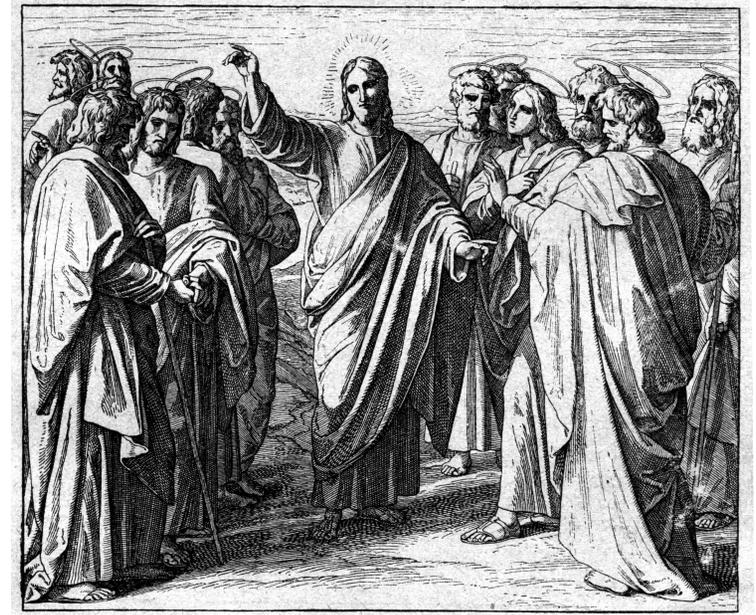


THE LUTHERAN HERALD



CANTATE—TRINITY
(MAY 4—JUNE 6 2015)

A PUBLICATION OF
THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN DIOCESE OF
NORTH AMERICA

“In this way, Scripture calls the natural man simply ‘darkness’ in spiritual and divine things (Eph. 5:8; Acts 26:18). ‘The light shines in the darkness (that is, in the dark, blind world which neither knows nor regards God) and the darkness has not comprehended it’ (John 1:5). Moreover, Scripture teaches that the man who is ‘in sin’ is not only weak and sick, but that he is truly lifeless and ‘dead’ (Eph. 2:1, 5; Col. 2:13)” (FC SD II par 9).

There are two things which Jesus knows and the unbelieving Pharisees do not know. “I know where I come from and where I am going; but you do not know where I come from and where I am going.” 1. Having been sent by the heavenly Father from Heaven, these words indicate origin—Jesus is the divine Son of God, Who has taken on human flesh. 2. Jesus is ascending back to Heaven by way of the cross. The intent of these words is to show forth Jesus’ purpose in atoning for the sins of the world. Jesus came “...to be a sacrifice not only for original sin, but also for all other sin and to propitiate God’s wrath” (AC II).

When we come to know Who God is and what He has done, then Jesus, the Light of the world, has drawn us to Himself. We also know the Father, because He is with Jesus, and always is bearing witness to His beloved Son.

Prayer: We thank You Almighty God for having liberated us from the darkness of ignorance and the bondage of sin and death through Your Son, and for having illuminated us through Baptism and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Great persecution arose against the Church. Saul made havoc of the Church, dragging to prison men and women who confessed Jesus to be the Christ. One can only wonder how deaths can be attributed, at least indirectly, to the zealous young Pharisee from Tarsus. But we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28). What’s more, Jesus had told His Apostles they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Stephen’s blood was in a very real sense becoming the seed of the Church.

The Church in Jerusalem had enjoyed a marvelous unity in Christ and now this had spread even to Samaria, long the object of scorn on the part of the Jews. The difference between them was not concerning the authenticity of their Baptism, but the manifestation of the Spirit, which, through the work of Saints Peter and John, was resolved. God also greatly used Saint Philip for the work of the Great Commission.

What a miraculous joy we share with them because, when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He unified us with Himself and with His own through the water and the Word of Holy Baptism.

*From eternity, O God, In Thy Son Thou didst elect me;
Therefore, Father, on life’s road Graciously to heav’n
direct me;*

Send to me Thy Holy Spirit That His gifts I may inherit.
(TLH 411:1)

Saint Stephen's sermon, recounting salvation history--bringing into consideration Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the Patriarchs, Joseph, Moses, the burning bush, the Exodus, and Solomon--contains more than twice as many words as Saint Peter's sermon in Acts 2. But both end with the same result. The hearers are "cut to the heart" with the assertion that they had betrayed and murdered Jesus, the Just One.

Although very much in accordance with God's plan, these were nonetheless wicked men who were guilty of Christ's blood. They were stiff-necked men with uncircumcised hearts and their resistance to the Holy Spirit was in no way different than their fathers'. They were guilty and they knew it.

