Having had our faith confirmed through the words of the absolution and the out-pouring the Holy Ghost, we are now able hear His holy Word and in faith gladly receive and hear it. And our Lord shows the abundance of His compassion for us by feeding us with His own Body and Blood given in bread and wine so that our souls may not have to fast, but may be nourished and given the strength to remain steadfast in faith.

Contrasted with the faith of the crowds who in yesterday's pericope brought the lame, blind, mute and maimed to our Lord to be healed, and who remained three days with our Lord hearing His preaching, is the unbelief of the Pharisees and Sadducees who come to the Lord to test and trap Him, so that they might have reason to lay hold of Him and kill Him.

The Pharisees and Sadducees come asking for a sign from the Lord, much in the same way that the devil tested the Lord in the wilderness, in order that He might prove that He was the Messiah. Our Lord's response is "*No sign shall be given . . . except the sign of the prophet Jonah.*" There is no need for a sign, for the sign was already there. Our Lord had just fed 5,000 and 4,000 men, plus women and children in the preceding days. Surely such events would not have remained so secret that the Pharisees and Sadducees had not heard of them.

The sign that will be given by our Lord—the sign of Jonah—who was in the belly of the whale for three days, is the same as the desire of the Pharisees and Sadducees, who desired Him to be dead. This sign is the same sign, and the only sign, that is given to all unbelievers—our Lord's suffering, crucifixion, burial and resurrection to win forgiveness of sins, eternal life and salvation for all those who believe on Him.

May we hold fast to this sign, and rejoice whenever we come into the Lord's house that we get to hear once again how our Lord proved that He was the Messiah by fulfilling the Law for us, and suffering and dying in our place on the cross.

Again, the Lord fed a multitude, and *still* the disciples worried about bread; when Jesus said to them, "Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod," they "reasoned among themselves, 'It is because we have no bread.'" (v. 15, 16)

There is a tremendous temptation for Christians to worry about all the wrong things, fretting over personal finances, or the support of the work of the Church, while giving but scant attention to a far greater threat than empty coffers: the leaven of false doctrine. Jesus' frustration with the disciples—"How is it you do not understand?" (v. 21)—addresses their sin-darkened reason, and our own, as well. The feeding of the 5,000 and the feeding of the 4,000 should have taught them not to worry about the Lord providing sustenance for His people, and yet the disciples still worried over a single loaf. But while men worry about loaves, Jesus asks a simple question: "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (v. 36)

By the grace of the Lord, we know Jesus according to that confession of St. Peter: "You are the Christ." (v. 29) Knowing Jesus to be the Christ, we know that all was indeed necessary as the Lord taught His disciples: "... that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." (v. 31) We know, too, that as those who have been joined to Christ Jesus in Baptism, we will bear our crosses in the midst of this vale of tears. By the grace of God, we are delivered from the fear of earthly loss, knowing the mercy of God which is ours in Jesus. Through the word of Absolution, we are comforted as often as we repent of our sins, and thus strengthened in faith, remain in that hope which the Lord has established for us. Jesus feeds His flock with His Body and His Blood, and in this communion we have the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation, and thus we have the living confidence that no loss of earthly goods or life can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

“For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men—the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do.’ He said to them, ‘All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition.’” (v. 8–9) The Pharisees were obsessed with their traditions—in this case, a tradition of washing the ‘outside’ of a person, while ignoring the uncleanness ‘inside.’

It is the nature of the mind corrupted by sin to imagine that all one needs to stand without fear before the Lord is to simply ‘clean up’ or ‘get one’s act together.’ But Jesus clearly teaches that the problem is not merely what is on the outside; rather, the corruption of sin goes to the very core: “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man.” (v. 21–23) Compared to all of this vile corruption, worrying about dirty hands is a pretty trivial concern.

We have no power of our own to address this font of evil within the heart of man, but Christ Jesus—who casts out demons by the power of His word—cleanses us through water and the Word in Holy Baptism. The Lord works salvation through His Sacrament to purify us of all that has been born in us from Adam, and which we, through our transgression, have added thereto.

The Lord had warned His disciples about the “leaven” of the Pharisees and Sadducees—the leaven that would have our Lord ruling as an earthly king in an earthly realm. In other words, before St. Peter had rebuked the Lord, he had already been instructed concerning these things, but the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees had crept in already. St. Peter desired our Lord to have an earthly kingdom—a kingdom like during the reign of King David.

