

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 5: DEUTERONOMY 18:15-19 ADVENT 1

As we come to the end of this first week of Advent, we hear again of God's promise. This time He speaks of raising "up for them a Prophet like [Moses]." Over and over, we hear God speaking a Word of Promise to His people. With every Advent, we are reminded how our God deals with His people. He deals with them based upon His promise. He promised Adam and Eve that the Seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent. God blessed Noah and his sons and promised to never send another flood. God blessed Abraham and promised, "in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed." Through Jacob, God blessed Judah: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah." The Word of God given through Balaam reiterated the blessing bestowed on Judah.

As we know from Scripture, God kept that promise by sending His Son. Jesus came into this world and took on our flesh, lived a perfect life, died a perfect death, and rose again from the dead. Now, through faith in the promise of forgiveness of sin for Jesus' sake we are saved from sin, death, and the power of the devil. Furthermore, we have Jesus' promise of His final Advent. Jesus promised to come again and take us to be with Him in Paradise.

And then there is now. We also have this promise: "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Jesus keeps that promise through His Word and Sacraments. Through His Means of Grace, Jesus comes to us with His promised forgiveness of sins and the assurance of life eternal with Him.

Oh, Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel. Amen.

THE LUTHERAN HERALD

**TRINITY 24—ADVENT 1
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Saint Paul makes it undeniably clear that God is righteous and merciful, while man is sinful and self-centered. In spite of this sad reality related to man, God has preserved for Himself a remnant, which He has chosen by grace. Paul does not care to justify the ways of God to man, for he is an apostle of Jesus Christ, knowing that there are no limits to the creative means and ways of God. In the hopeless spectacle of the lost sheep of Israel facing the just wrath of God upon unbelief he can see the harvest field of the Lord.

Paul has the mind of Christ. Paul has, moreover, been set apart by grace for the Gospel of God. He serves the Creator, whose Word has never failed, whose Word says, "Let light shine out of darkness." God's Word can make light shine even out of Israel's present darkness; His Word has uses for the dead branches cut from the tree of Israel, branches cut due to hardened hearts set to resist God. God's almighty love is in that Word. A proclamation of God's Gospel love which cannot stop at the limitless power and presence of God, but must speak of the Lord's free gift of justification by grace for His new people.

We pray: Almighty God, grant that we, who have been redeemed from the old life of sin by our Baptism into the death and resurrection of Your Son, Jesus Christ, may be renewed by Your Holy Spirit to live in righteousness and true holiness; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Balaam was a renowned prophet in the area. Balak, King of Moab, had called upon Balaam to curse the people of Israel. Balaam had refused the king's offer saying he could only speak the words God gave him. With each request by King Balak for Balaam to curse the people of Israel, the Lord answers back with prophecy about Israel being blessed and Moab and the surrounding lands being conquered.

Yesterday's reading, specifically Gen. 49:10, "The scepter shall not depart from Judah," offers some help with understanding this prophecy. Also helpful is Hebrew 1:8, "But to the Son He says: 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; A scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom.'" Balaam prophesies of the time when one would come who would "destroy all the sons of tumult."

On the Cross, Jesus defeated Satan and all his minions, "all the sons of tumult." God's One and only Son, Who rose from the dead, now lives and reigns forever. Though we wander in this wilderness and are assaulted by Satan, we have God's promise "that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

Though King Balak made great promises to Balaam in order to have Balaam curse the people of Israel, Balaam would not: "What the Lord says, that I must speak." Sadly, Balaam would later turn from God and show King Balak how to trap God's people. Our assurance is that God will never turn His back on us.

Lord, bless me so that I always hold fast to Your Word.
Amen.

After reading today's account from Genesis, you may wonder, "What does this mean for me? What am I to learn?" Jacob was on his deathbed when these words were spoken. Jacob knew the peril facing his sons. At that time, they were living comfortably in the land of Egypt. They could have easily lost sight of who they were as God's people in favor of temporal comforts. The fulfillment of God's promises would not be found in the land of Egypt. Jacob's sons needed to look ahead to the time they would return to the land promised to their forefathers.

As Christians, we must understand that though we live in the present, we are to live our lives in anticipation of our future with Christ at the resurrection. As we know, this is much easier said than done. It is not easy to live in anticipation of the future when trials and tribulations come our way. But, as with the sons of Jacob, it can be even more difficult to live in anticipation of the future when our lives are comfortable.