Stephen did not die in vain. Mirroring Christ in love and humility, he, the first martyr in the Christian Church, fell asleep in the Lord. His example speaks loud and clear. Tertullian (c. 155-c. 240), "the Father of Western Theology," goes so far as to assert that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." In the words of a Martin Luther hymn, "And vain is Satan's boast of vict'ry in their death. Still, still, tho' dead, they speak" (TLH 259:2).

Standing on the edge of this gory scene is one whom we all know, Saul of Tarsus. We find hope for certain friends and family members because "God the Lord draws the person whom He wants to convert. He draws him in such a way that his darkened understanding is turned into an enlightened one and his perverse will into an obedient one. This is what the Scriptures call creating a clean heart" (Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration: II, Free Will, 60).

"If a person will not hear preaching or read the Word of God, but despises the Word and the community of God, dies in this condition, and perishes in his sins, he can neither comfort himself with God's eternal election nor obtain his mercy. For Christ, in whom we are elected, offers his grace to all men in the Word and the holy sacraments, earnestly wills that we hear it, and has promised that, where two or three are gathered together in his name and occupy themselves with his holy Word, he is in the midst of them. But if such a person despises the instruments of the Holy Spirit and will not hear, no injustice is done him if the Holy Spirit does not illuminate him but lets him remain in the darkness of his unbelief and be lost, as it is written, 'How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!' (Matt. 23:37)" (FC SD II par. 57-58).

Jesus uses the locking keys of Heaven. He tells them that they cannot come where He is going on the way back to Heaven. Three times He tells them "you will die in your sins."

Jesus is the promised Messiah. Through the Word, the heavenly Father has been teaching us to believe in Jesus since the fall into sin. The Father is inseparably "with" Jesus, so that we know the gates of Heaven are open to all who know and trust in Jesus.

Prayer: We confess that we have been remiss and lazy in reading, hearing, and meditating on the Word of God, forgive and keep us in Your Word that we might be faith-filled unto the end and receive an open gate to eternal life. Amen.

There were some who listened to Jesus' words and came to believe in Him as their Savior Who would free them from sin and death. In verse 31-32, these believers are being encouraged to "abide" in Jesus' words. "Once saved, always saved" is not true. There is a danger that a believer would let go of Jesus' words and stop believing. The simple conditional statement is one of promise. For those who abide in Jesus' words—and believers do—they receive three promises from Jesus. You are truly Jesus' disciples. You shall know the truth. And the truth will make you free. What a comfort to know that through abiding in Jesus' word-creating faith, we are saved.

In verses 31ff, for the others who rejected Him, Jesus speaks harsh words by using two contrary-to-fact conditional clauses. They claim, "Abraham is our father." Jesus says, "If you were Abraham's children..." directly telling them that they are not or they would behave differently. They claim, "we have one Father—God." Jesus denies their claim. "If God were your Father (and He isn't), you would love me (and you don't)."

For the believers, Jesus assures them that they are saved not by anything which they do (by grace alone), but through abiding in God's Word (through faith alone), which makes disciples (in Christ alone). For these who openly reject Him and His teaching, Jesus denies their claim by their lack of good works, and the presence of evil works.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we have been made Your disciples through baptizing and teaching, continue to free us from false teaching and evil practices by Your Word-freeing truth. Amen.

Conflict does not always have to be a bad thing. It can instead be harnessed or resolved to bring about God-pleasing change. This is what took place in Jerusalem. The early Church had undergone such rapid and significant growth that the "infrastructure," that is, the Twelve, could not see to the needs of everyone.

Among the blessings enjoyed by these Christians in their communal lifestyle was the sharing of resources necessary for physical life. The Hellenists accused the Hebrews of neglecting their widows in "the daily distribution." This was not a Gentile-versus-Christian Jew conflict, but a difficulty between believers in Christ, Greek-speaking and Hebrew-speaking. It was a cultural factionalism threatening the marvelous unity of the young Church. Among those selected to resolve this issue was the Christ-like Saint Stephen. He was unflappable when false charges were brought against him.

We have been freed from sin and death through faith in Christ, and we pray weekly, "restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation." Consider this observation by Johann Gerhard:

"If we daily lift up our hearts to God with prayer and daily walk about with Him, we then shall be drawn ever closer to God. ... In the same way, Moses, in ancient times, as he spoke with God for forty days and night, a bright countenance came over him in Exo. 34:38, 39. As Stephen prayed, one saw his face become like unto the face of an angel (Acts 6:15)."