On the surface this may not seem like a temptation into which we, or the Church of this generation, would fall. But this desire has been around throughout the ages of the Church. It was present when the popes desired their power to not only be over the spiritual kingdom, but over the government of the secular kingdom as well.

Today, this leaven is still present among us in those who want to set up an earthly Christian government. Now, we can admit this is tempting. Who would not desire that all the unbelief, lawlessness, and anti-Christian sentiment inherent in our world would go away? There are many who falsely believe that this would be the case if the government was run by Christians.

But our Lord does not desire to have us establish an earthly kingdom, those who do have not the things of God in mind, but the things of man. Our Lord instead desires for us to have a spiritual kingdom; a kingdom that is founded upon our Lord’s suffering and death for our forgiveness, life, and salvation. For this eternal kingdom, we in the true Christian Church on earth will suffer; we will bear a cross. Therefore, boldly take up your cross and follow after our Lord’s cross; the cross of your salvation.

The events of today's pericope follow immediately after the events of this coming Sunday's Gospel for the Transfiguration of our Lord. Upon coming down from the mount of Transfiguration, our Lord encounters a demon-possessed man whom the Apostles could not cure. Sts. Peter, James and John were with the Lord on the mount of Transfiguration with Moses and Elijah. They saw Him glorified; they heard Moses and Elijah conversing with Him about His approaching suffering and death. It was a taste of Heaven.

We also receive a taste of Heaven when we come into the holy house of our Lord. There He is glorified before us. We hear the prophets proclaim the promise of the coming Messiah. We hear the Apostles preach about our Lord's suffering and death. We even hear the words of our Lord proclaim His love for us and what He came to do for us in His own words. We hear how our sins are forgiven on account of His work of fulfilling the Law for us and offering Himself as a sacrifice for us and our sins.

But like our Lord and His Apostles who come down from the mount of Transfiguration, when we leave the holy house of the Lord, we are confronted with this world and the evil that exists in this world. And our prayer echoes the prayer of our Lord, "*O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you?*"

Our Lord hears our prayers of suffering on account of the life we live in this world. He knows our suffering and pain. He knows how sin and evil fill this world, and cause us to lament. He shares that lament. He knows it so well, that He willingly and lovingly offers up His life for yours, so that you might have eternal life with Him.

"Then He went up into the boat to them, and the wind ceased. And they were greatly amazed in themselves beyond measure, and marveled." These words recall to mind those which we heard a few weeks ago, in the Gospel for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany. When Jesus spoke and stilled the wind and waves, the disciples marveled, and said, "Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?"

St. Mark tells us the reason for their amazement: "For they had not understood about the loaves, because their heart was hardened." (v. 52) They still thought in terms of worldly loaves, and feared their loss more than they were concerned about the leaven of the Pharisees—that is, false doctrine. By Word and deed, the divine nature of the Christ was made known to them; the One who feeds the whole of mankind is the One who multiplied to loaves and fish to feed the 5,000. The One who spoke and called all of creation into being has but to speak a word and the wind and waves cease. It is this One who says unto His disciples: "Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid."

The disciples had wondered whether they beheld a ghost as they saw the Lord walking to them on the sea. On the day of the resurrection, this fear would return to them (Luke 24:37). It is the inclination of the fallen heart of man to trust too much to our reason and our senses, rather than relying on the Word of the Lord.

When Jesus beheld the great multitude, He was "moved with compassion for them, because they were like sheep not having a shepherd. So He began to teach them many things." (v. 34) What the sheep needed was to hear the Shepherd's voice, and—by the working of the Holy Spirit—to believe that which He proclaimed to them. The One who feeds the multitude, and delivered His disciples from the tumult of the sea, now feeds the flock with His Body and Blood and delivers His people from the tumult of this fallen world to the everlasting peace of His eternal Kingdom.

We heard on Septuagesima Sunday: “So the last shall be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few are chosen.” Yesterday we heard of the blessed miracles which the Lord performed, healing the woman with the flow of blood and raising Jairus’ daughter from the dead. But now, St. Mark relates that Jesus “went out from there and came to His own country, and His disciples followed Him.” (v. 1) The very people whom one might expect to place the most faith in Jesus are those who succumb to their doubts: “‘Is this not the carpenter, the Son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?’ And they were offended at Him.” (v. 3) Measuring these things by reason, and not according to the Word, they were offended by the Christ and “He could do no mighty work there, except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them.” (v. 5) The first were now last. The people took offense at the Lord’s humility, but Jesus did not give in to their desire for glory; instead He knocked away even more of their ‘props’: Jesus sent out His humble disciples to proclaim the Word and to perform such works as were pleasing to the Lord. If the worldly-minded were (and are) offended by Jesus, how much more so are they offended by those whom the Lord sends to proclaim His Word!

