

“And if you make Me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stone; for if you use your tool on it, you have profaned it.”

Why should cutting stone or shaping stone be such a problem? Why would that “profane” the altar? God is teaching us here that His blessing is not earned by our efforts. Even in the midst of the sacrifices that He commands, He wants us to know that the blessings are not the result of your efforts in that sacrifice. Your temples cannot house Me, nor do they impress Me. Your salvation will come from only one direction, from God. Don’t confuse God’s grace with the works of men’s hands. If men believe they have contributed to their own acceptance or righteousness, they have profaned God’s gifts.

It is the same today. If we believe that we can contribute to our salvation with our efforts or with beautiful things, we have thrown the gift of God in the mud. Today, the Sacrament we receive at the altar isn’t the body and blood of Christ because we believe it. It is His body and blood regardless of our belief. We merely receive it in faith, and faith is not a work. God is the mover. We are passive. Salvation and life come from only one direction.

We pray: Lord God, heavenly Father, give us grace to see and believe that You are the source of all our blessings, all our forgiveness, and all our life. Help us to put away any ideas that we can do more or earn more from You. Let us be willing and receptive vessels, in the Name of Your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

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God's creation was very good. It is a man-made falsehood that all things spiritual are good and all things physical are bad or inferior. From the very beginning God made us to have bodies *and* souls. We were not intended to be disembodied spirits for all eternity, much less are we to “evolve” into pure thought or energy, as the science fiction writers suggest. Sin caused the blessed order to disintegrate, not unlike it disintegrated our blessed relationship with God.

The importance of our physical reality is emphasized ultimately in the fact that God Himself took on flesh and blood in order to save us. God became a man and was born of the Virgin Mary to become one of us and redeem us from the sin that brought death and destruction to our lives! This is no small matter! Just as Eve's first sin had a physical and spiritual reality to it, the death of our Lord had very real physical and spiritual significance for our salvation from that sin.

The importance of God's good creation of physical things is also emphasized in the fact that He promises to make all things new in Christ Jesus when He will come again in glory, to judge both the living and the dead, and to grant His faithful people life in the world to come in the Resurrection of all flesh.

We pray: Lord God, grant us Your Spirit so we may abide in faith and be raised to everlasting life in Jesus Christ. Amen.

God is holy. To be holy is to be set apart, to be separate. God's holiness is such that it sets Him apart from all other beings. God's justice is an extension of His holiness. God is just because He is holy. He could be nothing else. His holiness would be violated if He were not just. And justice demands that the holy be separate from the unholy.

“Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to gaze at the Lord, and many of them perish. Also let the priests who come near the Lord consecrate themselves, lest the Lord break out against them.” No one can be holy enough to approach God, no one other than those God declares holy. It seems an inconceivable thought to modern man, but what if God does not accept everyone (or anyone)? First modern man must understand what it is to have a holy God, then understand his own unholiness. Only then can we understand what grace is. Only then would we understand what a Mediator is. We need someone who can approach the all-holy God for us, someone who will plead our case for us in front of this hurricane of a God.

Moses was only an imperfect shadow of that One. Christ is our holy Mediator who can approach the mountain, and has. The terrible God comes to us in the face of the Savior, the Lamb of God.

We pray: Lord God, heavenly Father, let us know our unworthiness and our sin, so that we may truly know our forgiveness in the Name of Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

Amalek is the grandson of Esau, great-grandson of Isaac. The Amalekites would have been a branch of the Edomites, who are descendants of Esau. How very different are the histories of the descendants of Jacob and the descendants of Esau. One line lives in the promise of God. One line drifts away from God. But God says, "I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven." God will utterly destroy the Amalekites in genocidal wrath.

Is this our God of love? We need to come to grips with the fact that our God is a destroyer, a bringer of wrath even against the women and children, the cattle, the sheep and all life. It is proper to fear God. He has destroyed for the seemingly smallest of infractions, the wrong incense, cheating a little on one's pledge of support. Many in our day say they cannot believe in such a God. How do we answer the charge that our God is a genocidal maniac?

"God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son." We still worship the God of the Old Testament, but now He has turned His wrath on Himself. We have come "to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel."

We pray: Oh Lord God, heavenly Father, let us truly fear You so that we may know how blessed we are to be the recipients of Your Gospel. May we always walk in the knowledge of Your fierce wrath, and in the knowledge of our freedom from it, in the name of Your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

From Dr. Luther's Large Catechism, the First Article of the Creed:

"This is what I mean and believe, that I am a creature of God; that is, that He has given and constantly preserves to me my body, soul, and life, members great and small, all my senses, reason, and understanding, and so on, food and drink, clothing and support, wife and children, domestics, house and home, etc.