(*Postilla*; Johann Gerhard; tr., Elmer M. Hole; The Center for the Study of Lutheran Orthodoxy, Malone, Texas, 2003; Volume 1, page 416)

When you and I were admitted to the Lord's Table through the Rite of Confirmation we promised that we would "continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it." Even though the Christian population of Jerusalem was growing daily, and thereby triggering fear in the heart of the opposition, the Sadducees finally, in desperation, laid hands on the Apostles and locked them in the "city jail." But a messenger of the Lord simply unlocked the doors and the Apostles were immediately found once again in the Temple preaching the words of "this life," this new and glorious life of freedom from death and the devil through faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We do not face jail or execution for the sake of the truth. Not yet any way. But we, in our day, do face tremendous challenges in remaining faithful in the face of institutional apostasy. Those who would disregard the Word of God and reject 2,000 years of Christian practice accuse the men who will not violate their ordination vows of "lacking people skills," of being "legalistic," of "scattering the sheep," of being "divisive." Adding to this misery is the self-doubt which can poison ministry.

It is far better, instead, to rejoice to have been counted worthy to suffer for Christ's name and to lift our heads in all boldness and proper humility to proclaim, "Here I stand." Christ Himself will bind up the brokenhearted and set the prisoners free.

With the words, "I am the light of the world," Jesus repeats what He said in John 8:12. By his truth-filled teaching concerning Himself and His rescuing from sin and death in chapter 8, Jesus has been shining out to the world. By this account in which He heals a man born blind, Jesus continues to shine out by doing "the works of Him who sent" Him. In John 8:12 Jesus said, "He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life." Here, Jesus, our Light, shows His power over blindness and gives to the blind man, new light of life for his eyes.

This sickness was not the punishment for anyone's sin, but according to the Father's plan was "so that the works of God should be revealed in him." The one and only Son of God is revealed to be the sole Light of the world in a unique never-been-done-before healing (John 9:32). Furthermore, Jesus sends the blind man to wash in the pool of Siloam. The Hebrew name for this pool is "Sent" (v.7). Six times in chapters 8-9, Jesus has described Himself as One Who was sent by the Father. This man is not to go to just any pool, but to the one "Sent."

We are saved only by Jesus Christ, the One sent by the Father for that very purpose. John 17:3, "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent."

Prayer: Heavenly Father, You sent Your beloved Jesus into the world, wash away our sins in His blood that we may behold His glory. Amen.

Hebrews 4:12, “For the Word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” I guess it shouldn’t surprise us that Jesus—the Word of God become flesh—would cause “a division among them” by healing a blind man. Some acknowledged that Jesus must be of God, while others falsely accused him of sinfully breaking the Sabbath law. The healed blind man’s parents tried not to take a side as they feared man more than God. Though they avoided getting kicked out of the synagogue, we know the truth—he that is not with Jesus is against Him (Matt. 12:30).

The miracle denying Pharisees call back the healed blind man to try to get him to recant. When it comes to credentials, the healed man has none. Yet, wielding the Word of God, he takes them to theology school. Unlike the Pharisees, we need to check our pride and let the Lord take us to school. He will teach us to confess our spiritually-blind condition. He will teach us to receive His healing of forgiveness through the Word and Sacraments. Jesus’ disciples desire to hear again and again the Lord’s marvelous works.

Prayer: Oh Lord, teach us Your ways. Where we have sinned, show us so that we confess it. Where we have sinned, show us Your Son, our Savior that trusting in Him we may have forgiveness. Amen.

The Sadducees were in a bind. They were thoroughly vexed. They denied all teachings of resurrection from death, yet they dared not take any action against Saints Peter and John or the other Apostles, not only because of the evidence itself, of which the Twelve were eye witnesses, but also for fear of the growing number of people who believed in Jesus, now having swollen into the thousands.

The Apostles had been transformed. Only perhaps two months before, they had hidden themselves in the upper room for fear of the Jews. And now these men, for the most part unschooled Galilean fishermen, opposed by this highly educated and powerful sect of the Jewish leadership, were courageous to proclaim the truth of Christ—that the Holy One of God had been treated as accursed (Galatians 3:13), as sin itself (2 Corinthians 5:21), and had now burst forth from the tomb as the Second Adam. Indeed, they could not but speak the things which they had seen and heard, testifying to the power, the name, and the means by which Christ, the Chief Cornerstone, brought healing to the people of God. They were further strengthened through prayer: “Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness [we] may speak.”

We too encounter enemies of the Gospel as we strive to confess God’s truth in Christ. But, like the Apostles, we are stiffened in our resolve by the Word of God: “I will speak of Your testimonies also before kings, and will not be ashamed” (Psalm 119:46). Amen.