Thus we come to Herod and Herodias and their treatment of the Lord’s servant. One might speculate that Herod, without the pernicious influence of Herodias, might have repented; “for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just and holy man, and he protected him. And when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly.” (v. 20) Our flesh might wish that the account would end there! But we remember: “For many are called, but few chosen.” Herodias took offense at the faithful proclamation of the servant of the Lord, and by her great wickedness—and the weakness of Herod—she plotted the death of St. John. There was no victory for her in such a villainous act; rather, there was the surety that the judgment which the servants of the Lord proclaimed against the ungodly condemned her, as well. The servant was faithful to the Word, and the chosen rejoice in that Word of God which he proclaimed.

The Pharisees test our Lord Jesus today with a question about divorce, saying, “*Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?*” The Lord had preached about this in the Sermon on the Mount (quoted in verse 9), and it was these words of His from that sermon that they wished to challenge.

We see in this question the deceit and evil in their hearts. For a faithful heart has no need to inquire about divorce. If a man is faithful to his wife, (and vice versa) such a law seems unnecessary. But the fact that the question is asked shows that some form of unfaithfulness towards one’s spouse has already taken root in the person’s heart, and where this unfaithfulness exists, lustful thoughts, fornication and adultery lie waiting in the wings.

Our Lord answers the Pharisees with the very words of God, He “*made them male and female,*” not males and females, as if they could marry more than one. He also says “*the two shall become one flesh.*” There exists in marriage a bond of oneness—one man and one woman become one marriage. The reason for divorce, according to our Lord, is the hardness of one’s heart—our natural inclination towards unfaithfulness, even to our Lord.

However, we still see our Lord’s grace and mercy, for although we are unfaithful to Him through our sin, He still forgives us when we remain contrite and repent. Our Lord in His mercy provided a release from a marriage that was plagued with “*sexual immorality.*” But even where this exists, let us just as our Lord forgives us for our daily unfaithfulness and sin, also strive to have a merciful heart of forgiveness, wherever contrition and repentance are present.

Today's pericope is distinguished by two requests. One request was from the mother of the sons of Zebedee on behalf of her two sons, and one from two blind men on the side of the road. The first is an earthly request; a request for authority and greatness for her two sons. The second is a heavenly request; a request to receive mercy from the Lord, in order that they might receive their sight.

We can see from the response of our Lord in both situations that He is anticipating the question, "*What do you wish?*"; "*What do you want Me to do for you?*" The Lord seems willing to grant the request. However, the heart that asks the question is different in each case. The first is filled with pride and self-seeking glory, the second is filled with humility.

Our Lord Jesus rejects the first request, and fulfills the second. The natural question is, "Why?" The answer is a natural one as well, and it is centered in the opening discourse of our Lord to His Apostles. Our Lord is going up to Jerusalem to be betrayed to the chief priests and scribes, and He will be condemned to death, in order that He might purchase and redeem all the lost from the condemnation of sin, death, and the devil.

The Lord Jesus shows His humility in this act. The request of Sts. James and John is rejected because it is in opposition to the sacrifice of our Lord. The request of the two blind men is fulfilled, for it is for this very purpose—to rescue those who cry for mercy—that our Lord has come into this world. The Lord has come to free you from the darkness that envelops you on account of your sin by His humility and mercy revealed in His cross.

It is, of course, immediately obvious that there is a link between the two women in today's reading; the recurrence of twelve years makes the point evident on even a casual reading. The plight of the woman with the flow of blood and that of Jairus' daughter are similar in that the only possible relief for their afflictions rested with the Lord. Both of them were beyond the help of medicine: the woman had spent all that she had on doctors, without benefit (Luke 8:43), while the other died even as Jesus was travelling to heal her.

Both were, therefore, ritually unclean—one through the flow of blood (Lev. 15:25-30) and the other because of death (Num. 19:11-13)—and to touch either one meant that one would be unclean for seven days. But the woman sought to conceal her affliction, even as she came to Jesus seeking healing: "If only I may touch His clothes, I shall be made well." (v. 28) The Lord did not permit such concealment, but instead required that she speak concerning this blessing which she had received from the Lord (v. 33). The faith which resided in her heart was confessed with her lips (Rom. 10:9), and Jesus said to her: "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your affliction." (v. 34)

The woman who had suffered 12 years was thus granted healing at that moment to the glory of the Triune God and to the strengthening of Jairus in his faith. As soon as Jesus spoke His benediction to the woman, "While He was still speaking, some came from the ruler of the synagogue's house who said, 'Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the Teacher any further?'" (v. 35) It was for this moment that the woman endured her affliction throughout those years; the answer is akin to that which Jesus said regarding the man born blind: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him." (John 9:3) Her healing in that moment no doubt helped sustain Jairus and his household, even as the crowd mocked the Lord's word. Their lives intersect in the healing Word; though unclean and beyond the aid of man, the Lord heals and purifies them both. Whether we deem our crosses to be of brief or extended duration, the Lord's Word assures us of His grace.

