

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 4: EXODUS 10-12

Who can read this account of the Passover and not have the allusions to our Savior jump from the page? We hear about the unblemished lamb whose blood causes death to pass us by. It is clear that the center of our Christian worship follows the pattern of this Passover worship.

The blood is so central and prominent in the story that it shows us that our life is gained through the blood of our Lamb, Jesus Christ. But the unleavened bread also is mentioned at such length that we cannot help but see it as significant. The body of Christ is the bread that sustains us in the Holy Eucharist. We, as Christians, do not celebrate Passover Seders. We do not have to re-enact the event of long ago. We have our own Passover meal: the new Passover meal instituted by Christ Himself.

He has made all things new and He has given us His supper that preserves us from death. The blood of the Lamb in the chalice that we drink and the body of our Lamb in the bread that we eat is the Christian's Passover. We are not just saved from the Egyptians, or even temporal death in our Holy Eucharist, but we are saved from eternal death. This is the greater and more holy Supper.

We pray: Lord help us to see that we are not disconnected from the saints of the Old Testament. Teach us to carry on with the new and perfect Passover of our Lord Jesus Christ's body and blood, given to us for the forgiveness of our sins and the imparting of eternal life. Amen.

THE LUTHERAN HERALD



The Circumcision and the Name of Jesus

JANUARY 2—FEBRUARY 4, 2017

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The Calendar

January 1	Feast of the Circumcision
January 6	The Epiphany of our Lord
January 8	Epiphany 1
January 15	Epiphany 2
January 19	St. Henry of Finland, martyr
January 22	Epiphany 3
January 24	St. Timothy, Bishop and Confessor
January 25	The Conversion of St. Paul
January 26	St. Titus, Bishop and Confessor
January 29	Epiphany 4
February 2	The Presentation of our Lord

Installation of New Pastor at Saints Peter and Paul

On January 15, Bishop Heiser is scheduled to install Rev. Jerald Dulas as the new pastor of Saints Peter and Paul Ev. Lutheran Church (Greenville, South Carolina). Pastor Gilbert Eliason, the founding pastor of the congregation, is retiring.

Winter Quarter of St. Ignatius Lutheran Seminary Continues

Classes for the Winter quarter resume on Tuesday, January 3. The quarter began on November 28 and will conclude February 10. Classes for this quarter include: E009—Greek Readings 2 (taught by Pr. Stefanski); E003—Psalms (Pr.-Elect Dulas); H003—Medieval Church (Bp. Heiser); H009—Readings in Medieval Theology (Bp. Heiser); P002—Catechetics (Dcn. Oncken).

Friday, February 3: Exodus 7-9

“And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, . . . But Pharaoh will not heed you, so that I may lay My hand on Egypt” (Exodus 7:3-4).

Consider that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart so that he would not listen and God could bring even more severe punishment on Egypt. This seems terribly unfair, but we must remember that Pharaoh and the Egyptians had already piled up sins before the Lord before Moses ever came. God had destroyed nations in the past for their sins, and could easily have done so again.

But instead of immediate and sudden obliteration, God chastised them before the nations. He made them an object lesson about the wages of sin. In fact, He is merciful in letting them live after severe chastisement. God does as He wills and uses men for His purposes.

Romans 9:17-18 says, “For the Scripture says to the Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth.’ Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens.” The world is the Lord’s and He chooses whom He will for grace and judgment. His decisions are always good and just. Yet, we can know if He has chosen us for mercy through the blood of the Lamb. It is no unknowable mystery. Just as the Israelites knew their destiny by the blood over their doors, we also know our destiny when we receive the Word and Sacraments of God in faith. They tell us who we are and where we are going.

We pray: Lord God, heavenly Father, may we always remain in faith so that we know we are Yours in Jesus Christ. Amen.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 2: EXODUS 4-6

We do not understand God correctly when we imagine Him as indulgent or weak-willed. Too often our society envies Him as “open minded,” indulgent and happy with whatever we believe or do. This is not the image we get in the book of Exodus. No one would come to that conclusion by simply reading this text. In chapter four, when Moses demurred at going to Egypt, the text says, “So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses.” Usually the next action would be incineration, but the Lord is long-suffering, which is not exactly the same as indulgent.

The Lord is also long-suffering with Pharaoh. One could imagine instant death for Pharaoh when he said “Who is the LORD, that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, nor will I let Israel go” (Exodus 5:2). But perhaps the most telling incident that shows the strictness with which the Lord expects to be obeyed is Exodus 4:24-26. God is about to kill Moses because he had failed to circumcise his son. Only the last minute action of his wife Zipporah saves him.