It seems inexplicable. The Prince of Life is slain and at the crowd's insistence Barabbas, a murderer, is set free. It also seems impossible. Jesus, having already shed holy blood beneath the mocking crown and the tearing scourge, is nailed, hand and foot, to a cross and has His side pierced with a spear to confirm His death. Yet on the third day He rises from the borrowed tomb very much alive.

Then there is the grand miraculous. A man crippled from birth, given the ability for the first time in his life to walk, now leaps for joy, shouting praises to God. There is also the ordinary miraculous. Your faithful pastor, Sunday after Sunday, turns to you and the rest of the congregation to say, "Upon this, your confession, I, by virtue of my office," forgive you all your sins. But it is not "ordinary" at all. The Prince of Life is slain and you, sinner most foul, have been set free. As with Peter and John and the lame man, so also with your pastor. It is not by his power or godliness that life has been restored to you. It is by the grace of God through faith in the One He sent to give Himself for your deliverance from the present evil age that you have been forgiven.

*Jesus! Only name that's given Under all the mighty heaven
Whereby man, to sin enslaved, Bursts his fetters and is
saved.*

(TLH 114:5)

Jesus said, "Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 10:32). This healed blind man had confessed Jesus before the Pharisees and as a result of His confession, the Pharisees had cast him out of the synagogue. Jesus comes to his defense.

Those who say that Jesus never claimed to be the Son of God could not be more wrong. Jesus knew that He was the Son of God and He taught others that He was the Son of God in Whom we are to believe/trust for forgiveness. Jesus gives this man words of absolution when He says, "You have both seen Him and it is He who is talking with you." The healed blind man had not seen Jesus with His eyes after washing off the mud in the pool, Siloam. However, Jesus declares that the man had already seen Him (believed), when He trusted in Jesus' words. Further, Jesus identifies Himself by talking with him.

The Pharisees recognize themselves in Jesus' words, "...that those who see may be made blind." Jesus explains further that if they had confessed their sin (being blind), He would have absolved them so that trusting in Jesus they "would have no sin." But because they deny their sinful blindness saying, "We see," their sin remains. 1 John 1:9-10, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Prayer: Almighty God, heal our blindness by the Word of Your Son that our sins might not remain, but that we would be declared without sin and righteous in Your sight. Amen.

MONDAY, MAY 11: JOHN 10:1-5

ROGATE

Sin is to seek things on one's own terms rather than abide by God's holy will. We confess in the creeds that we believe God the Father created all things. This also means that He set things in order according to His benevolent will. However, Satan and our parents, Adam and Eve, fouled things up by transgressing His good will and righteous ordering, and things have been scattered and damaged ever since.

To this day wicked men and false teachers circumvent God's will and Christ's commands for the Church, and these men cause havoc. God's lambs are gathered together by the one voice of the Good Shepherd and made into one flock. But man's foolishness and selfishness causes them to follow strange voices that are different from God's. They steal the blessings of peace and assurance in the clear Word of God by spreading Satan's noise, and they disturb the flock.

This is why it is always important for us to discern and follow the voice of Christ's sound doctrine and be guarded by it. The wisdom of His Law helps us to see how our lives should look as one of His lambs, and the glory of His Gospel shows us that He has done all to redeem us and grant us abundant life in Him according to faith and His Spirit.

We pray: Lord God, keep us steadfast in Your Word and guide us always by the voice of our Good Shepherd, Your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

SAT., MAY 30: JOHN 16:31-17:26

SATURDAY OF WHITSUN WEEK

Christ Jesus speaks consolation to His apostles to comfort them in the midst of their travails in this world: "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." We, too, need this consolation because our flesh is always imagining that the world is winning one victory after another. Rebellion against the Word of God is a badge of honor among the heathen, and the enemies of Christ revel in their defiance against the Lord and cruelly persecute the Church.

We hear the words of Christ's prayer for us and for all His Church: "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." This unity is in the Word—it is a unity in that which Christ teaches His Church. Those who depart from the Truth do not have the Word and do not have fellowship with Christ or His Church. But if we have the Truth, then we have everything, and are of one Body with all Christ's Church from Adam to the end of the world.

O God, who didst teach the hearts of thy faithful people by sending to them the light of Thy Holy Spirit, grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgment in all things and evermore to rejoice in His holy comfort; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who with Thee and the Holy Ghost liveth and reigneth with Thee, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

The Church in every age lives by the Word of the Lord, and—in an age in the West which is obsessed with a self-indulgent ease and comfort—we need to hear again those words which Christ spoke: “If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you.” While the blood of the martyrs flows in Africa and the Middle East, Christians in North America and Europe cringe in fear that perverts, libertines and blasphemers are going to call them ‘bigots.’ The apparent weakness of confession by American Christians is particularly telling: desperate to be ‘popular’ they have betrayed their first love.