The assurance we have as Christians is knowing that no matter how our lives are going, whether there be trials or good times, God is working for our good. As St. Paul wrote: "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." Those whom He has called have nothing to fear. Though there may be temporal consequences to our actions we are assured that nothing will separate us from the love God has for us in Christ.

In all time of tribulation, in all time of our prosperity, help us, good Lord. Amen.

Paul speaks from pastoral concern in today's text and prays that God, who has called, may foster and make fruitful the faith which His call has created, to the glory of the Lord. The imminent character of the coming of the Day of the Lord sometimes is misinterpreted to mean the Day of the Lord has already come, with the result that the responsible sobriety of Christian hope gives way to hysterical excitement and irresponsible idleness. This often manifests itself in sects that claim to know the day, hour, and second of Christ's return.

In response to these types of anti-scriptural claims and ungodly behavior the apostle's words of pastoral concern are intended to restore the hope of the church throughout time to health and vigor. Paul speaks of the sequence of the terrible events which must precede the coming of the Day of the Lord. There will be a great rebellion headed by a figure who rebels so radically against God that he deifies himself, and therefore dooms himself. The hour will come, though, when this lawless one (antichrist) will be revealed, to work openly and freely—and to be judged and destroyed. In the meantime, Paul directs us to stand firm and hold to the apostolic teachings.

We pray: Lord God, we thank You that You have taught us what You would have us believe and do. Help us by Your Holy Spirit, for the sake of Jesus Christ, to hold fast Your Word in the regenerate spirit, that thereby we may be made strong in faith and perfect in holiness, and be comforted in life and death; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Paul's concern for the spiritual well being of the Thessalonian believers causes him to speak in terms meant to turn the mind of the church from overexcited, idle hope to the work of the apostolic church. He asks for the church's intercessions on his behalf, now that his work is opposed and threatened by wicked and evil men. He also assures the church once more of the aid and protection of their faithful Lord and of his, Paul's, confidence in their obedience. And he implores that the gift of love and steadfast hope flourish among them.

A last command deals with the disciplining of brethren who disobey the apostolic tradition (doctrine) and ignore the apostle's own example by living lives of idleness at the expense of others. The church's treatment of them is to remind them, forcefully yet fraternally, that they are by their disobedience excluding themselves from the fellowship of the church which the apostolic Word has created.

Paul dictated this letter and added a final greeting in his own handwriting as a seal of authenticity. This autograph conclusion is to serve as a mark of identification, should there be any doubt about the genuineness of the letter and the apostolic authority it carried.

We pray: O God, who chose us to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth of the holy Gospel, we implore You to show us Your great mercy that we may be set free from our sins and rescued from the punishment we rightly deserve; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Once again, we hear of God bestowing His blessing, this time upon His servant Abraham.

The account of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son usually draws most of our attention to Abraham. After all, he is the one who listened to God and did as God had told him by taking Isaac "to the land of Moriah." We see the willingness of Abraham, the father, to do as God commands.

However, often overlooked is another important person in this story: Isaac. Scripture refers to Isaac as a "lad" or "young man." Abraham had laid "the wood of the burnt offering" on his son, his one and only son. Isaac asks, "Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham assures Isaac that the Lord would provide a lamb. Abraham builds the altar, piles the wood on it, then binds his son and places him on the altar. Isaac could have easily overpowered Abraham, who by this time was around 115-120 years old, and simply ran away. Instead, Isaac is willing to be bound and to be laid upon the altar. Isaac obeys his father, and God.

We can give thanks to our Heavenly Father and to His Son for offering up the sacrifice for our sins. God the Father laid the cross on Christ, His Son, His one and only Son. Jesus did not run but willingly offered Himself as the sacrifice for our sins. Indeed, God provided the Lamb just as Abraham said.

You offered up Your Son as sacrifice for my sins. Forgive me for His sake. Amen.

Our reading for today jumps from the fall of Adam and Eve to shortly after the great flood where we hear God bestowing His blessing upon Noah and his sons.

With all the evil we hear and see in the world today, it may be difficult for us to believe there was a time when mankind was so evil that God sent a flood to destroy all the people of the world except for Noah, his wife, their three sons, and their wives. We tend to look back in time and see life as being somewhat more pristine than it is today. Only a few decades ago, sins, such as homosexuality, pornography, and abortion, to name a few, would have brought shame and embarrassment upon those who committed them. Today, they are proffered as virtuous and even godly. Even the rainbow, the sign of God's promise that "the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh," has been taken over by the LGBT crowd as a symbol for their perversion.

