

It is around 400 BC, and God’s divinely called prophet Malachi utters cutting words. The overwhelming majority have not listened to the Lord; they have walked contrary to His Word and will. They have robbed God and not trusted in Him alone for everything. They have served self and forsaken God. They honor the worldly successful and dishonor God because of their apparent lack of success.

Today is the end of another year of grace—the last day of this Church Year. How do Malachi’s words apply? To be honest, they cut to the core, for “all have sinned and fallen far short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23) “If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?” (Psalm 130:3)

But being slain by the perfect Law, the Lord does not desert us. Instead, He gives us certain hope, “But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared.” (Psalm 130:3–4) “Those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength,” (Isaiah 40:31) and this in His Means of Grace.

The remnant—the faithful few—repent and call upon the Lord, trusting in Him to hear and forgive and provide just as He always has done for His people. Once this brief pilgrimage ends, the Lord gathers His people to His inheritance—earned by His own suffering and death. He atones for our sins to make us holy.

The time of grace is at hand. Repent and continue to be nourished in Him in Word and Sacrament so as to remain faithful. Then the fullness of His glory shall be yours as you receive the crown of life from His nail-pierced hands.

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THE GOSPEL**St. Matthew 9:18-26 (NKJV)**

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Collect

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

Disaster and destruction were soon coming upon the rebellious Hebrew Southern Kingdom. In spite of being warned by the few faithful remaining prophets of God, the people chose to continue in the way of the world, the devil, and the flesh—the unholy trinity—as approved by the yes-men or company men of the established bureaucratic church. Corrupt to the core, these false prophets willingly fed the people the poison for which they begged.

This is the first intercession of the weeping and mourning prophet, Jeremiah, for God’s mercy upon the Southern Kingdom. As the divinely called pastor of God’s people, Jeremiah called them to task with the Law and then led them in repentance, begging for forgiveness for all of their backsliding and rebellion.

Jeremiah preached this around 602 BC. In fifteen years Judah would be destroyed. What are the correlations to our world and nation today? The hymn-writer Selnecker referred to his days as the “last days of sore distress.” (TLH 292:2) Certainly our days are no different as turmoil erupts and consumes the nations and the rebellious people. Obviously, while the calendar has changed, the people have not. (Ecclesiastes 1:9)

Let us listen to God in His Word, as proclaimed by our pastor, so that we may be right with God at all times! Let us repent of our myriad sins! The beloved disciple tells us something about such heartfelt confession, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9) The absolution of God through the pastor cleanses; live in this absolution as His redeemed!

A little over 700 years before Christ came into this world in His incarnation, Isaiah proclaimed these words of comfort to the Hebrew people, especially those who were downtrodden, despairing, and questioning whether God really cared about them in their trials and distress, and if He would ever fulfill His Genesis 3:15 Promise of a Messiah coming to deliver them.

What Isaiah preached seven centuries before the annunciation (and, then, Bethlehem) is just as applicable for His children today. When days seem dark and gloomy, when trials arise and tragedies confront us, when storms of doubt and affliction surround, when we become weak and feeble and faint from the attacks of sin, remember that our Lord does not abandon His perpetual care for His little flock, no matter where they are scattered. He still freely offers His healing and sustenance.

Where? In the same place the shepherds found it seven centuries after these words were proclaimed—in the Divine Service that is entirely Christocentric (“centered in Christ”). In His Bride, He still comes and nourishes His people whom He gathers through Baptism, the Supper, and the Word, read, preached and administered in Confession and Absolution. In this spiritual hospital of His Church, He is always available in His purely preached Word and rightly administered Sacraments.

What you need for daily life and its struggles, what you need for salvation, is all found in the Means of Grace. Gather in His House and wait upon Him so as to be washed and fed and nourished to go forth strengthened as His redeemed. He will never leave nor forsake you Who died and rose for you.

Our reading for today is the beginning of a series of “burdens” against the nations around God’s people and against God’s people for failing to follow His Holy Word.

God’s Word is often a burden. Isaiah, as God’s spokesman, had no choice but to proclaim God’s anger against sin. Our pastors, too, have no choice but to proclaim God’s anger against our sin. This is a burden placed on pastors who have been called to be God’s spokesmen. They are to speak God’s Word regardless of the consequences.