The world hates the Christ, and it will always reject those who are faithful to Christ. As Jesus declares: “If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also. But all these things will they do unto you for my name’s sake, because they know not him that sent me.” Confess Christ and do not fear the world. The Triune God has placed His name upon us in Baptism—we have nothing to fear from the world.

O God, who didst teach the hearts of thy faithful people by sending to them the light of Thy Holy Spirit, grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgment in all things and evermore to rejoice in His holy comfort; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who with Thee and the Holy Ghost liveth and reigneth with Thee, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

“All who ever came before Me are thieves and robbers...”

No one comes to God except through Jesus Christ and the faith that believes in Him. All those who offer, or have offered, any sort of righteousness or salvation apart from the promised Savior are servants of the devil and his lies. Whether it is the false teachers of the Jews, who claim to know and serve God the Father while rejecting Jesus, or the diabolical religion of Islam, which mocks Jesus as a secondary teacher and advocates violence against Christians, or any other religion that disregards Jesus Christ as God incarnate, these religions are those of thieves and robbers.

God values the lives of all people who are part of His creation. He loved, and still loves, the world and gave His Son so that all might believe in Him and be saved. But Satan has fought long and hard, since the very beginning with Adam and Eve, to steal as many men and women away from God as possible.

The world is blessed by God’s continued mercy in the fact that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is still preached and taught. The true “Door” to salvation is Jesus Christ crucified. He laid down His life for His lambs and for all the world so that we might be saved from the death of our sins by His grace, through the faith that He creates in us by His Spirit. Thanks be to God!

We pray: God the Father, thank You for showing us Yourself and Your infinite mercies through Your Son, Jesus Christ, and blessing us according to Your Holy Spirit. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

“Go therefore and make disciples...teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you...”

“Making disciples” for Christ is not just a matter of filling the seats or pews. Nor is it just a matter of people making a stated decision. Making disciples of Jesus Christ is to have people hear and learn the Word of God as it is faithfully taught and preached in the Church.

Our Lord connects discipleship with baptism, which means it also is connected with the work of His Word and His Holy Spirit. That is why the integrity of the Church’s public confession in teaching and practice is so important. The Church is sent to proclaim the whole truth of God, to teach those who hear to observe all that Christ commands. We are made part of the work that His Word and His Spirit does, because it is only through Him that we have life and salvation.

It is a dangerous and misguided situation when people ignore or compromise God’s teachings in the name of “greater outreach.” Failing to teach the whole truth of Christ’s commands is not justified by superficial statistics. “Any means necessary” or “bait-and-switch” tactics do great harm because the focus and work is not on our Lord’s Word, but on man’s foolish efforts.

True discipleship is a great blessing that only comes from God. By His gifts and His power we are made to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, and we are all made part of the one flock that abides in His saving truth.

We pray: Lord God, continue to bless us with Your Word and Spirit, and strengthen us according to them so we may always do and confess all that our Savior has taught us. In Jesus Christ. Amen.

In response to the words of St. Thomas and St. Philip, Jesus speaks words which comfort and console the saints in times of trouble. In the midst of the heresy and darkness of this age, St. Thomas’ words strike at all the confusion which often threatens to overwhelm many Christians: “Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way?” “Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” When we are tempted to compromise the truth, or to doubt that which the Lord has made known in His holy Word, knowledge of, and trust in, the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life calls us back from reliance on anything from the imagination or reason of man or the corruption of false teachers.

“Philip saith unto him, Lord, show us the Father, and it sufficeth us.” “Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? the words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works.” There is no division within the Godhead. As we confess in the Athanasian Creed, “So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not three Gods, but one God.” We do not know the Father apart from knowing the Son, and no one who denies the Son has the Father. But we who have been baptized in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost have fellowship with the Lord, and thus fellowship with all those who are of this faith in its truth and purity.

O God, who didst teach the hearts of thy faithful people by sending to them the light of Thy Holy Spirit, grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgment in all things and evermore to rejoice in His holy comfort; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who with Thee and the Holy Ghost liveth and reigneth with Thee, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Those of the house of Israel who heard Peter's words and were struck to the heart asked of the apostles: "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" The reply which they received was not only an answer for the house of Israel, but for everyone who would be saved: "Then Peter said unto them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.'" Sorrow over sin and faith in the Christ, and the gifts of holy Baptism are not for one generation, or a particular nation, or only for those who have reached 'the age of accountability'—baptism is for you, for your children, and for everyone whom the Lord our God shall call. Through baptism we are joined to the Church, the Body of Christ, and thus it was in the apostolic age, and even unto this day: "...the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."