What we need to understand about sin is quite simple: "For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one *point*, he is guilty of all." Such clear words from God condemn us all. Though we may see ourselves as better than others in some, even many ways, before God we are guilty as anyone else.

Our only hope is to trust in Christ as did Noah and his family. They were saved from the flood because of the faith God have given them. By God's grace we are now saved by the water of Holy Baptism and the faith He has given to us to believe in His Son, Jesus.

Father, I thank you for the washing of regeneration. Amen.

The letters addressed to Timothy are correspondence directed to a "pastor" or shepherd of the church and deal with the office of the Ministry. Second Timothy has pastoral elements in it, but is basically a personal letter and in a class by itself though.

Paul is writing from prison in Rome. He has been a prisoner for some time and there has already been one hearing, at which Paul was deserted by all men, and yet, with the Lord's help, so successfully defended himself that he "was rescued from the lion's mouth"—but Paul has no hope of ultimate acquittal; he is at the end of his course.

Within this context Timothy is directed to fulfill his ministry in the sobering conviction that times and men will grow worse and that opposition to the truth will increase. The only alleviating feature of this dark future is that the folly of those who oppose the truth will expose itself. For this unorthodox folly is perpetually curious about the latest religious fads that oppose the truth by offering an abundance of enticing falsehood.

Timothy is to fulfill his office in the solid assurance that he has the equipment needed for his difficult and dangerous task in the example of Paul, in the apostolic teaching he has received, and in the inspired Scriptures which are able to instruct man for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

We pray: O Lord, the God of all grace, You have called Your Church to minister in the name of Your Son, our great High Priest. By Your Word and Spirit inspire men to offer their lives for the sacred Ministry that, ministering in the name of Christ, they may draw many to Your kingdom; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Timothy is to fulfill his ministry strenuously, insistently, and courageously in the face of men's indifference to sound teaching and in spite of their itching desire for false teaching. He is responsible, not to men, but to the Christ who will return to judge all men. It is Timothy who must now do the work of an evangelist. Paul's course is run, his fight finished; he looks to the reward that awaits him and all faithful men who look in love for their Lord's appearing, His return to reign.

Timothy is called to always be steady, literally "be sober in all things"—to not allow emotion and fleshly concerns to distract or sway his course. Paul points all believers to eternity with his reference regarding the "crown of righteousness." Righteousness, the final verdict of the God who "justifies him who has faith in Jesus" is the crown all the Elect will receive. The "crown of life" that all who have loved Christ's appearing shall receive through grace and faith.

Paul concludes his letter with a request for fellowship with a fellow soldier of Christ as he awaits his being called home to the Lord. Thankfully, in the fellowship of the church we all receive what is most needful in facing the trials of life and death: Christ's blessed Means of Grace.

We pray: Merciful God, we humbly implore You to cast the bright beams of Your light upon Your Church that we, being instructed by the doctrine of the blessed apostles, may walk in the light of Your truth and finally attain to the light of everlasting life, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Yesterday began a new Church year with the season of Advent. Our reading for today takes us back to the beginning. All was well with creation until Adam and Eve encountered the serpent in the garden of Eden. They had everything they needed for life in this world for they had God's pure, unadulterated Word: "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." Life was perfect.

However, the temptation was simple: "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?" The simple answer would have been, "Yes." But we know how it went from there. We are living examples of the corruption that entered the world the day our first parents sinned. All one needs to do is put "Has God indeed said..." in front of each of the Ten Commandments. If we answer, "No," we make God out to be a liar. If we answer, "Yes," we must follow up with another question: "Am I keeping His commandments?"

The simple answer is, "No."

What is so amazing in today's reading from Genesis 3 is that God didn't leave Adam and Eve alone in their sin. He came and sought them out. He confronted them with their sins and amazingly forgave them of the sake of "her Seed."

Every day, God does the same for us. He comes and finds us as we try to hide from Him. He confronts us with our sins and forgives us for the sake of His Son, the promised "Seed."

Heavenly Father, blot our sins for the sake of Your Son. Amen.

Tomorrow we begin another year in the Church with the celebration of Advent. The next four weeks give us time to prepare our hearts and minds for the right celebration of the birth of Christ.

Every year at this time some strange new belief seems to surface that has something weird regarding the birth, life, and death of Christ, to entice believers from staying firmly grounded in the Christian faith while remembering who/what/why is to be celebrated at Christmas. To assist we are humbled with the Gospel reading of how Jesus came riding into Jerusalem to suffer and die at the hands of sinful men.