Imagine, something as insignificant as lack of circumcision can cause immediate death. But this is not the only example. In Acts, chapter five, Ananias and Sapphira are actually killed for telling a lie. It is no small thing to trifle with God. Modern men fail to see this, but the God of love and mercy is the same God of the Passover and the Burning Bush. We do not want a weak god to save us. We want the Almighty God to save us. Then we know we are truly saved.

We pray: Lord, help us see You as You really are. In Jesus Christ’s name, Amen.

MONDAY, JANUARY 2: MARK 3

“He who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation” (Mark 3:29).

Our Lord cast a demon out of a possessed man. The Pharisees didn’t want to recognize the authority of Jesus, but it’s hard to argue with a miracle like that! Still, they tried. They claimed it was by demonic power that He was casting out demons. After Jesus explained how obviously wrong such an explanation was, He launched into this warning about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

The verse worries a lot of Christians. What is this unforgivable sin? Have I committed it? Let’s deal with that second question first: No, you haven’t. If you’re at all concerned, it is because the Holy Spirit is at work in your heart. If the Holy Spirit had utterly forsaken you, you wouldn’t care about matters of salvation! Instead of worrying, heed the Word of the Lord and remain repentant.

In context, the sin against the Holy Spirit is a matter of being wrong about Jesus on purpose. Plenty of people are wrong about Jesus. But the Pharisees saw Jesus as a threat, so they weren’t just wrong, they were being wrong on purpose by rejecting the possibility that Jesus spoke the truth. Be not like unto them! Rather, may God continue to grant us His Holy Spirit so that we repent of our sinful thoughts and conform our minds to the teaching of Jesus.

We pray: “Heavenly Father, ever renew my faith in Christ by Your Holy Spirit, that His forgiveness and eternal life may remain mine, through the same Jesus my Lord. Amen.”

TUESDAY, JANUARY 3: MARK 4

“And they feared exceedingly, and said to one another, ‘Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!’” (Mark 4:41).

The very first verse of the Gospel according to St. Mark tells us that it’s going to show us Jesus as “the Son of God.” The Father speaks it, both at His Baptism and at the Transfiguration, “This is my Son, Whom I love.” The demons catch on too, fearing that this “Christ of God” has come to torment them before their time.

But the people fail to get it. They ask the right question. In this case, Jesus calms the storm, so they ask, “Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” The obvious answer is, “the Son of God!” But no one said it.

No one said it until Jesus was hanging dead on the cross. Then the centurion confessed, “surely this man was the Son of God.” St. Mark tells the story this way to make a very important point: the Person of Christ isn’t truly known without His work! The demons’ knowledge of Jesus certainly doesn’t save them. Knowing that Jesus can change the weather won’t save you. No, what saves you is that this Son of God hung dead on the cross for the forgiveness of your sins. He is indeed crucified and risen. Your sins are forgiven!

We Pray: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, as You have suffered for the forgiveness of my sins, so grant me to trust in You through all the storms of this life. Amen.”

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 1: EXODUS 1-3

It is noteworthy how quickly the first three chapters of Exodus cover a significant portion of Moses’ life. It reminds us that the Bible is not just a history book, but a *sacred history* book. It tells us the history we need to know to understand our path to salvation. In relation to that, it seems strange at first that the God of the burning bush seems to not answer directly when asked His name, but simply says I AM. But then we realize that this is not some deflection. It is as direct an answer as there is. His name describes who He is. He is the God that exists. He is the only God that exists and the only one who has ever existed.

And we learn that this only God who has existed is the “Angel of the Lord,” that is, God the Son. The One who makes the eternal God known to us. Jesus alludes to this in John, chapter 8, where He says, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.” Even here in the burning bush we see hints of the Triune God who works for our salvation. Moses, the type of Christ, is sent to save God’s people from the bondage of the Egyptians. This, of course, prefigures our Lord, Jesus Christ leading the saints out of bondage to sin, death and the Devil, into the true promised land of heaven.

We pray: Lord God, heavenly Father, let us follow the One You sent us to the promised land that awaits us. In Jesus Christ’s name, Amen.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 31: GENESIS 49-50

Notice here that Jacob blesses all of his sons. Though the prophecies directed to Reuben, Simeon, and Levi do not sound particularly good, we must bear in mind that in verse 28 it says, “And he blessed them; he blessed each one according to his own blessing.” So even what sounds like a curse here is ultimately a blessing. On one level this does make sense. Even Reuben, Simeon, and Levi are still part of the people of God, the tribes of Israel. They still inherit a portion in the land of Canaan, though not as much as they might have. But even this is not the ultimate point. The ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy is the One who will come through Judah. They were all blessed to be part of the people of God who bring us the Christ.