The fellowship into which the saints were added was then expressed in a unity of doctrine and practice: "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." That which we believe, teach and confess is that which the Lord has made known through His holy Word through the prophets, apostles and evangelists.

O God, who didst teach the hearts of thy faithful people by sending to them the light of Thy Holy Spirit, grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgment in all things and evermore to rejoice in His holy comfort; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who with Thee and the Holy Ghost liveth and reigneth with Thee, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Our Lord did not leave us when He ascended into Heaven. At this event He reminded His Apostles, and the entire Church, that He would continue with them in the most profound way. He would be with us always through faith in the Gospel. Jesus Christ abides in us, and we in Him, by the Word of His death and resurrection for our forgiveness, by the indwelling of His Spirit with the Word in Baptism, and by the ongoing proclamation of His atoning sacrifice and victory over death in His holy Supper.

The ascension of our Lord is sometimes reduced to a mystical excuse for the unseen, spiritual nature of our Lord's presence. However, an important point to be remembered about the ascension is that it is part of the testimony that we do not just cling to philosophical abstractions, but that our faith is based on real, physical events in history. Our God was truly made flesh and blood; He truly lived as a man in a particular place and time. He became a documented part of the human story, and His death and resurrection were significant events that affect man's future. And because God lived and walked as a man for a time, He also needed to transcend the limitations of that particular place and time for the benefit of the whole world. Our Lord did not leave us at the ascension, He went up to a place of greater glory from which He would continue to bless mankind in profound ways!

We pray: Lord God, we give You thanks for Your Son Jesus Christ, and for all that He accomplished for our forgiveness and life. Keep us steadfast in the signs and manifest graces that He gives to us in His holy Word and Sacraments, even to the end of the age. In His Name. Amen.

“And they worshiped Him...and were continually in the temple praising and blessing God.”

Our Lord came to be with us as true man in a particular place and time in history. But He also ascended to heavenly glory as part of the testimony that He was indeed true God. With His incarnation He revealed Himself in flesh and blood, but after His ascension He continues to reveal Himself to us in the Word of the Gospel, the water of Baptism, as well as in the flesh and blood of His Supper. And we are taught to follow the Apostles in continuing in these holy blessings in the holy places where He gives these gifts.

On the one hand, we do not have to seek out one particular place in this large world for us to faithfully worship the Lord. We do not have to travel to unfamiliar countries with significant expense or risk. However, on the other hand, we are not given license to be lazy or careless about observing the presence of our Lord’s blessings either. One cannot faithfully argue that they are rightly praising and blessing God while sleeping in or playing golf when the rest of God’s people are gathered together around the faithful preaching and administration of His sacraments.

Our Lord reveals Himself according to His own will, and He has told us that His will is for us to remember the gifts of His divine rest in Jesus Christ at those times and places where the Church faithful observes Christ’s commands concerning preaching, teaching, and His blessed sacraments. Thanks be to God for that!

We pray: Lord God, help us to gladly hear, learn, and observe the blessings You give us in Christ through Your holy Church. In His Name. Amen.

Peter once denied the faith for fear of a servant girl, but now, inspired by the Holy Spirit, he spoke with boldness, faithfully confessed Christ, and called the house of Israel to repentance.

Among the points worthy of notice is Peter’s astute confession of the two natures in Christ—that Jesus is truly God and truly Man. Thus, in verse 22, Peter declares, “Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know”. Nathanael had once wondered, “Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46) The apostles do not hesitate to confess that the Christ is true Man, born of the virgin Mary, raised in the house of Joseph, where the holy family resided from the time of their return from Egypt.

But Peter also faithfully proclaimed the divine nature of the Christ, and set forth what it means that Jesus is David’s Son and David’s Lord: “Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear. For David is not ascended into the heavens: but he saith himself, The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, Until I make thy foes thy footstool. Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made the same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ.” Jesus of Nazareth is Christ, the Lord.

O God, who didst teach the hearts of thy faithful people by sending to them the light of Thy Holy Spirit, grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgment in all things and evermore to rejoice in His holy comfort; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who with Thee and the Holy Ghost liveth and reigneth with Thee, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

The multitude who heard St. Peter's words on Pentecost heard the Law as the apostle declared to them: "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made the same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ." "Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?' Then Peter said unto them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.'"

Inspired by the Holy Spirit to call the people to repentance and baptism, St. Peter proclaimed that salvation by grace through faith which Jesus spoke of in John 3: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Faith is that which God Himself creates and sustains by the work of the Holy Spirit through the means of grace.

For as long as those of the "house of Israel" attempted to harden their hearts and deny their sin, they were those who loved darkness rather than the light. But the Lord's word of Law broke down their defenses and laid bare the character of their sins. Knowing their need for salvation, they cried out to the apostles, and St. Peter proclaimed the only hope for sinners: Christ Jesus, who atoned for the sins of the world.