John encourages us to not just take the word of any new belief/spirit, but to test that message to see if it came from God. In other words, if any message does not center around or specifically geared toward the belief that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh then it is of the antichrist!

As we draw to the end of the Church Year calendar, may we be firmly grounded on Jesus Christ and His revealed Word alone; remembering God has revealed Himself in the person of Jesus Christ, so He could grow to manhood, keep the law in our place and then ride on into Jerusalem to suffer and die on Calvary in our place. Holding to this truth, we have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

We Pray: By grace to timid hearts that tremble, in tribulation's furnace tried,—by grace, despite all fear and trouble, the Father's heart is open wide. Where could I help and strength secure if grace were not my anchor sure? Amen.

Jesus does not answer the question, “When will this be?” He will not permit His disciples to speculate concerning His return. Instead, He shapes their hope as a vigilant and responsible expectation by teaching them to read in all history the sign of His coming and the close of the age. All history is the sign; they are to see in all history, with its false hopes, its wars and disasters, and it's apparently meaningless sufferings, the work of God carrying out His will as He moves toward final judgment.

The history of the church is the sign. God will be at work in His persecuted, stumbling church, manifesting His strength in her weakness. The task of the church will be accomplished; the Gospel will be universally proclaimed, and then the end will come.

All history alerts the disciple for the end of history. In that history the fall of Jerusalem has a unique place; in Jerusalem the drama of God's offer of His grace in the Son and man's rejection of that grace, with the resultant judgment, are a miniature of the close of the age. Jesus has separated His own from the doomed city, and they need not share its fate. They are to flee.

Human nature is such that we always crave to know the future, though God time and again tells us it is not ours to know such things. Our weak faith will not allow us to trust wholly in the Lord's care for us and His ability to carry us through all trials of this life and unto His eternal kingdom.

We pray: Lighten our darkness, O Lord, and by Your great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers; for the love of Your only Son, our Redeemer, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's reading has but one message: "be ready." After a lengthy description of the impending Judgment that would scare even the most complacent reader, we're forced to ask: "What then shall we do?" Jesus tells us: "Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing."

As Jesus addresses His disciples in this passage, there is no doubt He's giving emphasis to their calling in the Holy Ministry. Their responsibility over souls is paramount as they carry on the work the Lord has given them. No less will be the task of the pastors who follow them to the close of the age. It should be no surprise that Jesus is simply telling them, and us, to be faithful.

But Jesus' advice about our preparation for the Last Days is not a "last-ditch effort" to be employed when times get "really bad." Rather, we're to treat all days the same. We're to be doing what we always should have been doing. Even if we did know when Jesus would return, that shouldn't change our words or deeds one bit. Each and every day is critical in the life of the Christian, as souls are swayed one way or another by what we say and do.

Prayer: May God grant us the courage and wisdom to be His faithful servants each and every day in both word and deed. Amen.

As we draw to the end of another Church Year, we recall all we have learned following the One Year Lectionary. We have heard the Advent of Christ; His birth of the Virgin Mary: God becoming man! We saw His Epiphany to the Gentiles; His Transfiguration. We had time to reflect on sin and the suffering/Passion of our Lord throughout Lent; followed by Palm Sunday and Holy Week; all culminating with the joy of another Easter Resurrection. This was followed by Pentecost, Trinity Season, Reformation, All Saints; not to mention remembering all the faithful departed Apostles and saints.

These seasons and celebrations pointed believers in the direction in which one has ample opportunity to see a loving God, the reason for Christ's existence; and the work of the Holy Spirit. We heard the Law and the Gospel, sins exposed, and were comforted by hearing that Christ was/is the atonement for the sins of the world of which you and I are a part. Having heard how God has justified us freely and given us faith to believe through the Word proclaimed and the Sacraments administered. We live each day in repentance, remembering our Baptism, strengthened through Christ's Body and Blood to live a holy life, trusting that God remembers our sin no more. As we wait for Christ's return may He enable you to believe in His Name as you love one another. For this is the will of God.

We pray: By grace! This ground of faith is certain; So long as God is true, it stands. What saints have penned by inspiration, what in His Word our God commands, what our whole faith must rest upon, is grace alone, grace in His Son. Amen.

This has to be one of the most beloved texts for anyone who refuses the means of grace. “See I told you, I don’t sin! I hear God’s command to not sin. I love God! I don’t swear! I go to church! I love my parents! I haven’t killed anyone! I, I, I, I! I purify myself with righteous life!”