As Pastors proclaim God’s Law, the hearer’s reaction is often anger. We don’t want to hear God’s Word show us our sin and tell us to stop it. We really don’t want to stop. Our old sinful nature wants to keep on being sinful, just like it always does. We are as sinful as were the Old Testament Israelites.

We children of the Heavenly Father know that “the Word of God is living and powerful...seeing we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb 4).

If we “confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Thanks be to God. Amen.

After reading the first two verses of our text for today and realizing that Old Testament Israel was never restored to the grandeur Isaiah speaks of here, we may wonder if God kept His promise to “choose Israel, and settle them in their own land.” Isaiah is not writing about the nation of Israel. He is talking about the establishment of the Christian Church.

Like the Jews of Isaiah’s day, there is no reason that God should be merciful to us. In Ephesians 6 St. Paul says that like them, we too, “were dead in our trespasses and sins.” We were children of wrath just as they were. We don’t deserve any mercy or grace from the holy and righteous God.

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love, made us alive together with Christ. God sent His one and only precious Son to suffer and die to take the punishment our sin deserves. Then He raised His Son from death and with His resurrection raised us up to be His Church. For by grace we have been saved through faith, and that not of ourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, so we cannot boast.

Now we are God’s work of art, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which He has prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. What a great and merciful God we have! He saved us from sin and death by the sacrifice of His Son, placed us into His Church, and allows us to be His hands and feet to serve our neighbors. Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Amen.

The prophet Habakkuk, writing a good six hundred years before the birth of Christ, provides a brief prayerful summary of what the majestic Lord God had brought to pass both in blessing and judgment upon His people through the ages. He boldly preached against the evils in which the people had immersed themselves as they became the more callous in heart and life toward God. One might well call Habakkuk a preacher of gloom and doom and destruction.

Yet, this faithful prophet preaches such a message because he *loves* the wandering sheep and wants to draw them back into the fold as a good shepherd. Yes, Habakkuk is a type of the Good Shepherd. So great is his love for the arrogant and rebellious Hebrew people that he proclaims this unpopular message in the face of great animosity.

Habakkuk loves the Lord and he loves the people entrusted to his pastoral care. Therefore he pleads for mercy from the Lord upon the erring nation in the coming day of judgment—a day which transpires about 38 to 39 years in the future.

Sin has consequences, both temporal and eternal—for the Israelites, as well as for us. But we need not face an uncertain and tumultuous future on our own, for Christ is also our Leader. He takes our insurmountable debt of sin and washes it away in His spilt water and blood—thus, Baptism and the Supper. When confession is made, absolution is pronounced, and the sinner is saint; and this saint—you!—shall go forward in faith in Christ alone. Thanks be to God for His redemption in Jesus our Messiah!

Ezekiel, the divinely called prophet of the Lord, proclaimed the message of the Messiah to both Judah—the Southern Kingdom—and Israel—the Northern Kingdom. The promised coming Messiah would bring all of the faithful scattered children of God together as one—this would be the Church of the New Testament era. This prophet of God points the disillusioned and captive children to the Genesis 3:15 Promise which shall be fulfilled in the flesh-and-blood Christ, the *incarnate* Christ. This promise would come to pass in a little less than six centuries.

As God was faithful to His Word and, thus, rejected the rebellious Hebrew people of both kingdoms, their destruction thereby coming to pass at the hands of their enemies, so He would be faithful to His Promise of coming into the world as the God-Man to rescue the remnant, bringing them back together from the ends of the earth, making them one in His Bride. The covenant He would initiate would last forever.

As the trials, temptations, and persecutions increase around the world and evil breeds further chaos, as each day unfolds into the next, drawing us ever closer to Judgment Day, have no doubt that through faith alone in Christ alone, as He comes to us in Word and Sacraments within His Church, we shall be sustained in the one true and saving faith, equipped for life here and for heaven hereafter in His water and Word, body and blood. The Lord will not forsake His little flock for whom He has died in ransom, and for whom He arose in victory—and that victory is yours in Jesus now! Thanks be to God!