O God, who didst give Thy Holy Spirit to Thine Apostles, grant unto Thy people the performance of their petitions, so that on us, to whom Thou has given faith, Thou mayest bestow also peace; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

"One of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection."

The focus of the Church is to preach Jesus Christ crucified for our sins and risen again to show His victory over death. For the sake of those who hear and would believe, it is important that the message be clearly and faithfully proclaimed. Those who preach are not selected just because they have a feeling or hear some inner voice that tells them they are called. Those who faithfully preach are qualified by their foundation and connection with the Word of God and the truth of Jesus Christ.

In the case of the Apostles filling Judas's place, it was not a matter of asking for the first volunteer to jump up and say he felt the Spirit move in him. They carefully selected men who were faithful and constant in learning from the Lord. These men were qualified because they showed clear outward characteristics that made them apt to teach the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

A man called as minister to the Church is not qualified by some mere feeling. Nor is he qualified by his good looks, people skills, or rhetorical abilities. (However, such things can be a help in serving as a minister.) A man is qualified because God has trained him according to His Spirit and Word, giving the man knowledge, wisdom, and ability to teach faithfully. He is qualified because he has made a clear and faithful witness to the life and salvation we have that comes through our crucified and risen Lord, Jesus Christ.

We pray: Lord God, continue to bless Your Church on Earth with faithful men who preach, teach, and administer Your holy gifts according to all that Christ has commanded. In His Name. Amen.

MONDAY, MAY 18: JOHN 10:17-21 SUNDAY AFTER ASCENSION

“Therefore there was a division again among the Jews because of these sayings.”

It is a common misconception that Jesus’ teaching will bring a visible, outward sort of “peace on earth.” His Word causes division in this world because this world is broken by sin. It is unrealistic to assume that our Lord’s will always bring agreement, because that assumption overlooks the reality of sin and selfishness in the world.

Christ, the Good Shepherd, does seek to gather His lambs into one flock around the singular voice of His holy Word. But that is not the same as “world peace.” As long as there is sin in the world there will always be people who resist the Holy Spirit and ignore His true understanding of Christ’s voice. And sin will not be completely gone until our Lord comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and bring us to life everlasting.

In the meantime, we are simply called to be faithful according to His Word and Spirit, and show forth His righteousness in the world. True peace is not primarily an outward state; it is the state of being at peace with God, oneself, and one’s neighbor according to the forgiveness that He gives us in the Gospel of Christ, and according to the love that we are taught in the Ten Commandments. And the fullness of that peace does not always result in outward unity, but is still the most important peace that we can know in this present life, because it is the true peace that God gives us in Jesus Christ.

We pray: Lord God, let Your holy peace be with us always, according to Your Word and Your Sacraments, where we find the only source of that peace in Christ Jesus. In His name, Amen.

SATURDAY, MAY 23: JOHN 11:45-57 SUNDAY AFTER ASCENSION

The chief priests and Pharisees intended great evil when they sought to kill Jesus. But God has shown many times before that He takes the wickedness of man and uses it to achieve great good. In the case of these treacherous Jews, God would use their evil to bring about the greatest good that mankind has ever known! The death of Jesus Christ would take away the sins of the world, and give forgiveness and everlasting life to all who believe!

God’s use of such things does not make the evil acts any less evil, but it does show that God truly has power over all things. The Jews thought they would be rid of Jesus if they killed Him. But the will of God made it so that Jesus did not go away, as the Jews hoped. Instead, He was lifted up in glory, where He would draw Jews, and people of all nations, to Himself as their true God and Savior.

Man can plot and work against the will of God, but God will always be victorious. Even when man seems to succeed, he fails. Men can seem to be wealthy, successful, and superior in profound ways, but eventually those men will die. Their legacies will be left to fall apart or be used for good, and those men will never be able to raise themselves up from the defeat of their death. However, God has shown in Christ that His legacy stands forever. It will not fall apart; it will come to greater glory when the current things pass away! And even as He laid down His life according to His own will, was betrayed into the hands of evil men, and was executed for sins He did not commit, He was ultimately able to raise Himself up again! Thanks be to God!

FRIDAY, MAY 22: JOHN 11:28-44 **SUNDAY AFTER ASCENSION**

Jesus is not troubled by death. He is troubled by unbelief. He knew He would overcome death after He laid down His life for the sake of the world. He stated previously, "I am the resurrection and the life." However, He is grieved by the faithlessness of His beloved people.