From the Propers for Septuagesima Sunday

THE GOSPEL

St. Matthew 20:1-16 (NKJV)

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you." So they went.

Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, "Why have you been standing here idle all day?"

They said to him, "Because no one hired us."

He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive."

So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, "Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first."

And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, saying, "These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day."

But he answered one of them and said, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?"

So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.

The 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 Savior, who lives and reign with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end,

From the Propers for the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany (Transfiguration)

The HOLY GOSPEL

St. Matthew 17:1-9 (NKJV)

Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him.

Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!"

And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid. But Jesus came and touched them and said, "Arise, and do not be afraid." When they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

Now as they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead."

The COLLECT

O God, who in the glorious transfiguration of Thine only-begotten Son has 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, ever one God, world without end.

“Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’ it will be done. And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.”

Throughout the Holy Scriptures, the mountain depicts not only the place where God meets His people—as in this past Sunday’s Gospel proclaiming the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain top (Mt 17:1-9)—but also is a portrait of God Himself (cf. Ex. 33, Dan. 2). Jesus uses this latter image to teach His disciples a lesson about the power of the Church’s prayer. Even as it is humanly impossible to move a mountain, it seems equally impossible to move an Eternal and Unchanging God (Mal. 3:6) through prayer. Yet God can be moved—and, Jesus promises, will be moved—through the petitions of His faithful people.

Even as God in His compassion was moved in former times by the prayer of faithful Abraham to spare Sodom if ten righteous souls were found in that city (Gen. 18:16-33), so God is moved today by the prayer of His faithful people to hallow His Name, let His Kingdom come, do His will, give daily bread, graciously forgive, and deliver us from temptation, and the Evil One. We therefore ought to believe that He is our true Father, and that we are His true children, so that we may ask Him confidently with all boldness, as dear children ask their dear father. For truly the prayer of the Church is powerful, since that prayer will move mountains—even God Himself!

“Now a certain woman had a flow of blood for twelve years, and had suffered many things from many physicians.”

She suffered many things from many physicians, yet it was not quackery—nor even the absence of modern medical practice—that was the cause of this woman’s continuing misery. Even if she lived in our days, her spending of all that she had on medical care at the most advanced medical center could have been just as fruitless for this poor woman. As God’s Word proclaims in truth: *“Unless the Lord builds the house,”*—and that include the house of healing known as a hospital—*“they labor in vain who build it.”* (Ps. 127:1). That is, apart from the blessing of the Lord upon the ministrations of the medical center and its medical staff, a patient becomes no better.

God had not added His Word of blessing to the treatments given to this woman for the same reason that the man described in St. John 9 was born blind: *“that the works of God should be revealed in him.”* (Jn. 9:3). She suffered under the cross until the One Who would bear the cross for her wholeness—the healing of her body and soul together—would manifest His marvelous works in her. Jesus healed her body, to reveal that He is the Physician Who His Word governs all creation, including the means through which bodily health is treated and restored. Jesus also restored her in soul, removing all uncleanness from her, (Lev. 15) to manifest Himself as the One Who heals body and soul through the means of His healing Word, His cleansing Baptism, and His strengthening Supper. Truly a Great Physician is He, Who brings His blessing to make us whole—forevermore!

“And He looked around in a circle at those who sat about Him, and said, ‘Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother.’”

The Word of God transforms relationships. Jesus illustrates this truth in declaring those gathered around Him to be His own family: His brothers and His sisters—and even His mother! Little wonder why others thought, “He is out of His mind.” Yet, God’s faithful people continue to heed the Voice that thundered from the cloud: *“This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!”* (Mt. 17:5). That Word stops ringing in our ears, and then we tune them to hear His Son speak, believing that His Word is the Very Word of God.