"Besides, He causes all creatures to serve for the uses and necessities of life sun, moon, and stars in the firmament, day and night, air, fire, water, earth, and whatever it bears and produces, birds and fishes, beasts, grain, and all kinds of produce, and whatever else there is of bodily and temporal goods, good government, peace, security.

"Thus we learn from this article that none of us has of himself, nor can preserve, his life nor anything that is here enumerated or can be enumerated, however small and unimportant a thing it might be, for all is comprehended in the word Creator.

"Moreover, we also confess that God the Father has not only given us all that we have and see before our eyes, but daily preserves and defends us against all evil and misfortune, averts all sorts of danger and calamity; and that He does all this out of pure love and goodness, without our merit, as a benevolent Father, Who cares for us that no evil befall us."

We pray: Lord God, Heavenly Father, we thank You for all the blessings of this life for our body and soul. Preserve them according to Your divine goodness and mercy, and keep us always steadfast in Jesus Christ, Who is our abundant life and salvation. Amen.

From Dr. Luther's Large Catechism, the Fifth Commandment:

“Thus by the devil's incitement you will get many enemies who cannot bear to see you have any good, either bodily or spiritual. When we see such people, our hearts, in turn, would rage and bleed and take vengeance. Then there arise cursing and blows, from which follow finally misery and murder. Here, now, God like a kind father steps in ahead of us, interposes and wishes to have the quarrel settled, that no misfortune come of it, nor one destroy another. And briefly, He would hereby protect, set free, and keep in peace every one against the crime and violence of every one else; and would have this commandment placed as a wall, fortress, and refuge about our neighbor, that we do him no hurt nor harm in his body.

“Thus this commandment aims at this, that no one offend his neighbor on account of any evil deed, even though he have fully deserved it. For where murder is forbidden, all cause also is forbidden whence murder may originate. ...

“Here [in Matthew 5:46] we have again the Word of God whereby He would encourage and urge us to true noble and sublime works, as gentleness, patience, and, in short, love and kindness to our enemies, and would ever remind us to reflect upon the First Commandment, that He is our God, that is, that He will help, assist, and protect us, in order that He may thus quench the desire of revenge in us.”

We pray: Heavenly Father, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

God provides sustenance for His people. He gives and sustains life in the midst of death. The Israelites are in the desert. It is an inhospitable place for human life. Water is scarce. Crops do not grow. Without provisions, man could not live long. This is also true for us in this inhospitable world.

Our spiritual life would wither and die without provision from God. He both gives us life and sustains life. We receive life first at the baptismal font. We are born there. Our life begins. We sustain that life with the Bread from Heaven, who comes to us in the Holy Sacrament of the Altar. As Moses made the water useful by means of a tree, so our Lord gives us the water of baptism from the water out of His side as He hung on a tree. As God sustained the children of Israel through bread from heaven, we live from our eternal bread from heaven, Jesus in the Holy Eucharist.

The Church is now the people of God, the children of Israel. We are led through this desert of the world on our way to our promised land in heaven. God gives us the water we need for life in baptism and the bread we need for life at the altar. We are but strangers here. Heaven is our home.

We pray: Lord God, heavenly Father, help us to appreciate and faithfully use the sacraments You provide for our eternal life. May we see ourselves as a people gathered around the altar receiving the Bread of Life. In the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our God always fights for and preserves His people in the midst of an ungodly world. We can become very discouraged with the continual advance of perversion and wickedness in the world. We can become depressed because of the growing opposition to the Church from civil authorities, but we must always remind ourselves that God has the world in the palm of His hand. He has promised His Church victory over the world, and though it may not seem like He is doing anything, He is orchestrating all things for His ends and our good. “Who is like You, O Lord, among the gods?”

Who does wonders for His people like our God? When St. Boniface of Mainz evangelized the pagan Saxons, he could confidently cut down the sacred oak, knowing that Thor could do nothing. The other gods are nothing. Only our God exists and works for His people. The Canaanites and the Philistines were more than a match for the children of Israel, but they were no match for Israel’s God. It is fashionable to claim different or unusual gods today, but it is a game, for even the new pagans don’t really believe their gods exist. There is only one God who truly exists.

We pray: Lord God, heavenly Father, strengthen us in our faith in the midst of this hostile world. Bring to our remembrance your promises for our eternal reward. Help us to remain faithful and hopeful as we trust in Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

From Dr. Luther’s Large Catechism, Exposition of the Appendix to the First Commandment:

“‘For I am the Lord, thy God, strong and jealous, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love Me and keep My commandments.’