This reading from Isaiah, written about 700 B.C, foretold Jerusalem’s fall to Babylon and Babylon’s fall to Persia. This text reminds us that our God is in absolute control of history.

The Old Testament people of Israel often found themselves in difficult situations. They continually fell away from the Lord, and were defeated by the heathen nations around them. Yet God, through the prophets, repeatedly promised them that He was still their God, still in control of all things, and that He would deliver them.

This knowledge has been and still is a comfort to God’s people. It is by faith that you and I can say with St. Paul in Romans 8, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: ‘For your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.’ Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.”

Like God’s people in former days, we Christians of today are also “persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Our Triune God is Lord of all things. We are His people and through His Word and Sacraments He keeps us His own. No matter in what situation we may find ourselves, we need not despair. “If God is for us, who can be against us?”

Tuesday was Election Day in the United States. Before the election we had our hopes of how the country would be as a result of these elections. Today we may know the election results, but we do not really know what the results of the elections will be.

In today's reading, King Nebuchadnezzar wanted to know the future. Daniel told him, "The secret which the king has demanded, the wise men...cannot declare to the king. But there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets." Daniel knew the True God. We also know the True God. He has been revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ. The angel Gabriel told Mary in Luke 2, "behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever...."

This Jesus came to us in the Waters of Holy Baptism and made us new people; the One Who came to live, suffer, and die for the sin of all people; He it is who is still in control of all things. Man proposes—God disposes!

Whatever our feelings are about the results of the elections, or whatever situations or problems we may face, our God is still sitting on the throne and is still reigning. Thanks be to God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that He is indeed working all things for good to those who love Him.

Oh, Holy Trinity—Your will be done! Amen.

"Oh, that I had the wings of an eagle; I would fly away!" So exclaimed the overwhelmed farm wife and mother surrounded by four demanding little children; life seemed to be unloading too many things too fast, and she just could not keep up and get everything accomplished and still retain concord in the household. In the midst of the escalating trials and stress, she longingly wished for departure home to the everlasting peace of heaven.

Isaiah, nearly 700 years before Christ, gives a preview of the new heaven and the new earth—a place of joy and peace, comfort and safety for all the believing children of God. As the church year draws to a close, in a world where chaos is erupting in numerous places around the globe, Isaiah's words offer comfort amidst the strife of this pilgrimage. He assures us that our Lord is with us, that He will never leave us nor forsake us.

What God creates is for us—His beloved and redeemed children. It is not that we deserve any of it, but that He in His mercy and grace bestows it upon us because He loves us so very much. When we call upon Him in our every need, He is there to answer and provide, even in our greatest hours of trial and tragedy.

In Christ, pain and sorrow, sadness and separation, and all of the stressful burdens and trials of this life are diminished, and we can go forward in faith knowing that He has forgiven us and continually strengthens us in His Means of Grace within His Divine Service. What great joy!

Lesson from the Book of Concord

The Last Sunday after Trinity

ARTICLE XVII.

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

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

—The Augsburg Confession

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 9: DANIEL 7:1-28

TRINITY 24

From the beginning the question asked is “Did God really say?” Mankind has always wanted its own way. Cain, wanting His own way, killed Abel. The people at the Tower of Babel tried to build a tower to Heaven to take over from God to get their own way. During the Exodus God told the Israelites His will for them, and time after time they rejected Him and tried to have their own way. Throughout time, God’s people continued to reject Him in an attempt to get their own way. We New Testament people are no different. This has always been the desire of the old sinful nature of mankind.

God gave Daniel a vision of “great beasts” who were people and nations sinfully desiring their own way. God told Daniel that the beast “shall speak pompous words against the Most High.” He “shall persecute the saints of the Most High.” Throughout the history the “beasts of this world” have persecuted God’s Church. There are always those, both inside and outside the church, who try to destroy it and the Word of God. That is the way it is in the world, because of man’s sinful nature.

However, the victory belongs to God, and to His people. Daniel is told, “The court shall be seated. And they shall take away his [that is, the beast’s] dominion...then the kingdom... shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey Him.”

God promises His Church that we have the victory over sin, death, and the devil, now and forever!