These individual prophecies work as warnings as well as blessings. The sons of Jacob must remember to live lives dedicated to the God of Jacob in order to be ready when the Messiah comes. Jacob goes back to the promised land and is buried there. We as the people of God look for the true promised land as the fulfillment here. We waited for Shiloh to come in His first advent, and now we wait for Shiloh to come again.

We pray: Lord, help us to understand all Scripture in the light of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us see it all fulfilled in Him. Let us keep our eyes upon Jesus so that we enter our promised land. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 4: MARK 5

“Go home to your friends, and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He has had compassion on you” (Mark 5:19).

It’s a strange story. There was a demon possessed man living among the tombs who was quite uncontrollable. Chains wouldn’t hold him. He cut himself. He was alone. Along came Jesus. When Jesus asked the demon his name, he said “legion,” because they were many. They asked for, and received, permission to enter a herd of pigs, which they then proceeded to drown. Those tending the pigs ran into town and reported the matter. All those drowned pigs amounted to a great business loss, and (as though a healed man didn’t matter!) they asked Jesus to leave the region.

The man wanted to follow Jesus, but Jesus told him to stay there. If the locals were to start complaining about what Jesus did, this man would be able to confront them with words like, “Really? That pack of unclean pigs matters more to you than that I got my life back?”

The Lord has His use for those of us who confess His name in our own towns and in our daily lives. As He has redeemed us by His death on the cross, may He have use of us also to tell people “what great things” He has done for us.

We Pray: “Lord Jesus Christ, whether in distant lands or in our own homes, have Your use of us, that we may speak Your saving mercies to others in our lives. Amen.”

THURSDAY, JANUARY 5: MARK 6

“But He said to them, ‘How many loaves do you have? Go and see.’ And when they found out they said, ‘Five, and two fish’” (Mark 6:38).

Well, that isn't much, is it? Five loaves of bread. Two fish. Thousands of hungry people. And the boy who gave it: there's no indication that the disciples took these without his consent; he offered them freely. But there's no indication that he couldn't do math, either. Everyone knows you can't feed thousands with that!

The boy put his meager lunch into the hands of the Lord, for the Lord to do with that what He would. What the Lord did was so amazing that the Holy Spirit caused it to be written, and we continue to be amazed to this day!

What an important lesson for us. My offering is so small, what difference can this little gift make? And it seems like a fair question, as long as we look only at the gift. Look rather at the one to Whom it is given! It's not a question of what my gift can do. It's a question of what the Lord can do with it! God grant us the same grace that He granted one boy long ago: grace to put what we have in the hands of our gracious Savior. The God who deigned to dwell among us as a baby and die on the cross to take away the sin of the world will amaze us with the great use He has of our little gifts too.

We pray: “Heavenly Father, grant me grace not to look at the smallness of my gift, but rather at the greatness of Him into whose hands it is given, even Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.”

MONDAY, JANUARY 30: GENESIS 46-48

Jacob, or Israel, and his sons leave the promised land for Egypt. Egypt becomes a sort of haven for them while they are in an exile due to famine. But, as God has them journey to this alien land, He makes sure they remain a separate people. He makes sure that they are not completely dissolved and lost in Egyptian culture by keeping them somewhat separated in Goshen. God arranges it that “every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians” so the Egyptians will not want the Israelites mingling with them. Not only will there be the natural separation of two different peoples, but also the added aversion to shepherds among the Egyptians. This lack of assimilation will keep the Israelites alive as a people.

This is instructive for us as Christians. We are in the world but not of it. We do live within the territories of this world, and in some senses we are part of those lands, but there are important ways in which we are a separate people. We are thrilled when our favorite candidate wins an election, but we know that even our candidate will disappoint us sometimes. “Do not put your trust in princes” (Psalm 146:3) is our watchword even when things go well.

We as Christians also do not completely take part in the general culture. There are things we abstain from, or things we practice differently from the world. While we may not be thought of as “an abomination,” we are looked at as “wet blankets” sometimes. We are a different people from the world. We are Americans on one level and embrace that identity, but we are Christians on an even deeper level and make that our ultimate identity.

We pray: Lord, keep us as Your people. In Jesus Christ's name, Amen.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 28: GENESIS 40–42

Joseph is a model of godly honesty, though not necessarily always of wisdom. His honest presentation to his brothers of the dream he had concerning them all got him sold into slavery. His honesty to Potiphar's wife did nothing but anger her; her lie was more convincing, and he learned about earthly ties, authority, and favor in being sent to prison. His honesty in the interpretation of the dreams of the butler and baker may well have made the one love him and the other hate him. Yet, instead, as is often the case in any faithful action, the butler who had received good news from Joseph completely forgot about him when that good news came to pass. His joy at being restored to his position did not bring him to tell anyone about what Joseph had done.