“Although these words relate to all the commandments (as we shall hereafter learn), yet they are joined to this chief commandment because it is of first importance that men have a right head; for where the head is right, the whole life must be right, and *vice versa*. Learn, therefore, from these words how angry God is with those who trust in anything but Him, and again, how good and gracious He is to those who trust and believe in Him alone with the whole heart; so that His anger does not cease until the fourth generation, while, on the other hand, His blessing and goodness extend to many thousands, lest you live in such security and commit yourself to chance, as men of brutal heart, who think that it makes no great difference. He is a God Who will not leave it unavenged if men turn from Him, and will not cease to be angry until the fourth generation, even until they are utterly exterminated. Therefore He is to be feared, and not to be despised.”

We pray: Lord God, make us to call upon Your Name in true fear, love, and trust, and grant us true comfort in all Your holy blessings, especially in our salvation through Your Son Jesus Christ; In His Name, Amen.

From Dr. Luther's Large Catechism, the Seventh and Last Petition of the Lord's Prayer, "But deliver us from evil. Amen.":

"Therefore there is nothing for us to do upon Earth but to pray against this arch-enemy without ceasing. For unless God preserved us, we would not be safe from him even for an hour.

"Hence you see again how God wishes us to pray to Him also for all the things which affect our bodily interests, so that we seek and expect help nowhere else except in Him. But this matter He has put last; for if we are to be preserved and delivered from all evil, the Name of God must first be hallowed in us, His kingdom must be with us, and His will be done. After that He will finally preserve us from sin and shame, and, besides, from everything that may hurt or injure us.

"Thus God has briefly placed before us all the distress which may ever come upon us, so that we might have no excuse whatever for not praying. But all depends upon this, that we learn also to say Amen, that is, that we do not doubt that our prayer is surely heard, and shall be done. For this is nothing else than the word of undoubting faith, which does not pray at a venture, but knows that God does not lie to him, since He has promised to grant it."

We pray: Heavenly Father, deliver us from the evil one and all perils of our body and soul. Keep us safe in Christ Jesus and His Body, the Church, so that we may be carried safely through this time of sin and death to the life of the world to come in Your Son's glory; In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Of course the waters of the Red Sea are a tremendous symbol for us. In these waters we see our baptismal water. Just as the water of the Red Sea is the passageway for the children of Israel from their slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land in Canaan, the water of baptism is our passage way from slavery to sin to our promised land of heaven. And so, heaven is ours by grace through faith, but repentance and faith must continue. We must continuously remember our baptism in faith. The water is never left alone. It is accompanied by faith. Those who remain in faith find the eternal Promised Land. But the water becomes a source of condemnation to those who harden their hearts. Those who do not receive this blessing of God in faith will be destroyed just as Pharaoh was.

The sacraments don't work as magic incantations. They are the application of the living Word to us that brings our salvation. We receive our baptism in faith, letting God do His work on us. "See the salvation of the Lord, which He will accomplish for you today."

We pray: Lord God, heavenly Father, make us mindful of our baptism each day that we may live lives that glorify you. Help us to remember that faith is a living, active thing so that we may not just trust in a faith that once was, but now still is a part of our daily life. In the Name of Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.

The pillar of cloud and pillar of fire stood before the children of Israel, day and night. These were visible reminders to the children of Israel that they would reach their destination.

God had given this same sign to their father Abraham. The Lord declared to the childless Abram that he would have a multitude of descendants, and that they would have a land to call their own one day. God then gave a sign to Abram to confirm these promises. After leading Abram to perform specific sacrifices and to lay out the flesh of the sacrificial animals upon the ground, God stood in the midst of the sacrificed flesh, making His appearance in the form of a smoking oven and a burning torch. God's presence within the sacrificed flesh indicated that these sacrifices were symbolic of the great sacrifice that He would make of His own flesh in the person of His Son. It signified that God was gracious toward Abram and His descendants—toward all who likewise believed God and were declared righteous through faith—for the sake of Christ. The cloud of smoke and pillar of flame that went before Israel in the wilderness testified to the enduring grace of God toward the faithful children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, all the way to the promised land.

Along your way through the wilderness of life in this world, God grant you to witness the signs of His abiding presence and enduring grace—His Word and His Sacraments—and the assurance that He will lead you to the Promised Land of Heaven.

We pray: I would have lost heart, O God, unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Keep me in the true faith unto the end. Amen.