God loves the world and does not rejoice in the death of anyone. He made the world good and sinless because He wanted mankind to enjoy the blessings of His benevolence for all time. But sinful faithlessness brought death and more faithlessness into the world. That is what grieved our Lord. He blesses us, seeks to restore us, and even lays His own life down for us, yet we continue as though we are blind and deaf, resisting His Spirit.

The resurrection of Lazarus was an important miracle for two reasons. First, it showed that Jesus did indeed have power over life and death. Faithful Martha knew He had this power, which would be manifest at the resurrection of all flesh. But He also used the opportunity to show He also had such power at that time, emphasizing that the Father does hear Him, because He and the Father are one. Second, this miracle gave a sort of preview of His own resurrection. His own grave would be a cave with a stone over the doorway; and He would be wrapped in linens. But no one would need to move the stone and call Him forth, nor would anyone need to loose Him from His graveclothes. He would free Himself from these restrictions as He would raise Himself from death!

Let us give thanks to God that our Savior does show us great patience and mercy as He teaches us to have faith in the life we receive by His death and resurrection. Amen.

TUESDAY, MAY 19: JOHN 10:22-31 **SUNDAY AFTER ASCENSION**

"Then the Jews surrounded Him and said to Him, 'How long do You keep us in doubt? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly.' Jesus answered them, 'I told you, and you do not believe.'"

We often want answers from God, but we do not always want to believe the answer when He gives it. Our sinful hearts want to set terms, and if the Lord does not answer according to our terms then we either chafe against His Words, or else assume He has not told us.

He gives us clear answers in His Word and works. Part of our life in Christ is learning to sincerely pray and think, "Thy will be done." True faith makes us able to see where He has taught us plainly the answer to many of our questions in life. We often dislike His answers because they seem hard to our selfish minds, but if we are truly His lambs according to the Holy Spirit, we will hear, understand, and do those things in His will. Or if we fail to do so, (and we do fail at those things constantly) His Spirit instructs us according to His Law and moves us to repentance. He teaches us His will plainly, but He is also very clear in how He shows us His grace and forgiveness.

Jesus Christ clearly manifested His divine power and will to take away the sins of the world by His works and His innocent death on the cross. But, tragically, many choose not to believe in Him, and so they remain deaf to God and are lost in their own doubt. May He continue to tell the world of His true love and grace through His Word and works by His Church on Earth, so that more may believe and have everlasting life in Him. Amen.

The Jews make an ironic claim against Jesus. They seek to execute Him because they say He speaks blasphemy as a man, making Himself God. However, He is, in fact, God and has shown that by His works. But the Jews ignore His works and the Word of God (by which they try to claim the right to kill Him), and make themselves in the place of God, judging and condemning Him by their own blasphemous human understanding.

All our sinfulness is a result of making ourselves equal to or greater than God. According to Luther's explanation of the First Commandment, we fail to fear, love, or trust in God above all things. We place our own interests and understanding above the clear Word and will of God. Another irony is that we think we are acting in our own best interest, but we ignore the fact that ours is a selfish and misguided self-interest that often harms ourselves or others around us, while God's will is truly in our best interest and is also a benefit to our neighbor's as well.

If we were left to our own godhood, we would end up killing ourselves and all those around us because of our foolish sinfulness. But God is truly benevolent and merciful, and saves us from the dangerous will of men. He has shown us His own profound love and divine power by becoming true man and allowing Himself to be executed in our stead. And He confirms that He is true God in His glorious resurrection and everlasting presence with His people in His Words and His deeds in the Sacraments.

We pray: Lord God, forgive us for faithlessly placing ourselves before You, and keep us steadfast in true faith in our divine Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.”

Real life is more than just the day-to-day existence of this fallen world. (Thank the Lord for that!) This current life that any of us experience is full of pain, trouble, and sin. Real life is found in Jesus Christ. In Him we have the life of forgiveness, so we know that no matter how bad this life is we will have abundant life in the next life after the resurrection of the dead. But we also have many blessings now because of Him. In Him we also learn contentment and joy even when things are bad. This blessing comes from His own example that even the worst suffering can be used by God to work great good, and that can be a comfort, if we have the help of His Spirit to see it that way.

Sin has damaged this current life and world. It is actually a blessing that our time in it is limited. Its own time is limited. The present things will pass away. But the blessings of true life in Him will not pass away. They give us hope now, and are a preview of the greater things to come in the everlasting life of the world to come. So let us not grow weary or hopeless when the present life troubles us with sickness and death. The life we have in Christ crucified is far greater than anything we know now!

We pray: Lord God, grant us faith, hope, and love according to Your Holy Spirit so that we may not despair of this sinful world, but hold fast to our abundant life in Jesus Christ. Amen.