Yet, when a chance for further advantage came to him because of the Pharaoh's being troubled by his dreams, then the butler remembered Joseph and told Pharaoh about what Joseph could do. Joseph acted wisely in meeting with Pharaoh, denying that the power to interpret the dreams was his own, but that his God would give Pharaoh an answer. In so doing, he also carefully led Pharaoh to see what God would do, so that Pharaoh might both let Joseph live and become a believer in the true God through the evidence that He would provide.

We trust in Him because of the evidence that His promise is true: the death and resurrection of the Christ.

We pray: Grant, O Heavenly Father, that we wisely use the abilities You give us, so that our neighbors are served to the end that they glorify You for having given us to bless them, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 6: MARK 7

“And she answered and said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs under the table eat from the children's crumbs’” (Mark 7:28).

Our Lord is in the region of Tyre and Sidon in our reading. These towns still exist, but they are in Lebanon, not Israel. Jesus is approached by a Gentile woman, a Syro-Phoenician Greek woman, seeking healing for her demon possessed daughter. But the Messiah whom she invokes has been sent to the children of Israel, not to Gentiles.

Jesus has some harsh sounding words for her: “Let the children be filled first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs.” What an insult! And how many people would, and do, walk away from the Lord and His church when no affirmation of their basic goodness is given them!

Not this woman. She has faith, and real faith clings to the Lord's Word. Jesus has given her the word “dog.” Faithfully, she runs with it. “Okay, ‘dog’ it is then. Give me the crumbs that the dogs get.” God grant us likewise to cling to our Lord's words, even the harsh ones, for in His Word is life and salvation.

We Pray: “Heavenly Father, grant me grace to receive Your harsh words of law, that repenting of my sins I may receive also the life giving words of the Gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, my crucified and risen Savior. Amen.”

SATURDAY, JANUARY 7: MARK 8

“He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered and said to Him, ‘You are the Christ’” (Mark 8:29).

Peter confesses Jesus as Christ. We know from Matthew that he also said “Son of the living God,” but Mark does not mention this. He’s saving “Son of God” for when Jesus is hanging dead on the cross. The curious thing is that just a few verses later, Peter rebukes Jesus for saying He will be killed. Jesus in turn rebukes him, “get behind me Satan!” Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ, but then acts like he knows better than the Christ just exactly what the Christ should be doing!

So who do you say Jesus is? And who do you say He is, really? Do you confess the words of the Nicene Creed, but in your prayers bring Him up to date on current events in your life because He doesn’t seem to understand like you do what He should be doing in your life?

Dear ones in Christ, don’t just say Jesus is the Christ. Trust this. Really trust this. You may not understand the plan, but Jesus has one, and it is a plan that ultimately results in bestowing upon you the forgiveness of sins, life, and eternal salvation.

We Pray: “Heavenly Father, how often I am tempted to doubt Your mercies when life doesn’t go my way. Let Your mercies toward me in Christ Jesus forgive me of this also, and grant me grace to trust, even when I don’t understand, for the sake of Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.”

FRIDAY, JANUARY 27: GENESIS 37–39

As it was with Jacob in his dealings with Laban, so with Joseph: “the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper” (39:23). Yet, in the same way, none of it necessarily looked like prospering from a human point of view. As Jacob was constantly being dealt with treacherously by Laban (who always seemed to have some facile excuse handy), so Joseph was consistently being betrayed by those who should have been thankful to have his service. We need only remember where Joseph is when the events of his “prospering” referred to Genesis 39:23 occur: in an Egyptian prison!

As we will see Joseph confess before his life’s story comes to a close, wisdom has a different view of these events. Jacob’s reaction to Joseph’s announcement concerning his dreams of greatness is one of wisdom: he condemns his son’s having said such things before his brothers, but then considers that Joseph’s dream may be true and that it may be something the Lord would bring to pass for their good.

Joseph’s brothers lack of wisdom would display itself through the many sinful acts in these three chapters, culminating in their need for their long-since departed brother in the chapters to come. The wonderful thing is that Joseph’s learning of wisdom involved learning mercy, which is so essential for us who so often leave wisdom for sin.

We pray: Thanks to You, O Triune God, for Your merciful wisdom that blesses us who do not deserve it, even using our enemies to be conduits of Your blessing to us. In Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 26: GENESIS 34–36

It was right that the sons of Jacob be angered by Shechem's defilement of their sister. Yet, how they handled that anger is most deplorable—not only did they commit murder, but they defiled God's sacrament to do so!