From Dr. Luther's Large Catechism, the Third Article of the Creed:

[This article means,] "I believe that there is upon Earth a little holy group and congregation of pure saints, under one head, even Christ, called together by the Holy Ghost in one faith, one mind, and understanding, with manifold gifts, yet agreeing in love, without sects or schisms.

"I am also a part and member of the same, a sharer and joint owner of all the goods it possesses, brought to it and incorporated into it by the Holy Ghost by having heard and continuing to hear the Word of God, which is the beginning of entering it. For formerly, before we had attained to this, we were altogether of the devil, knowing nothing of God and of Christ.

"Thus, until the last day, the Holy Ghost abides with the holy congregation or Christendom, by means of which He fetches us to Christ and which He employs to teach and preach to us the Word, whereby He works and promotes sanctification, causing it [this community] daily to grow and become strong in the faith and its fruits which He produces.

"We further believe that in this Christian Church we have forgiveness of sin, which is wrought through the holy Sacraments and Absolution, moreover, through all manner of consolatory promises of the entire Gospel. Therefore, whatever is to be preached concerning the Sacraments belongs here, and, in short, the whole Gospel and all the offices of Christianity, which also must be preached and taught without ceasing."

We pray: Lord God, Heavenly Father, grant us Your Spirit and keep us steadfast in Your holy Church, which is the Body of Jesus Christ, our Lord; In His Name. Amen.

People might read this passage and get tangled in figuring and counting. Exactly how long were Noah and his people aboard the ark with the various pairs of creatures? What is the gestation period for the sundry animals, the hatching time for the birds' eggs? How long would it take an olive tree which had been submerged once again to produce healthy leaves and what effect would ocean saltwater, which surely blended with the flood waters, have had on dry-land plant life? Did the building of the altar and the burnt offering take place immediately, or was there an intervening period of time so as to allow replenishment of the species before their sacrificial death at the altar? Or was the sacrifice taken from the original seven pairs of each creature?

God was in charge of these things from beginning to end. It was God who said when to board the ark, and it was God who said when to disembark. God has kept His promise not to destroy the earth again with a flood, and even though the seasons march along in natural order, seedtime and harvest, winter and summer, on the Day of the Lord this earth will be destroyed. Not by flood, but there will be a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.

We pray: Lord God, heavenly Father, grant for Jesus' sake that all who have passed through the water of Holy Baptism be faithfully transformed by the renewing of their minds to believe that which You have spoken, and not to second-guess You where, in Your wisdom, You have remained silent. Amen.

In light of the amazing event that was unfolding before their very eyes on that night, the idea of enriching themselves with the treasures of the Egyptians before leaving the land was not on the minds of the children of Israel. In fact, the Israelites had not even made the basic provisions for the journey that they were beginning on that very night. Even the bread in their kneading bowls remained without leaven. None of these things mattered much to them, however. What really mattered was taking part in the amazing event that God was performing: Israel's True King was leading His subjects out of the servitude of Egypt, and it was time to go with Him.

Yet, to bestow blessing upon blessing to His children, the Lord had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians. Even as the vast multitude of Israel was making its way out of Egypt in the middle of the night, God directed the children of Israel to ask the Egyptians for articles of silver and gold as well as clothing, which the Egyptians gave willingly. By the additional gifts that God graciously provided to His people even while He was giving the greater gift of deliverance, God was teaching His people of a most vital truth: attend to the things that really matter, and the Lord would attend to the rest. He provides all things—spiritual and physical, great and small—that His people need.

It is the same for you. As Jesus says, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matthew 6:33).

We pray: You, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek You. Make me to ever put my trust in You, Amen.

“This month shall be your beginning of months” (Exodus 12:2). By this Word God created a new annual calendar for His people. From that time forward the children of Israel would have a distinctive way of determining the date for the start of a new year. It was centered on the date for the Passover, the night during which God demonstrated that He alone is God, striking the households of those who worshiped the false gods of ancient Egypt with death while passing over the households of His faithful people, each of whom had marked their doors with the blood of the sacrificial lamb. On that very night Egypt’s pharaoh, whose own home was touched by the death of his firstborn son, finally released Israel from captivity in accord with God’s demand. So that future generations of God’s people would have additional visible signs of God’s enduring mercy toward His faithful children, the annual commemoration of Passover fell at a time when the night sky was in the same orientation as it had been on that most memorable night in Egypt.