Wow! Maybe you’ve heard such comments, and say to yourself, “how sad?” to think you’re in a relationship with God because you don’t sin. You have to ask them immediately, “Have you ever wondered why Christ had to die!”

Such is the love of God that keeps the world from knowing who are the children of God. It’s called grace! It is called God’s undeserved favor, or as another old Lutheran once told me, “God’s riches at Christ’s expense!”

For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil. Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.

The key words are: “born of God.” Here John is talking about those who have been born not of the flesh but through water and the Spirit; namely, Holy Baptism through which God regenerates and renews the heart and mind to have this hope in the work of Christ; as we trust in His promises; as we wait for His return.

We pray: By grace God’s Son, our only Savior, came down to earth to bear our sin. Was it because of thine own merit that Jesus died thy soul to win? Nay, it was grace, and grace alone, that brought Him from His heavenly throne. Amen.

In today’s text Jesus is doing battle with the Sadducees. The Sadducees, though small in number, were wealthy and sophisticated, having great influence in the Jerusalem temple, as well as the Sanhedrin. They accepted only the first five books of the Old Testament, and as the text says at the outset, they didn’t believe in the Resurrection. They make up a story that’s so ridiculous and hypothetical that it’s obvious their motive is simply to cast doubt on Jesus’ ministry.

It is significant that Jesus answers them from one of their few accepted books, that of Genesis: “Jesus answered and said to them, ‘You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God in heaven. But concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?’ God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.”

Jesus essentially says they know nothing of God, and to ask such a ridiculous question reveals their lack of knowledge. God instituted marriage to serve man’s need for companionship and to populate the earth. Its purpose ceases in heaven, where there is neither birth nor death. Heaven is all about eternal life, as Jesus emphasizes in the last verse.

Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, we thank You for the gift of marriage that serves us well in this earthly life. Help us to not lose sight of Your ultimate gift of life eternal. Amen.

This passage in 1 Corinthians is often read at funerals. There is good reason for doing so. Perhaps nowhere else in Scripture do we find a passage with so much comfort and assurance. Paul plainly says the Church is in the “resurrection business.” The sole purpose of the Church is to offer the means of eternal life. Many make it into something else, or so crowd it with distractions that eventually the centrality of our mission becomes lost. How important it is that we keep forgiveness, life, and salvation at the fore—as did St. Paul.

The Apostle makes a two-way argument concerning the reality of the resurrection: “But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty.” If we are not raised from death, that means there was no precedent of the resurrection. In other words, it means Christ never rose. So if the Initiator didn’t “initiate,” then all who follow have only this life to live. This places the doctrine of the resurrection solely and squarely on the shoulders of Jesus Christ. And what better place can there be to have our trust. Paul goes on: “But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” The fact that Jesus did rise is the lynch pin. Without it, we have nothing. With it, we have everything.

Prayer: Gracious God, we praise You for being the Guarantor of eternal life. Let us never lose heart, knowing that we are the beneficiaries of that first Easter. Amen.

Our reading for today is most encouraging for the Christian who holds to the belief that God’s Word is the inerrant, infallible Word of God; and that not only certain parts of the Bible, but the entire Bible is the Word of God; that it not merely contains the Word of God besides some ideas, views, and even mistakes of men, but it is the Word of God in all its parts, and is therefore the source book for all Christian knowledge, the foundation of our faith, and the rule of our life (Koehler, Ques. 7). Therefore the Word of God cannot contain lies, untruths, myths or contradictions.

The person who rejects this teaching cannot have saving faith, for to reject the Word of God in all its purity, is to reject Jesus the Christ, Who is the Word made flesh, begotten of the Father full of grace and truth. So to reject the Son, also means to reject the Father. Sadly, those who reject the Christ are fitted appropriately with the term anti-Christ.

John writes how we should not be shocked but realize that in these last days there will be those who will reject the Christ and not be saved. In fact they will with every ounce of their soul deceive the believer into questioning the validity of the Word of God as Satan did in the Garden of Eden. Therefore abide in His Word and you will not be disappointed when Christ returns.

We pray: By grace! Oh, mark this word of promise when thou art by thy sins opprest, when Satan plagues thy troubled conscience, and when thy heart is seeking rest. What reason cannot comprehend God by His grace to thee doth send. Amen.