What Dinah's brother did would be like using Holy Baptism to drown those who receive it, or abusing the Lord's Supper by admitting unbelievers, getting them drunk, and killing them while they are disabled. Such an action not only is evil in and of itself, but it makes the sacraments seem untrustworthy in the eyes of the unbelievers—to say nothing of how they would look at believers themselves!

When a sacrament is used for other than the intent that God has indicated for it, destruction and death follow. Even so, we see in 1 Corinthians 11 that Christians were getting sick and dying from their misuse of the Lord's Supper. Admitting to the Sacrament of the Altar those who do not confess the true faith unambiguously—those who belong to erring church bodies, as well as those who continue in open sin without repentance—is to endanger them eternally. And we have no promise that the Lord will use such dramatic means as He employed in Corinth to keep them from continuing to stray until they are at last damned!

Similarly, whether Rome's teaching that the mass is an unbloody re-sacrificing of Christ that benefits the living and the dead (and that apart from faith!) or the teaching of others that the purpose and power of the Sacrament is our remembering of Jesus, such false teaching leads to the destruction of true faith.

We pray: O Holy Spirit, let us not depart from the right confession and use of the blessed sacraments, but be kept through them in the true faith, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

MONDAY, JANUARY 9: MARK 10

Understanding this chapter, and all that Jesus teaches and does within it, requires that the disciple hear all the words through the filter of this simple quote: “With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible.” With men death does not bring life; with men faith does not restore sight; with men outward success does not bring eternal peace—but with God all these can be possible.

The man who ran up to Jesus and knelt before Him did not have a problem regarding what he owned, but instead how he thought and interacted with those possessions. The problem, as Jesus pointed out, was not the possessions, but the trust the man placed in those possessions instead of in God. His trust (faith) was in things, not his Creator and Redeemer. How sad it is when we allow worship of the creation to take the place of faith and worship of the Creator, for this always ends poorly. Those who place their faith in things of the world will be horribly disappointed in the end, for even what they have will be taken away. We come into this world with nothing but our eternal soul, and we will take nothing out of this world but that soul. Everything else is transitory and of very little (if any) value.

We pray: Almighty God, all that we possess is from Your loving hand. Give us grace that we may honor You with all we own, always remembering the account we must one day give to Jesus Christ, our Lord. And help us to trust only in Him for our salvation. Amen.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 10: MARK 11

Our text opens with Jesus triumphantly entering Jerusalem to shouts of “save us now” and “he who comes in the name of the Lord,” during what can only be described as a royal procession. Jesus followed this procession by cleansing the temple with an air of authority that led the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders to confront Him with demands of where He got such authority.

The cleansing of the temple and the questioning of Jesus’ authority is interwoven with the cursing of the fig tree by Jesus for its lack of fruit. The application that Jesus makes regarding this cursed fig tree is as an illustration of believing prayer. Faithful prayer was lacking in the Jerusalem Temple, though this was exactly what God calls for His people to offer to Him in His Temple. The prayer that the Lord calls on us to bring before Him is the one He taught us in Matthew 6:9-13. The religious leaders confronting Jesus lacked faith, and because of that deficiency lacked believing prayer as the fruit of faith. A faith without fruits is a dried up dead tree which has no life, not unlike the fig tree cursed by Jesus.

We pray: Lord of all power and might, author and giver of all good things, graft into our hearts the love of Your name and nourish us with all goodness. Make us to love and serve our neighbor while joyfully bringing all things to You in prayer; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 25: GENESIS 31–33

Every time Laban sets Jacob up to fail, the Lord prospers him. Then Laban changes the rules. Finally, his sons become enraged because, they believe, Jacob has stolen their inheritance. When the Lord instructs Jacob to return to the land of his fathers, though, Laban’s daughters speak correctly: Laban took Jacob’s labor as payment for them—sold them!—and now he wanted to deprive them and their children of what should have been theirs by birth and by their husband’s labor. If Jacob had all and their brothers had nothing, this would be because God so willed it, and Jacob should continue to do whatever the Lord told him.

Jacob confesses this same truth both when he prays concerning meeting Esau and at their actual meeting. “I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant; for I crossed over this Jordan with my staff, and now I have become two companies,” he says in prayer, reminding God of His promise, “I will surely treat you well, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.”

When Esau came to Jacob, not attacking him for the theft of the birthright, but rejoicing to see him again, Esau asked, “Who are these with you?” Jacob’s response, translated, is those with whom “God has graced your servant.” That is, as Jacob had told Rachel earlier that he could not force conception to happen, so in both birth and prosperity, it was all by the Lord’s grace.