For God’s faithful people, the calendar remains centered on the commemoration of God’s deliverance of His people at the time of the Passover. The annual calendar of the Christian Church revolves around the date of the first full moon following the Spring equinox, commemorating the Passover night in which God sacrificed His Lamb to atone for the sins of all the world and struck His Firstborn Son with death as the punishment for all sinners—and celebrating, on the third day thereafter, the rising of the Son in victory over sin, death, and the grave for all the faithful who mark the doorways of their hearts with His blood.

We pray: My times are in Your hand; deliver me, O Everlasting God. Amen.

The descendants of Noah were fruitful and increased in number. However, that there was only one language testifies that they had not spread out over the earth as God intended, but were localized. The imagination of man’s heart being evil from his youth, they planned the construction of a lofty tower to glorify themselves, worshiping the creature and not the Creator.

The Lord had other plans and intervened in order to frustrate their conceit by scattering them across the face of the whole earth and confusing their languages. Millennia later, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit came in power upon the people assembled in Jerusalem for Pentecost. Saint Peter preached the first sermon in Christendom and what is known as a miracle of tongues was actually more a miracle of ears. Peter, a Galilean fisherman, spoke in his own tongue and people from far-flung places heard him in their own language. This foreshadowed the inclusion also of non-Jews as children of light, recipients of God’s grace in Christ. Indeed, Jesus at His ascension had instructed His followers that they were to be His witnesses even to the ends of the earth, speaking and hearing God’s truth in Christ till that hour when every knee will bend and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

We pray: O Lord, open Thou my lips and my mouth shall show forth Thy praise. Grant me the wisdom and courage to speak Your truth with love and the faith to trust that the Holy Spirit will resolve ‘translation’ issues as He does His Gospel work of calling, gathering, enlightening, and sanctifying; forming the Church and keeping it with Christ. Amen

“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country” (Hebrews 11:8-9). The people of the earth had spread far and wide, as God had willed it. There were distant lands and different cultures, foreign countries. God, who knows all things, commanded Abraham (Abram) to venture forth into the great unknown, and Abraham, in the assurance of things not seen, obeyed. Embedded in the command was the promise that not only would God provide him protection, and not only that God would make him a great nation, but also that all the families on earth would be blessed in him; your family and mine included.

We see Abraham, for all his obedience, not only as a hero of the faith, but also as a sinner, being fearful and, therefore, less than honest with Pharaoh as concerned his wife. Still, God’s promise is based not on human performance, but on His own grace and faithfulness. We also may be assured that Jesus will never leave us or forsake us, that He is with us always, wherever our journey leads. What is more, He will never turn away from the one who turns to Him for forgiveness.

We pray: O God, You have called Your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that Your hand is leading us and Your love supporting us. Amen.

God had pronounced a harsh judgment upon all of Egypt because of the disobedience of one man. The refusal of Pharaoh to obey God’s command would result in a grave punishment upon the entire nation. Acting on behalf of every subject of his kingdom, the king was responsible for bringing ruin to his entire nation. His sin and its consequences were counted against every member of his kingdom.

One man was the cause of our ruin, too. The disobedience of our father Adam to the clear command of God brought judgment not merely upon himself, but upon his entire household. As the head of the entire human family, Adam is responsible for causing the punishment for his sin to fall upon all of his children, even to each of us. The consequence of that original sin—death to all—is grave enough, yet we confirm our just condemnation when we add our own sin to our accounts.

One Man, however, is the cause of our deliverance from it all. Christ Jesus is the Greater Adam Who has come to reverse the curse of Adam’s sin, and every man’s sin. The Only-Begotten Son of God is the One Man Who has obeyed every command given by God to man, so that any man who believes in Him is accounted obedient to God. Even more, this One Man died the one death for the sins of all men, so that any man who believes in Him is declared forgiven of all sins. The Lord truly does make a difference between Egypt and Israel, bring His righteous judgment against those who refuse to believe in Him and delivering the faithful for the sake of the One Man, Christ Jesus!

We pray: But You, O Lord, are a shield for me, My glory and the One who lifts up my head. Amen.

It is impossible for a man to look into the heart of another—whether God or man--and determine the inner disposition of that heart. We can know this hidden, inner character only through outward words and actions. The words by which God names Himself are particular revelations of His character. Each of the many different names that God ascribes to Himself testifies to a particular facet of His nature. Additionally, God confirms this word about Himself with a visible demonstration that the name describes Him perfectly.

In today's reading, God prepares His people for yet another demonstration of His character, this one associated with His Name, "Lord." While this particular title for God Almighty certainly was not unknown to the ancestors of the Israelites, neither Abraham, Isaac, nor Jacob were witnesses to the type of demonstration that God soon would give to the children of Israel to confirm that this name reveals His character as "Redeemer." The children of Israel would see the Lord redeem His people Israel, relieving them from their burdens, rescuing them from their bondage, and bringing them to the land promised to their fathers.