The book of Jude, our reading for today, reveals a plea to all who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ. It is a plea to contend earnestly for the “faith” which was once for all delivered to the saints.

It is the “faith” that was delivered or the Good News that was first delivered after our first parents questioned their Creator, as they were deceived into believing another voice, the voice of Satan, the father of lies.

It is this “faith” that consists of believing in a merciful and compassionate God, Who wishes that none be lost to everlasting sin and judgment, but that all might come to the knowledge of the truth; that truth, Who is the promised seed, Jesus Christ, Who was promised to destroy the authority or head of Satan, while having His heal, denoting His human nature, put to death as a payment for the sin of the world.

This plea to contend for the “faith” will occur by the saints who believe in Jesus Christ and trust in His promises by faith. These faithful will have no argument in making the claim, nor have any problem postulating, nor firmly asserting that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Light of the world, of which they are a part and they too want none to be lost.

We pray: By grace! None dare lay claim to merit; Our works and conduct have no worth. God in His love sent our Redeemer, Christ Jesus, to this sinful earth; His death did for our sins atone and we are saved by grace alone. Amen.

After a long treatise on the failure of the Israelites during their wilderness trials, the focus switches to the present-day reader in verse one of chapter 4. “Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it.” Nine times we hear the word “rest” in this brief section of Hebrews 4. By sheer repetition, the author desires to keep this word and concept at the forefront of our thought. So the question is: “How do we obtain this elusive rest?” After all, the nation of Israel, with all her inherent advantages, did not obtain it. Therefore, we must be doubly careful—for the same devil who succeeded in the Garden triumphed in the wilderness and countless other locales on numerous other people would like nothing more than to add us to his total.

What then do we do? Fast? Pray harder? Do better? All these are bogus desires, because their direction is all wrong. They focus inward, when the solution to our doubt must be outward. We cling to Christ, for there is no good to be found anywhere else. God sent us a Savior because we needed one. He didn’t send a coach or a cheerleader, but a Savior. It is through Him—and Him alone—that salvation is given and sustained.

Prayer: Dear Lord, I believe, but help my unbelief. May my doubts be quenched with the knowledge that You alone are my Savior. Amen.

How solid was the faith that Abraham possessed! He followed God's directions to the letter, even when there was no evidence to give him assurance. In fact, what Abraham could see and perceive only gave him reason to doubt God's Word. He left his sure and tangible homeland to head for a place he didn't know. Even the directions on how to get there were left up in the air. And things wouldn't get much better. Abraham would live the life of a nomad, moving his tent from one place to another. Even his first descendants, Isaac and Jacob, wouldn't fare much better. And yet, the Patriarchs would pave the way for descendants and generations yet to come, culminating in the birth of the Messiah.

So how could Abraham and the others move forward with so little of the promise realized? The text tells us: "by faith." "By faith, Abraham obeyed..." "By faith, Sarah herself also received strength..." But lest the reader think this family somehow had the "inside track" on faith, we must remember they were born of the same stock as we: sinners descended from Adam and Eve. As such, they faced the same struggles and temptations that you and I face. But they were also given the same Holy Spirit you and I possess, and therefore we can join them also as "great people of faith," because God has made us so.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, we thank You for the faith given to Your chosen people of times past and present. Keep us always in the true faith unto life everlasting. Amen.

Our reading for today is as applicable to the saints of the dispersion as it is for God's saints today. We are all at the mercy and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Living with our sinful human nature, we struggle with being the saints that God has made us to be through the water bath and His Holy precious Word. We struggle to be His faithful people and follow His Word as a guide for daily living. We struggle when we hear so many scoffers claim how our intellect and experience is what grasps God's salvation verses relying by faith on the person and work of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

This is why Peter's words at the end of our reading for today are so important in our daily struggle: "Beloved... grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ," that is, diligently be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless.

That happens in reading, learning, and inwardly digesting God's Holy Word; joining the faithful in Divine Service, confessing sin and receiving absolution; and receiving the Lord's Supper and the forgiveness of sins which strengthens us to put down that old sinful nature each day, and come forth and live the new man in Christ that God has called us to be.

Being the saint/sinner we are, we are strengthened to remember these means of grace are the only way to remain faithful until our Lord returns as a thief in the night.

We pray: By grace I'm saved, grace free and boundless; My soul, believe and doubt it not. Why stagger at this word of promise? Hath Scripture ever falsehood taught? Nay; then this word must true remain; by grace thou, too, shalt heav'n obtain. Amen.