We pray: Grant us, O Father in Heaven, to recognize You as the source of every good and perfect gift, that we may entrust ourselves entirely to Your grace in Christ Jesus. Amen.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 24: GENESIS 28–30

Jacob is not to take a wife from the daughters of Canaan, but from his own kinswomen—from the company of those not set against the believers in Christ. Esau saw that marrying the women of Canaan displeased his father, so he chose to marry a woman from the family, but he chose from those who despised the children of Sarah. There is the first lesson in grace as opposed to works: Esau heard the law not to marry a Canaanite, so he chose a path that he thought was just, but Jacob, understanding the intent, went to marry one from his mother's family, knowing an Ishmaelite wife would be as poorly suited as a Canaanite.

This, of course, leads to Jacob's being deceived by Laban. Yet, Jacob remains faithful in his desire for a believing wife and in his love for Rachel, and his being sinned against leads him to be blessed many times over, winning both the love of his life (who was, for awhile, infertile) and a wife who immediately started bearing him children. Thus, Leah was also a lesson for him: she was faithful to Jacob even though he openly loved her sister more than he loved her. Rachel should easily see that this was the case, but she was, instead, blinded by the fact that Leah was having babies while she was not. In response, Jacob makes clear what he has learned: it is not in his power to give her children, but if and when she conceived it would be only because God so willed it.

We pray: Grant us, O Lord, to remain faithful no matter the earthly effect, trusting in Your grace to aid us and bring us what blessings You will, now and forever, in Christ. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 11: MARK 12

This entire chapter of Mark is a response to the challenging of Jesus Christ's authority by the religious leaders of the Jews. This challenging of the Lord's authority is similar to and can ultimately be traced back to the confrontation in the Garden where the sinister phrase of "Did God really say" was first uttered.

All those who challenge Jesus are met with the same condemnation of "Are you not therefore mistaken, because you do not know the Scriptures nor the power of God?" May we always be drawn to ever more perfectly know God's holy Word by grace, through faith, and never hear such words of dire judgment spoken to us. The adversaries of all that is holy and righteous send temptation and doubt in every form possible to pose questions and challenges that all boil down to the same words that ultimately question God's authority over our lives. Whether it is a quandary over the legality of taxes, or the giving of the tithe, or the resurrection, or any multitude of questions, the answer can always be found in the Greatest Commandment. For if God is foremost in your heart, mind, and soul, all the other commandments will naturally follow.

We pray: Almighty God, You show those in error the light of Your truth so that they may return to the way of righteousness. Grant faithfulness to all who are admitted into the fellowship of Christ's Church that they may avoid whatever is contrary to their confession and follow all such things as are pleasing to You; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 12: MARK 13

When studying this text the most important point to focus on is in verse 33 where we hear Jesus tell us “Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is.” No one on earth knows the exact moment of Christ’s return, and the most certain sign there is of a charlatan is his claim of knowing the precise moment when the end is to arrive. The signs described by Jesus in this chapter and His reference to the prophecy of Daniel are meant to warn all His hearers that they must be ever vigilant in making use of the Means He has provided as they eagerly await His Second Coming.

The Daniel prophecy was fulfilled when the Temple in Jerusalem was utterly destroyed, bringing the Old Testament sacrifices to an end, though they had already been rendered obsolete by Christ’s sacrifice at the Crucifixion. The Fig Tree is an illustration of God’s control and order in all these events. The overarching message is one of comfort and assurance that we will not be taken by surprise if we remain faithful. His return is not going to be some secret event. All of creation will know when He bursts upon it to usher in the new Heavens and the new Earth.

We pray: O God, the protector of all who trust in You, without whom nothing is strong and nothing is holy, multiply Your mercy on us that, with You as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal that we lose not the things eternal, and join the Ancient Church in praying “Come Lord Jesus, Come Quickly.” In Jesus Christ’s name, Amen.

MONDAY, JANUARY 23: GENESIS 25–27

The real focus of today’s reading is the repetition and narrowing of the promise to Abraham, emphasizing sinners’ hearing, believing, and treasuring of God’s Word.

Genesis 26:5 confuses some, who base the promise on Abraham’s works. Romans 4:3 makes it clear that neither the circumcision of Abraham’s descendants, nor our Baptism can be considered a work that makes God owe us. Instead, forgiveness is ours just as it was Abraham’s: through trust in the promise our Judge made to forgive us in connection with Abraham’s Descendant, Jesus Christ. Circumcision then, and Baptism now, must thus be seen as God’s own work, by which He connects us with this promise.