A later generation of Israel would witness another demonstration of God's character as "Lord," when He came with an outstretched arm—stretched out and nailed upon a cross--in the person of His Son. His word and work cause all who bear the Name "Israel"—every person within whom God's Holy Spirit has created faith through Word and Sacrament—to confess in word and deed: "I believe that Jesus Christ, true Son of God, has become my Lord" (Luther's Large Catechism).

We pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. Amen.

The Lord had blessed faithful Abram in a variety of ways. Not only had he been assured and reassured that he would have countless descendants, and that the whole earth would be blessed through him, Abram also accumulated vast numbers of livestock and much gold and silver along the way. Pharaoh's interest in Abram while he was in Egypt because of famine in his own land was not only because Sarai, his wife, was a great beauty, but also because Abram was far more than a well-to-do itinerant keeper of flocks. He was a very wealthy man, a veritable prince among his people. His nephew Lot was similarly wealthy. In fact, sojourning together, the land could no longer support their livestock. It was creating conflict among their herdsman. So Abram, in his wisdom and humility, not only suggested that he and Lot divide their assets and go their separate ways, but also that Lot choose first. Lot selected the lush pasturelands of the Jordan valley, which had not yet been destroyed because of the rampant immorality of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Abraham foreshadowed Christ's great humility where He divested Himself of all divine prerogatives for our sake. Abram set a wonderful example for us whom Saint Paul urges to "walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1-3).

We pray: Father in heaven, continue to strengthen us in faith toward You and fervent love toward one another, always eager to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Amen.

Although no place was safe against the violence of avacious kings, Lot chose a place that was considerably more vulnerable in that regard. There had been conflict between Lot's herdsmen and Abram's, but there was no enmity between the uncle and the nephew, as Abram quickly assembled his household guard and his allies' men and went after the malefactors who had taken Lot.

Alliances then, as now, are important. They served for the purpose of mutual defense, but were not without other advantages—"to the victor go the spoils." Abram would have none of it for his own gain, but did accept operational expenses and that which rightly belonged to the allies under his command. He would not, by enriching himself with material gain, take credit for a victory that belonged to God alone.

It was, in a very narrow sense, a victory that was not a victory. Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem (also known as Jebus and Jerusalem) was present to speak a blessing on Abram. He serves here to point to the fact that Jesus, who is a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek, would suffer and die in Jerusalem. His was a defeat that was not a defeat, as Jesus rose again on the third day, victorious over sin and death forever.

We pray: Lord of heaven and earth, keep us focused on Your Word, both that which foretold our deliverance at Jesus' expense, and that which speaks more directly of His suffering and death in our place on the cross at Jerusalem; for it was not with silver or gold that we were redeemed, but with the precious blood of Christ. Amen.

The devil knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men. The devil knows how to stir up those hearts through his lies, stirring a man like Pharaoh to pour out his wicked thoughts toward Israel through harsh words and cruel acts. The devil knows how to use Pharaoh as his surrogate to strike at the hearts of God's people. The devil knows how Pharaoh's refusal to let Israel go and worship God undermines the heart's belief that the Christian's religious freedom is a God-given right, not a governmentally-controlled privilege. The devil knows how Pharaoh's imposition of harsh labor upon Israel clouds the heart's recognition that the Christian's work is given by God as a means to glorify Him by faithfully serving our neighbor in love in every circumstance. The devil knows how to make these attacks upon the heart successful through his deceptive interpretations concerning the troubles God's people face in this broken world.

However, your Creator knows the evil that lurks within every heart on account of the fall into sin—but He alone knows how to set the heart aright again. God knows to send His Very Heart, His Only-Begotten Son, into this world to live the righteous life before God, to die the sacrificial death for every sin, and to rise to life again to proclaim the justification of every heart who trusts in Christ Jesus. God's Holy Spirit knows how to soften the sin-hardened heart through the Holy Word, to cleanse the heart of all impurity through Holy Baptism, and to strengthen and enliven the heart with Christ's very flesh and very blood in His Holy Supper. Truly, God knows your needs, and fulfills them all, to the joy of your heart!

We pray: Create in me a clean heart, and renew a right Spirit within me. Amen.

Doctrine and Practice

The 'Gesima' Sundays

"The names Septuagesima, Sexagesima and Quinquagesima point forward to Easter, these Sundays falling within the seventh and the sixth decades and upon the fiftieth day before that great feast. The Propers of the three Sundays provide a transition from the joyousness of the Christmas and Epiphany cycles to the stern penitential season of Lent. Momentous historical events originally led to the choice of the Lessons and the composition of the Collects for these days. This accounts for the strongly individual character of these Sundays.