Lesson from the Book of Concord

The Last Sunday after Trinity

ARTICLE XVII.

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

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

—The Augsburg Confession

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 14: HEBREWS 12:18-29

TRINITY 25

The author of Hebrews explained the sad case of Esau, whose flippant decision caused irreversible fallout. He gave away his birthright, and there would be no changing of that allotment. We then hear of God's strict laws concerning Mount Sinai, and the severe consequences should they be broken. Such were the rules that governed ancient Judaism—rules which emphasized the infinite gap between God and man.

But with Christ, things are different: “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.” As believers, we dwell in a new Jerusalem where God is not only approachable, but watches over us. We also find ourselves in the company of a multitude of angels and fellow believers.

Given such an inheritance, we also have great responsibility. To disregard the law brought terrible punishment to the Israelites. To disregard the gospel yields eternal destruction: “See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven, whose voice then shook the earth; but now He has promised, saying, ‘Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven.’”

Prayer: Gracious God, help us never to take for granted the salvation won for us by Jesus Christ and given to us in His Means of Grace. Amen.

“Grace to you and peace be multiplied,” proclaims St. Peter in the opening of his First Epistle. Speaking as an ambassador for Christ Jesus, Peter bestows these very things upon the Christians who read and hear and meditate on his words. What greater comfort can the Christian find in this life than to know that our Triune God has arranged everything for our salvation, from beginning to end? From the Father’s election in eternity, to the Spirit’s sanctification in time, who sprinkled us with the justifying blood of Christ that is mixed with the water of Holy Baptism, our God has devoted Himself to helping us in our desperate need, working mightily to save us for time and for eternity.

Since we have been born again and made children of God through faith in Christ Jesus, Peter directs our eyes heavenward, to where our risen Savior reigns, and where our everlasting inheritance awaits. There is comfort and joy to be found in knowing ahead of time how the story ends for us, if, by God’s power and strength, we persevere in faith until the end. The story ends well, in unfading glory, in joy that will never end. But there is great comfort, too, in knowing that even our present trials are not beyond God’s control. They are part of God’s design to keep us steadfast in the faith by exercising our faith, testing it, purifying it, and causing it to shine. And best of all, such trials are temporary, lasting only a “little while.” How it must drive the devil mad! He persecutes and afflicts us in order to tear us away from faith. But God uses those very afflictions to drive us closer to Him and closer to His Word, as part of His good and gracious plan to bring us safely into our eternal inheritance.

False prophets have always been around, threatening the Christian Church from within, and they will never leave the Church in peace on this earth. St. Peter isn’t warning his readers about pagan prophets, but about those prophets, preachers, and teachers who claim to be Christian, but who bring a message that corrupts or contradicts the true Christian faith.

False prophets have multiplied over the centuries, causing the visible Christian Church to divide and splinter countless times. Some are openly wicked and immoral, supporting abortion and sexual deviancy, teaching that there is salvation apart from faith in Christ, openly denying the truthfulness of God’s Word. Others shun such things, but still teach falsehood about the person of Christ, the ministry of the Word, the Real Presence of Jesus’ body and blood in the Sacrament, justification by faith alone, etc. They all have their own followers. They all are successful in their deceptions among certain groups of people who “do not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved” (2 Thess. 2:10).

But St. Peter assures us that God is storing up judgment for all these false teachers. They will not get away with their deceptions for much longer. Even now, Christ preserves a little flock on this earth that hears the voice of the Good Shepherd and adheres to the truth of His Word. He “knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations,” just as He knows how and when to mete out judgment to those who lead His sheep astray.

Hold onto the precious treasure of God’s Word. Pray for those who proclaim it rightly. Support them. Defend them. Listen to them. For in the midst of so much falsehood, God will continue to provide faithful preachers and teachers for His people, even if they seem few and far between.

The God who has brought us to faith in Christ solely by His own working through the Word now seeks fruits of faith from us. The God who has forgiven and justified us solely by faith now calls upon the righteous to live righteously, to turn away from sinning, to think diligently about how we may devote ourselves to godliness and then to put it into practice in order to “make our call and election sure.”

Our Lutheran Confessions offer a useful explanation of this: “Peter speaks of works following the forgiveness of sins and teaches why they should be done. They should be done so that the calling may be sure, that is, should they fall from their calling if they sin again. Do good works in order that you may persevere in your calling, in order that you do not lose the gifts of your calling. They were given to you before, and not because of works that follow, and which now are kept through faith. Faith does not remain in those who lose the Holy Spirit and reject repentance. As we have said before, faith exists in repentance” (Ap:XX).