Still, subtle false teachers would make our faith into a work. One sort sings that they “have decided to follow Jesus,” when we know that we “cannot by [our] own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ [our] Lord or come to Him.”

Another teaches that you are already forgiven before trusting in Christ, saying that if Man is not already righteous before trusting the promise, you must be causing your salvation by your “working” of faith. By this, they show that they do not believe faith to be what the Bible says it is: the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8–10) that is given through the message concerning Christ (Romans 10:17). Yet, Paul doesn’t write, “Abraham believed God had already counted him righteous,” but that Abraham trusted in the promise of Christ and the work He would do, and through this God-given, promise-created confidence, Abraham was declared righteous. Jesus was delivered up to death because of our sins and raised to bring us to trust in His payment for them.

We pray: Father, grant us such steadfast confidence in Your Son Jesus Christ that we rejoice always in this deliverance. Amen.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 21: GENESIS 19-21

In Chapter 21 we finally see the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and Sarah. Their long-awaited son has been born in the fullness of God's time. What was once considered impossible--even laughable--has been made possible by the almighty hand of God. Note the unilateral language of Moses' narrative: "And the LORD visited Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken. For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him. And Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him--whom Sarah bore to him--Isaac" (21:1-3). It's impossible to miss that God is the sole actor: "the LORD visited" and "the LORD did." In both instances, Moses points out the action came about because the LORD promised that it would be so.

God never speaks lightly. When it's an act of judgment, there's no place for man to hide. When it's an act of grace, man is the fortunate beneficiary of God's undeserved kindness. For Abraham and Sarah, they were getting to see how God works. How fitting to name their son Isaac, which means "laughter." Sarah, who had once mocked God's promise in laughter can now look back at her own foolishness and know that with God all things are possible.

Prayer: Lord God, heavenly Father, grant us true faith to trust in Your promises and to see Your mighty works that fulfill them for our blessing. In Jesus Christ's name, Amen.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 13: MARK 14

The point of this chapter is contained in four verses near its center that record the institution of the Lord's Supper. The verses surrounding these four verses all point toward this event and the beautiful words spoken by Jesus. During the Passover meal on Maundy Thursday Christ instituted a holy Sacrament and a solemn remembrance of His tremendous sacrifice for our redemption from sin death and the Devil.

The chapter opens with the religious authorities busily plotting the death of Jesus, as well as Mary anointing Him in preparation of this death, and the horrible revelation that one of the twelve is scheming to betray the Lord to those who desire His death. The verses following the institution present the unfolding of Christ's Passion as we hear Him foretell His being abandoned by His apostles, and then see it take place over the course of several hours. The final verses present Jesus being condemned to death by the religious authorities while Peter utters a curse and swears that he does not know the Lord. From beginning to end of this text we are reminded that Jesus knows where He is headed, and willingly continues on His path. We are called to remember that He continues down that path because His blood must be shed and His life sacrificed to establish a new covenant.

We pray: O Lord, in this wondrous Sacrament You have left us a remembrance of Your passion. Grant that we may so receive the sacred mystery of Your body and blood that the fruits of Your redemption may continually be manifest in us; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 14: MARK 15-16

Throughout the trial before Pilate we never hear Jesus defend Himself against the many false accusations of treason against the Empire and the Emperor, though Pilate pleads with Him to defend Himself. If Jesus made no defense, according to Roman law Pilate would have to pronounce against Him. The Sanhedrin could not find adequate evidence to bring any legitimate charge forward, but they were able to whip the crowd into a bloodthirsty frenzy that wanted Christ crucified. Then Pilate said to them, “Why, what evil has He done?” But they cried out all the more, “Crucify Him!”

There was no evil that could be pointed at because the Lamb of God has no sin. He instead graciously carried our countless sins, along with those of the crowd and religious leaders, as well as all the world, to the cross and mercifully sacrificed His life. He shed His holy precious blood to deliver us from the condemnation that judges us to be guilty of our sin, and thus deserving of eternal damnation. His resurrection then declares that this sacrifice by Christ was accepted and has paid the price required for eternal redemption and salvation. All who look to Christ in faith receive these eternal benefits purely by grace.

We pray: O God, for our redemption You gave Your only-begotten Son to the death of the cross and by His glorious resurrection delivered us from the power of the enemy. Grant that all our sin may be drowned through daily repentance and that day by day we may arise to live before You in righteousness and purity forever; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 20: GENESIS 16-18

In our everyday meetings with others we use a variety of approaches, depending on the person we’re addressing. If it’s a close friend, we can speak easily and freely. If we’re talking to a potential boss in a job interview, we weigh each word with the utmost care. But what about speaking to God? What should be our approach as we go to Him in prayer? Listen to Abraham as he addresses God just before the destruction of Sodom: “And Abraham came near and said, ‘Would You also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there were fifty righteous within the city; would You also destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous that were in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked; far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?’” (Gen 18:23-25).