"In 568 Pope John III appointed these Sundays as days of supplication in view of the perils threatened by the invading Lombards. Fear of impending disaster and trust in God are alternately expressed in the Introits and Graduals and in the earnest petitions of the Collects for these Sundays. The prayers and other Propers were retained in the Liturgy after the long-continued threats of invasion had ended, and have now received a spiritual interpretation.

"... The Gospels for Septuagesima (the vineyard) and for Sexagesima (the sower) were originally chosen for early spring when the farmers prepared their vineyards and fields. The later extension of Lent pushed these selections back so that they now normally come at the end of winter.

"These Sundays have marked individuality and a Lentenlike intensity of spirit. This is announced thematically in the Introit for Septuagesima, which speaks of being 'mercifully delivered' and 'defended in all adversity.' The Epistle and the Gospel sound the warning that although many be called, few are chosen. The Gospel extols God's goodness but the Epistle exhorts us to self-discipline and endeavor; an intimation of the approaching Lententide. In keeping with this, the Hallelujahs of the Graduals are replaced, beginning with this Sunday, by 'tracts' which continue in use throughout Lent."

—Luther Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 450–451

SATURDAY, JAN. 16: GENESIS 15:1-21 1ST SUNDAY A. EPIPHANY

God "cut" a covenant with Abram. The solemn practice was for sacrificial animals to be cut down the middle lengthwise, the parties entering into agreement sealing their obligation by walking between the halves, signaling that if either of them did not keep the promise a similar fate would befall them. But it was God who made the covenant, His active presence symbolized by the smoking pot and the torch. Abram, for his part, had fallen into a deep sleep. (How often an infant is brought by parents and sponsors to the font for the Sacrament of Holy Baptism and, unless the water has chilled greatly, sleeps through the entire process as God gives new birth in water and Word!)

Abram had been promised an heir, one who would not be adopted, but who would be flesh of Abram's flesh, his own natural son. That promise was fulfilled in the birth of Isaac in Abram's old age, and would ultimately manifest itself in the Christ, flesh of our flesh. Jesus, through His death in our place, that is, by taking the consequence of all our unfaithfulness on His own sinless self, brought an end to the sacrifice of beasts through His superior sacrifice. And even as Abram, with the birth of Isaac, received a new name, Abraham, so also will come the day when Jesus, in the New Jerusalem, gives to us a new name.

We pray: Lord, we thank you that we can look to You for salvation and not to ourselves, and that for us, too, faith is counted as righteousness. Keep us faithful unto death that we may receive from You the promised crown of life. Amen.

During the Epiphany Season we have many texts about God revealing Himself to people. In Genesis 17 the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless.” God made a covenant with Abraham which has many earthly and eternal blessings, both for Abraham and for his descendants, that is, the Church.

In Baptism, the Triune God has made a covenant with us. Martin Luther writes that Baptism “works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare. Christ our Lord says in the last chapter of Mark: ‘Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.’”

God gathered Abram into His Church by His Word just as He gathers us today. We do not come into the Church by our own decision or power. Luther writes in the Third Article of the Apostle’s Creed: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel ... In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith ... In this Christian Church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers.”

Indeed, during our sojourn here on earth we too have God’s promise that “on the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true.” Amen.

We pray: Holy Lord, cause me to trust Your promises as Abraham did. Amen.

In the readings for the past two days we see how the Lord accomplished His will for Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac. In these readings it is also clear that Abraham, Sarah, Abraham’s servant, and Isaac didn’t understand what was going on. Nevertheless, God still accomplished His will.

In Hebrews 11 and 12 the writer of Hebrews tells us that all these things were written for us as a witness that our Heavenly Father is working all things for good to His people. When trials, tribulation, persecutions, temptations, old age or illness come, God is working those things to bring us to our eternal home and He is using them to strengthen us.

In the reading for today it is plain that the servant, Laban, Bethuel, and Rebekah would have liked to have some answers before they took action. But Hebrews 11 tells us they acted by faith, and received the gifts promised.

We pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy will be done.” However, because of our sinful nature, we aren’t always sure we want God’s will to be done. We’d always prefer that our will be done. The problem is our old sinful nature doesn’t see the whole picture, but God does.

Yes, we would like answers, but in God-given faith we remember that, whatever comes, God is working for the good of those who are His. Therefore we can pray “Thy will be done,” and be sure that His will is and always will be the very best.