It is clear from today's reading that Daniel was a student of the Old Testament. We read, "I, Daniel, understood by the books the number of years specified by the word of the Lord." The Holy Spirit taught Daniel why Jerusalem was defeated, the length of the captivity, and that they would be brought back.

Daniel knew these things, he believed these things, and he realized that he and the other people of Judah did not deserve to be returned to Jerusalem. They were sinners! Only shame was their due. They received just dues for their sin. But Daniel also knew that the Lord is merciful. He cried out, "O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and act! Do not delay...."

You and I are also unworthy of God's grace. We are sinful beings. We disregard God's Word and seek our will rather than God's will. But we, too, cry out to Him, "Lord, forgive for I am a sinner!" And he does! In His mercy He sent His only Son to live, suffer, and die on the Cross to take the punishment for our sin. He comes to us in His Word, in the Waters of Holy Baptism, and makes us new people. He keeps us as His own as He feeds us with His Word and His own Body and Blood in the Sacrament. And He has promised that He will bring us to the Last Day by His grace.

Like Daniel we can boldly come before His throne, confessing our sins, and saying: Lord, deal with us not according to our sin, but according to Your righteousness. Amen.

THE GOSPEL**St. Matthew 25:1-13 (NKJV)**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Collect

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

We are sometimes tempted to think, “How do we know the Bible is true? Other religions have their holy books, how do we know the Bible is right and those other books are wrong?” This is not much different from the devil’s original challenge: “Did God really say?” We answer: “God has given us His oath in Christ Jesus, sealed in His blood, testified to in His resurrection.”

St. Paul wrote, “As often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord’s death till He come.” As in a court of law, when an oath is required, it is customary to raise one’s right hand and swear that what you say is true, God swore an oath to us with upraised right hand—with His almighty Son raised up on a cross—and promised us that in Him we have eternal life; by Jesus’ resurrection, we have evidence that His promise, “Because I live, you, too, shall live,” is true. Moreover, God the Son left us the Supper of His Body and Blood that this oath might always be received by us and kept ever before our eyes and hearts.

We know that the few promises of God not yet been fulfilled will come to pass because Jesus died and rose again. Thus, the Church now prays and trusts that God would presently do what He has promised, even while having His watchmen constantly proclaim the historical truth of what God has already done. Such prayers are favorably heard, as God Himself commands us: “Give Him no rest till He establishes, and till He makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth.” Amen.

THE GOSPEL**St. Matthew 24:15-28 (NKJV)**

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

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

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

The Collect

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

Lesson from the Book of Concord Twenty-fifth Sunday after Trinity

XIV. Of Monastic Vows.

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

—Smalcald Articles, Part III

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 23: ISAIAH 60:7-22

TRINITY 26

We have such weak faith that it is difficult to imagine that heaven will be good and will be ours, that Judgment Day is a day for us to look forward to.

Sometimes, this is because our repentance is half-hearted at best, and we fear the wrath of God: we love our sin and cling to it far more than it clings to us. Other times, we dread the coming judgment, because we are far more connected to the things of this life than we ought to be. For this reason we pray that God’s kingdom might indeed come also to us, and that He would forgive even our sin of resisting His kingdom. God, in delivering us from evil, delivers us even from our own sinful flesh. He leads us away from evil to faith established solidly on His promises in Christ.

The glory of this life is nothing compared to the glory of heaven. Indeed, we suffer here mostly at our own hand. By hanging onto the things of this life, we lose eternal life. But God, in His mercy, frustrates our efforts to hold onto this life. The more we cling to this world the more suffering and sorrow we experience. The more we are turned toward Christ and the things of heaven, the more joy we have, even in the midst of earth’s chaos.

Thus, we express our hope: For thee, O dear, dear country, Mine eyes their vigils keep; For very love, beholding, Thy happy name, they weep. The mention of they glory, Is unction to the breast, And medicine in sickness, and love and life and rest. Amen. (TLH 614)

God has declared us righteous through faith in Christ, and walking by faith, that is, trusting what the Scriptures say, we are confident that our sins are forgiven.