First, Abraham “came near” to God. We do the same by preparing our hearts and minds to speak to the Lord. Second, he makes his plea, asking God to spare the righteous within the city. Third, he gives the premise for his plea, that God’s nature is to always do right. As God’s Church, we make our intercessions in the same manner as Abraham as we pray the Collect. Note the similarities in the Collect for this week as follows.

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

THURSDAY, JANUARY 19: GENESIS 13-15

God had repeatedly told Abram about the promise of land. Adding to this, He also promised the gift of offspring. But Abram and Sarai were childless, and getting older by the day. This was not the plan or timeline that God's promised couple had envisioned. Doubt, frustration, and perhaps even anger crept in: "But Abram said, 'Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?' Then Abram said, 'Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!'" (15:2-3). The promise of Abram and Sarai bearing a son was hanging in the balance. To them, the promise of a Savior through their line was in doubt.

But once again, when man is most desperate, he finds himself ripe for God's intervention: "And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, 'This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir.' Then He brought him outside and said, 'Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.' And He said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness."

So powerful was God's proclamation to Abraham, that Abraham did a complete turnaround. God's Word is all-powerful with us as well. Into our rebellious and spiritually lifeless soul He says: "I baptize you in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost." There is no delay, no waiting and seeing; just death turned to life.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank You for Your almighty Word, which is the very power of God for our salvation. In Jesus Christ's name, Amen.

MONDAY, JANUARY 16: GENESIS 4-6

Both Cain and Abel brought offerings from their labor, Cain bringing fruits of the earth and Abel bringing a portion of his flocks. But God was not pleased with Cain's offering. It wasn't because one offering was plant and the other animal. It was the motive behind the offering. For simply "going through the motions" is displeasing to God.

We learn this in the book of Hebrews: "By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and through it he being dead still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death, 'and was not found, because God had taken him'; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God. But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Heb 11:4-6).

It was a hollow act on Cain's part. God doesn't want our good works if they are only from the hand and not the heart.

Prayer: Dear God, create in us clean hearts and a right spirit, that we may honestly reflect the faith within us through our words and actions. In Jesus Christ's name, Amen.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 17: GENESIS 7-9

As the account of the flood is given in Chapter 7, we see Moses using phrase after phrase to convey the enormity of the disaster: “Now the flood was on the earth forty days. The waters increased and lifted up the ark, and it rose high above the earth. The waters prevailed and greatly increased on the earth, and the ark moved about on the surface of the waters. And the waters prevailed exceedingly on the earth, and all the high hills under the whole heaven were covered” (vs 17-19). As a result there was world-wide devastation. Not only was the geography of the earth rearranged, but all living creatures were destroyed, short of what Noah was instructed to take aboard the ark.

But as the Flood was an act of destruction, it was also an act of deliverance. For Noah and his family were spared not only from the destructive waters, but saved from all the evil that had surrounded them (Gen 6:5). This is why Jesus uses the Flood as a type of Judgment Day (Mt 24 and Lk 17), while Peter and Paul use it as a type for Baptism (1 Pet 3 and Rm 6). Luther also uses it to describe our baptismal life as he explains the significance of water in Baptism: “It signifies that the Old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts, and, again, a new man daily come forth and arise; who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever” (Luther’s Small Catechism).

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to always trust Your ways. Use the circumstances in our lives to lead us away from trusting things temporal, that we may focus on things eternal. In Jesus Christ’s name, Amen.

Wednesday, January 18: Genesis 10-12

Even after God’s world-wide purge of the Great Flood, that didn’t cure man’s problem. Although things had started out well, a seemingly innocent act occurred: “Now the whole earth had one language and one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they dwelt there. Then they said to one another, ‘Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly.’ They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar. And they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth’” (11:1-4).

God had commanded the people to fill the earth after the flood, but they did not. Instead, they settled and had every intention of staying put. To compound their sin, they declared the purpose of their monstrous construction: “let us make a name for ourselves.” The descendants of Noah were also products of their first parents, Adam and Eve, so the “sin issue” was still alive and well. As God had to frequently do, He intervened in judgment. In this case, He confused the language of the people so they’d have no choice but to disperse.

Prayer: Gracious God, we thank You for Your intervention in the history of man. You apply judgment and grace in just the right way and time. May we understand that Your will is always done, and is always best. In Jesus Christ’s name, Amen.