That Word of Jesus transforms our relationships with Him. By nature, we are children of wrath (Eph. 2:3), our father being the devil (Jn. 8:44). To such children Jesus proclaims His Word through preaching and baptism, and through these means transforms us into the children of His Father, now Our Father. Jesus’ declaration creates a new relationship, and truly all who believe His Word are His brothers and sisters. We gather together in one as His Church and are His mother (cf. Gal. 4:19), in whom Christ makes Himself manifest in His very flesh and blood in, with, and under bread and wine. We live together as His family, considering one another as brethren through faith and esteeming one another as being “adorned and clothed with the majesty and glory of God” (cf. LC IV.20), though hidden now within our flesh just as Christ’s own was hidden then in His body. Such is the will of God for His holy family!

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.”

The Christian life is not about outer appearances, but inner realities. The hypocrite has set this truth on its head. The hypocrite—which comes from the Greek word for an actor—is focused precisely on the outward appearances. He is playing a role, concealing his real identity, and seeking to convince others by his words and deeds that he is someone else. Sadly, the hypocrite also conceals his identity from himself. He comes to believe that the persona he is projecting outwardly is his true self; his words and deeds become the measure of his religious life. In spite of his outward appearance as a real Christian, he has no real life inside. He—like each of us—has entombed within his body unclean and spiritually-dead flesh.

Woe indeed to the hypocrite! Repent of your acting, and confess the truth about your outer appearance. Lament the death within you, before it becomes eternal. Receive through faith the new inner reality that Christ creates through His Word and His Sacraments, for His Holy Baptism washes away all uncleanness and the Holy Supper of His Body and Blood brings life back to the dead bones of the Old Adam. Now within you is the new man in Christ, who projects your new identity through your words of truth to your neighbor, and your deeds of true love for your neighbor as you live before God in righteous and purity forever!

“Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also, because for this purpose I have come forth.”

That is the purpose-driven life that Jesus lived during His former days in this world. It is for the purpose of preaching in every place that He had come into the world, that every man might hear His proclamation: *“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.”* (Mk. 1:14). He would preach in one place, then move along to the next, all the while making His way to Jerusalem. At that final destination, Jesus delivered His greatest sermon and put into practice what He had preached all along, dying a humiliating death on the cross for our offenses and raising Himself from the dead on the third day for our justification through faith in Him (Rom. 4:25). This was His ultimate purpose, and He was driven by His own Word of promise and His own Holy Spirit to fulfill this purpose throughout this life.

So also Christ’s people are called to a purpose-driven life. Our primary purpose, though, is intimately connected with His. Even as Jesus has as His chief purpose the preaching of the Word, the primary purpose of each Christian is to be a hearer of His Word. Even as those who are hearers of the Word need a preacher to proclaim that Word to them (Rom. 10:14), so also the Preacher necessarily gathers hearers around Himself so that His Word does not return void but instead accomplishes the purpose for which He sends it (Is. 55:11). He has come to preach His message so that we, like Mary and not like Martha (Lk. 10:38-42), find ourselves driven to the first and foremost purpose of the Christian life: *“Repent, and believe in the Gospel!”* (Mk. 1:14).

“And Jesus said to them, ‘Can the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them?’”

As the words of Jesus in today’s reading clearly indicate, there is a time for fasting in the Christian life. Lutheran churches teach “that every Christian ought to train and subdue himself with bodily restraints, or bodily exercises and labors, that neither satiety nor slothfulness tempt him to sin.” (AC XXVI.33). Yes, we may fast, “but not that we may merit grace or make satisfaction for sins by such exercises.” (AC XXVI.33). In accord with St. Paul’s self-imposed bodily discipline, a Christian fasts properly “not to merit forgiveness of sins by that discipline, but to have his body in subjection and fitted for spiritual things, and for the discharge of duty according to his calling.” (AC XXVI.38-39). Therefore, Confessional Lutherans “do not condemn fasting in itself, but the traditions which prescribe certain days and certain meats, with peril of conscience, as though such works were a necessary service.” (AC XXVI.39).

During this final week of Epiphany, we continue to feast, in celebration over Christ the Bridegroom’s coming into the world. Christians do well to seek counsel from their pastors concerning the keeping of the Lententide fast, in commemoration of the Bridegroom’s disappearance from us to accomplish His Passion, death, and burial for our sins. Yet we do this acknowledging that “such usages need not be alike everywhere,” and that diversity among our fellowship concerning fasting “does not destroy the harmony of faith . . . [or] violate the unity of the Church” (AC XXVI.44). As with the Apostles, our true unity is focused in the preaching of “Godliness and a holy life” (AC XXVI.45) in the Crucified and Risen Christ Jesus!