We read and believe that God does not remember our sins...yet, *we* know our sins. Lying in bed at night when everything is quiet, the memory of our sin haunts. A word, a look, or some incident while standing in line at the grocery store calls to mind what we have done or said. “How could I do that?” we wonder. Moreover the devil accuses us day and night: “How do you dare hope to be in heaven with the holy God?”

We dare hope because He has spoken. No accusation against us can stand, because God declares us righteous. His judgment springs forth from His mercy in Christ with the power to save His people. Thanks be to God, after the judgment we will no longer be troubled by the shame of our youth! Every accusation against shall be seen to have failed, because the God who said, “Let there be” and there was has declared us righteous in His sight!

We pray: Thy love and grace alone avail To blot out my transgression; The best and holiest deeds must fail To break sin’s dread oppression. Before Thee none can boasting stand, But all must fear Thy strict demand And live alone by mercy. Therefore my hope is in the Lord, And not in mine own merit; It rests upon His faithful Word, To them of contrite spirit, That He is merciful and just; This is my comfort and my trust. His help I wait with patience. Amen. (TLH 329:2,3)

The king described by Daniel the prophet in today’s reading is the Antichrist—the man of sin and son of perdition.

Every false preacher who peddles antichristian doctrine is an antichrist. Our Lord warns us that there will be no shortage of false prophets in these last days. Yet, well do our Lutheran Confessions identify the Roman Pope as the very Antichrist.

The Pope doesn’t physically persecute the faithful as he once did, but he is still waging spiritual warfare against Christ. He still exalts himself as divine head over Christ’s Church. He still insists that salvation is not by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ. He still insists on such things as the worship of the saints and a works-righteous penitential system. He and his priests still offer, daily, that abomination of desolation—the “sacrifice of the mass”—in the holy place. He claims that the Body and Blood of Christ are sacrificed repeatedly upon the altar to make atonement for the sins of the living and the dead.

Let us not be fooled by this Antichrist’s kinder, gentler face. Nor let us be fooled by the great signs and wonders of any lesser antichrists. Let us continue to oppose him by the power of the One Whom the archangel Michael pointed to—our Lord Jesus. Jesus bore the curse of all and was sacrificed into death for sin, once and for all sinners. He alone stands, pleading for us at the throne of grace. He shall finally destroy the Antichrist together with all false christs and prophets, and He shall appear at the Last Day upon the Earth to usher His faithful into their redemption.

In the Sunday Gospel our Lord warns of Jerusalem's destruction and the tribulation of that time. Jerusalem's overthrow is a picture of Judgment Day, and the tribulation is a foretaste of that which besets the holy church in the end times.

Ezekiel prophesies of this tribulation in today's lesson. Gog and Magog and the host of nations allied with them against Israel, represent all of the enemies of spiritual Israel—God's church—which are arrayed against the faithful in these last days.

The tribulation is great indeed! In some corners of the Earth, Christians are thrown into prison and killed, while in our society we endure an ever-more vicious cultural persecution. False christs and prophets are everywhere, outside the church and inside, challenging the forgiveness and salvation found only in Christ. Worldly entanglements also seduce the faithful to forget their true Love.

Yet, the promise of this chapter is that God's people have already been redeemed. They have already been gathered into the peace and safety of God's land. The war is won. Satan is defeated, though he still prowls about for victims. As fierce as the enemies are, our God fights for us. Even in the midst of their raging we are safe and secure through help of the Lord. His wrath and jealousy have been poured out against His enemies since Christ has bled and died in our place and has risen triumphant from the grave. Take heart! The Lord of hosts of with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. We wait, now, only for the final fulfillment of our salvation.

Some find the Divine Service boring; even more fear that visitors or youth will find it boring. Certainly, there isn't much new from week to week...yet the Divine Service, since it gives us Christ and His gifts, is rightly seen as the road to life.

The ancient term "liturgy" relates to public service and public obligations—like one's duty to keep his road in good repair, that others might safely travel. We on the road to life are obliged to 'service' that road "for the life of the world." That is, so that others may receive Christ's gifts (and that we may, too!), we continue in the liturgy that gives Christ, without regard to what might 'excite' us more.