As Luther explains in the Seventh Petition, “We pray ... that our Father in heaven would rescue us from every evil of body and soul...” Then we can pray, “Amen, amen means ‘yes, yes, it shall be so.’”

We pray: Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

In the reading for today Abraham sends his most trusted servant get a wife for his son, Isaac. The text doesn't tell us much about this servant, but it does reveal his faith. In verse 12 he says, "O Yahweh, God of my master, Your will be done for my master this day." The servant is there. He knows why he was sent, but he has no idea how he is to accomplish his mission. However, he knows Who does know, so he calls on Abraham's God.

Many times you and I have no idea what is going on in our lives. Trials, sickness, death, and many other things come along in our lives that we can't control. What do we do? We can worry and fret, or we can turn to the One Who holds all things in His hands.

In His mercy the Lord has taught us to pray, and he has taught us a prayer which we know we can use in every need. In Luke 6 He says to His disciples, "When you pray, say: Our Father in heaven..." Dr. Luther writes in the Small Catechism, "With these words God tenderly invites us to believe that He is our true Father and that we are His true children, so that with all boldness and confidence we may ask Him as dear children ask their dear father."

When we don't know what to do or where to turn, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," is really all we need to ask. God's will is always best.

Like Abraham's servant we can pray: Blessed be the Lord God who has not forsaken me. He has led me throughout my life, and He will bring me to eternal life in Christ. Amen.

In Genesis 17 the Lord appeared to Abraham and promised him a son and to make him a great nation. In Genesis 18 the Lord appears again to Abraham. Abraham bowed down, washed His feet, offered Him rest. He fed the Lord. He did everything he should have done when he met the Lord.

However, as we read on we find that both Abraham and Sarah had a problem with believing God's Word. God told them when the promised son would come. Sarah doubted God and questioned His promise. God also told Abraham that He would destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham began to question God's plan.

This is usually the way the old sinful nature reacts to God's Word. In Genesis 3 Satan asked, "Did God really say?" and Adam and Eve responded with a misquote of God's Word. You and I are also inclined to doubt God's Word, just as all the Old Testament saints did.

And just as He did with His Old Testament saints, the Lord in His love calls us to repentance, and then gives us His forgiveness. He encourages us to listen and believe His Word. In His grace He renews our faith in His Word.

We pray with the Church in the Divine Service, "Blessed Lord, who has caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of Thy holy Word we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which Thou hast given us in our Savior Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end." Amen.

Our text for today is another example of God's faithfulness to His promises. In Genesis 12 God made a promise to Abraham to bless him and make his name great. Lot was included in that promise. Lot was living in Sodom, and we know Sodom was on "the wrong side of the tracks." Our text doesn't tell us how much Lot and his family had to do with the people of Sodom, but it does tell us how faithful the Lord is to His promises. In accord with His promise, the Lord sent angels to rescue Lot and his family from the destruction of Sodom.

In 2 Peter 2, Peter tells us that God condemned Sodom, "making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly; and delivered righteous Lot, who was oppressed with the filthy conduct of the wicked" (verses 6-7). God is faithful to His promises.

You and I also live in a sinful world. In 1 Peter 1, St. Peter writes to "the pilgrims of the Dispersion ... elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ."

God has made promises to us too. Peter tells us God has promised us "an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled ... reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." In this we greatly rejoice, though now you do not see Him, yet believing, we are receiving the end of our faith—the salvation of our souls. Therefore, we rest our hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to us at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

We pray: Lord, keep us steadfast in Your Word and in the sure and certain hope of Your salvation. Amen.

"And the Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had spoken." Sometimes in the Bible the most important words are the easiest to overlook. In chapters 18 and 19 Abraham and Sarah doubted and questioned the Lord. In chapter 20 they used lying and deception for self-protection and comfort, but the Lord still "visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken."

For us sinners these words should be a great comfort. In the midst of our guilt over our sins, we hear the words, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." In spite of our sin, this promise is still true. In the midst of our guilt over our sins, we hear the words, "Take, eat; this is My body ... this is My Blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." In spite of our sin, this promise is still true.

Like Abraham and Sarah, we quickly forget God's promises and we turn to sinful thoughts and actions. In spite of our faithlessness, God is always faithful to His promises. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

On Sunday morning or in private confession we confess our sins and we hear the words of absolution, "I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." In these few words, "I forgive you," comes our comfort that we are indeed forgiven.

Lord, in the midst of our sins, by Your grace give us repentant hearts, and the faith to believe Your words of forgiveness. Amen.