“And since the Holy Spirit dwells in the elect, who have become believers, as in His temple, and is not idle in them, but impels the children of God to obedience to God’s commands, believers, likewise, should not be idle, and much less resist the impulse of God’s Spirit, but should exercise themselves in all Christian virtues, in all godliness, modesty, temperance, patience, brotherly love, and give all diligence to make their calling and election sure, in order that they may doubt the less concerning it, the more they experience the power and strength of the Spirit within them. For the Spirit bears witness to the elect that they are God’s children” (FC:SD:XI).

We Christians have been redeemed by the blood of Christ, which was sprinkled on us in holy Baptism. We have been made holy in God’s sight through faith in the precious blood of the Lamb of God. We have received pure, undeserved mercy from God. Therefore, says Peter, we have a solemn duty to lead holy lives that fit with the holy status we have been granted. Even as God, who gave us birth through His Word, is holy, so we are called to be holy in all that we do, “set apart” from the sinful world for the sacred service of the holy God.

Such holiness begins with faith, which is born of God’s Word and continually nourished and fed by God’s Word, just as babies are nourished with milk. Faith in Christ purifies the things that we do and makes them acceptable to God, for Jesus’ sake. It makes us into living stones in God’s temple, and priests who offer acceptable sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ.

Those sacrifices are the works of love with which we serve our neighbor, according to our various vocations. We offer priestly sacrifices to God when we do good to our neighbor, pray for him, defend him, and speak the truth to him about his sin and about God’s mercy in Christ. These sacrifices do not atone for sin; only the sacrifice of Christ accomplished that. They are, instead, offerings of thanksgiving, offered up daily by thankful priests, by Christians who have been chosen by God and called out of darkness into the marvelous light of Christ.

Christ suffered for us. He allowed His flesh, at times, to be deprived of food, drink, and sleep. He allowed His body to be whipped, beaten, and nailed to a cross. He allowed His blood to be shed. He suffered God's wrath in His flesh so that we might never suffer God's wrath in our flesh, so that we might be victorious over sin, death, and the devil through faith in Christ our Lord.

This is the Christ in whom we believe. This is the Christ into whose death we have been baptized, "buried with Him through Baptism into death." For what purpose? So that, as St. Paul writes, "just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). St. Peter urges the same thing, that we should no longer live for earthly pleasures and for sin, but for Him who died for us and rose again, that we should no longer participate in the sinful deeds that unbelievers label as "fun" or as "normal."

You will be ridiculed if you do not go along with the evil deeds of this world. People will speak evil of you if, for example, you keep the Sixth Commandment, honoring marriage and keeping the marriage bed pure. They will mock you and think you strange if you don't join in their drunken parties, repeat their foul language, or accept their evolutionary lies.

But judgment is coming, Peter warns, and no one will escape. Those who have lived for the flesh and rejected the sound doctrine of God's Word will have to give an account to God. The wisdom of this age says, "Live for the moment!" The wisdom of God cries out, "Live with an eye toward Judgment Day!" Cling to Christ for refuge. Keep watch, and pray!

Few people understand suffering rightly. They imagine that suffering is always a sign of God's wrath, or that Christians shouldn't have to suffer so much, because they're Christians. Neither is true.

Christ suffered God's wrath as a punishment for sin—not His sin, but our sin. His suffering made satisfaction for our sins, so that, no matter how much we may suffer, we cannot earn God's favor or make up for our sins in the slightest way, nor should we try. Our suffering does not atone for sin.

But our suffering and afflictions may still be punishments for sins—punishments that serve a good and salutary purpose. As the Apology of the Augsburg Confessions says, "Saints are subject to death, and all general afflictions, as 1 Peter 4, 17 says: *For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?* And although these afflictions are for the most part the punishments of sin, yet in the godly they have a better end, namely, to exercise them, that they may learn amidst trials to seek God's aid, to acknowledge the distrust of their own hearts... Afflictions are a discipline by which God exercises the saints" (Ap., Art. VI).

Because Christ, by His suffering, has removed God's wrath from us, and because God tells us that suffering for doing good makes us partakers of Christ's suffering and of Christ's glory, we can rejoice and bear up under the temporary and passing afflictions of this life. The unbeliever, on the other hand, has no such consolation, but will indeed suffer God's wrath and punishment eternally, if he does not repent and turn to Christ in faith.