Perhaps, as mere children in the kingdom, we miss the beauty along the way, constantly asking, "Are we there yet?" Yet, this road leads us to heaven! Along it are the 'road signs' of God's Word that bring us ever nearer by grace. We need not understand everything about the road: we know where it goes! Thus, Scripture teaches that even a fool is safe in following the road to life, whereon he is brought to contrition, forgiveness, and encouragement in the true faith, being fed on Christ's body and blood, left standing on the threshold of eternity, ready to depart in peace.

Boring? Not if we understand the sights along the way: "Here stands the font before our eyes, telling how God did receive us. The altar recalls Christ's sacrifice, and what His table doth give us; here sounds the Word that doth proclaim, Christ yesterday, today, the same, yea, and for aye our Redeemer." Amen. (TLH 467:6)

God save us from charismatics—those who believe God is talking directly to them—especially when “they” are “us”!. Anytime we base faith on feelings or experiences we are ‘charismatics’. Looking for some supposed continuing revelation of the Spirit is to walk in rebellion, not in faith.

We read today: “Search from the book of the Lord, and read.” Right judgment comes only through the revealed will of God presented in the Scriptures. To follow Scripture, no matter what we feel or experience, is to walk by faith. In them, God’s judgment condemns us for our sin so that we might fear and turn from it before it is too late...and shows us that Jesus has borne our damnation, so that the God’s faithful Word also forgives the penitent and gives assured hope by His promises in Christ.

The world is a mess and getting worse, but God promises to save us and renew the earth for us. We don’t know this because of an emotion or experience, but because God said it in the Scriptures. Therefore, we pray: Speak, O Lord, Thy servant heareth, to Thy Word I now give heed; Life and Spirit Thy Word beareth, all Thy Word is true indeed. Death’s dread pow’r in me is rife; Jesus, may Thy Word of Life, fill my soul with love’s strong fervor, that I cling to Thee forever. Oh, what blessing to be near Thee, and to hearken to Thy voice! May I ever love and fear Thee, that Thy Word may be my choice! Oft were hardened sinners, Lord, struck with terror by Thy Word; but to him who for sin grieveth, comfort sweet and hope it giveth. Amen. (TLH 296:1, 2)

Ezekiel 39 concludes the announcement of doom upon the enemies of spiritual Israel that began in yesterday’s lesson. At the end of today’s chapter, the Lord speaks to the reasons for their captivity, which has application to the ongoing tribulation that must be endured by His New Testament Israel—the Church.

Old Testament Israel was taken captive, not because their enemies were strong, or because God was weak. The nations that conquered Israel could take no credit for their triumphs. This was, rather, God’s punishment on His people’s continuous idolatry and rebellion. God Himself brought about Israel’s captivity in order to prune His vine. Then He restored those who, by faith, were truly His own people. In so doing, He magnified His holy Name which was being blasphemed by the enemies.

So it is for the Church in these last days. Let us not think that the raging attacks we suffer from the enemies are due, in any way, to their power, or to any weakness on God’s part. Rather, precisely through tribulation God is pruning us and keeping us in the Church, for we must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God. He is reminding us always to be found in repentance for our sins and in faith toward our Redeemer, Jesus Christ. Thus, in His holy Word and Sacraments He pours out His Spirit upon us and forgives all our sins. For we once bore the shame of our unfaithfulness, but by faith in Christ, and through His mercy alone, we have been declared righteous; set free to dwell safely in His good land where He will never hide His face from us.

Israel's redemption was an act of mercy from the Lord. She had not earned it, nor did she deserve it. Israel had burdened her Redeemer with her sins and rebellion. Already in Egypt, she had rebelled, and that would continue through all the days of her wilderness wandering. Except for a few periods of faithfulness, Israel's history would be marked by an almost constant falling away into idolatry, until God would finally stay His wrath no more, and brought the Babylonians against her.

Yet, the Lord would open a path through the mighty waters of the Red Sea. Israel would pass through on dry ground and her enemies would be drowned. Throughout her wilderness pilgrimage He would prove Himself to be her deliverer and preserver. In the Promised Land, where her unfaithfulness got worse and worse, the Lord would hear her cries for mercy and deliver her. In the midst of her captivity, the Lord would accomplish a new thing. He would form and preserve a faithful remnant—a people for Himself who would live from Him and declare His praise.

So He has done. He has redeemed a new spiritual Israel, comprised of believers in Christ alone from all the nations of the Earth. In Holy Baptism, the Lord has carved a dry pathway through which He leads us to our heavenly home and in which He destroys sin, death and the devil. We have not deserved it, for we are rebels who have burdened our Redeemer with our countless sins and iniquities. Yet, repenting of our sins and trusting in Christ, our transgressions are blotted out and He remembers our sins no more.

There is a lot of false teaching in the world today, but the same was true in Jesus' day. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus repeatedly says, "You have heard that it was said...but I say to you..." It is not only significant that Jesus speaks *authoritatively* there, but also significant *to whom* He speaks. If we don't recognize the importance of to whom Jesus speaks, we will not quite understand the Sermon on the Mount. We will be bewildered by the fact that Jesus really doesn't say anything new, but restates the Law as given through Moses.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus fulfills the prophecy of our passage for today. Jesus restores the "pure language" to all peoples, and as they call on (better translated, "call in," as also in many other Old Testament passages) the name of the Lord, the basis for a right judgment is reestablished. Many subtly twist God's Word to their own and other's destruction, but Jesus came and restored pure language. Now God's Word, spoken faithfully, transforms His people so that they are not haughty—trusting in themselves—but humble, trusting in the Name of the Lord. The Name of the Lord is none other than our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, who identifies and expresses who and what God is. He was—and remains—in the midst of the assembly, gathering His people together by means of the pure language of a right understanding of God's word. So we rightly pray: "Lord, keep us steadfast in Thy word! Curb those who feign by craft and sword, Would rest the kingdom from thy Son, And set at naught all He has done." Amen. (TLH 261:1)

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

CHAPTER III, ARTICLE VI.

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

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

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 16: ISAIAH 33:17-24

TRINITY 25

Judah was in a terrible way. The powerful Assyrian army, which was gobbling up every nation in its path, was now on the march against her. Assyria would lay siege to Jerusalem in 701 BC, and dare the people (or their God) to defy the host of such a great strength.

In chapter 33, the prophet Isaiah promises that Jerusalem shall be defended and freed from the hand of Assyria. The people had humbled themselves and cried out for deliverance. The Lord would arise and rescue them: “You will not see a fierce people.” Their terrible enemy would disappear forever.

More than temporal comfort for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, though, today’s verses prophesy of the glory of the Messiah’s kingdom, accomplished in His redemptive work upon the cross. These verses provide a beautiful picture of the security and stability of God’s Church which is established upon the foundation of Jesus Christ. God is in the midst of His people as King, mercifully saving them and defending them from all their enemies. Most especially, He is in the midst of His Church to forgive His people all their sins.

By faith, the Church of Christ, amidst the distress of her present tribulation, looks forward to her future glory. Christ and His eternal salvation is the secret of the Church’s strength. The Church is none other than sinners who fully realize their own helplessness, who are deeply repentant, and who by faith receive the forgiveness of their sins and draw upon the Lord alone for all their strength. That is the abiding comfort of all believers.

To Ezekiel, the valley of dry bones must have looked like the end of all. Then God commanded him to prophesy to the bones: “O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! Thus says the Lord God to these bones: ‘Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live.’” So Ezekiel prophesied, and the bones came together with a great rattling.

What now lay on the ground were not simply dead bones, but dead bodies. Thus the Lord told Ezekiel to prophesy again: “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” As He prophesied, the Breath of God—the Holy Spirit—came and entered those dead bodies and suddenly they stood on their feet, a great army.

The preaching of the Gospel—the preaching of the death and resurrection of Christ for the forgiveness of sins—is the very life-giving breath of God the Holy Spirit that does what He says. We sinful and unclean—dead and dry bones—have been brought to life by Christ, the crucified and risen One, through the power of the Holy Spirit. In Holy Baptism, the Spirit blew over the water as the Word was spoken to us. There, we were raised up from sin and death and joined to Christ in His death and life.

Now, in these last times, we live in our Holy Baptism, and we wait for the final summons when Christ will come and “raise up me and all the dead and grant me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.”

THE GOSPEL**St. Matthew 25:31-46 (NKJV)**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Collect

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