

Tuesday, January 31: Genesis 48:1–22

Transfiguration

“Then Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on Ephraim’s head, who was the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh’s head, guiding his hands knowingly, for Manasseh was the firstborn.”

To Joseph it was granted that not one, but two, tribes of Israel would arise; as Israel said to Joseph: “Moreover, I have given to you one portion above your brothers”. But the manner in which Israel blesses Joseph’s sons calls to mind the blessing which Jacob received from his father, Isaac.

When the time came for Isaac to bless his sons Esau and Jacob, Jacob conspired with his mother to cheat Esau out of the blessing which would have come to him on account of his being the firstborn. Jacob, in turn, deliberately reverses the blessing of the sons of Joseph, granting the greater honor to Ephraim, even though he was the younger. Unlike Isaac, Jacob extends the blessing to Ephraim deliberately, and over Joseph’s objections: “And Joseph said to his father, ‘Not so, my father, for this one is the firstborn; put your right hand on his head.’ But his father refused and said, ‘I know, my son, I know. He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great; but truly his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his descendants shall become a multitude of nations.’”

Joshua, who led the tribes into the promised land after the death of Moses, was of the tribe of Ephraim, as was Saul, the first king over Israel. In time, Jeroboam of the tribe of Ephraim would be the first king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. But with the end of the northern kingdom, the tribe of Ephraim was among those tribes lost among the nations, divided among the multitude of the nations.

For Ephraim and Manasse—as for all the tribes of Israel—their time came to a conclusive end with the judgment of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Now, none of the tribes remain on Earth, for their time has passed. The Church—in which there is neither Jew nor Gentile—is the bride of Christ, awaiting the return of the Lord in great glory at the end of the age.

THE LUTHERAN HERALD



JANUARY 2012

(NAME OF JESUS—EPIPHANY 4)

The Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of North America

**THE FESTIVAL OF THE CIRCUMCISION
AND THE NAME OF JESUS**

THE GOSPEL

St. Luke 2:21 (NKJV)

And when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the Child, His name was called JESUS, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.

THE COLLECT

O Lord God, who for our sakes hast made Thy blessed Son, our Savior, subject to the Law and caused Him to endure the circumcision of the flesh, grant us the true circumcision of the Spirit that our hearts may be pure from all sinful desires and lusts; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

Monday, January 30: Genesis 47:1–31

Transfiguration

Pharaoh said to Jacob, “How old are you?” And Jacob said to Pharaoh, “The days of the years of my pilgrimage are one hundred and thirty years; few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their pilgrimage.”

We might read the words of Jacob and think, “What is he complaining about?” A life of 130 years hardly seems brief in our generation, and yet Jacob found his days to be “few and evil” in comparison to his forebears.

We read in Genesis 25:8 that the “years of Abraham’s life” were “one hundred and seventy-five years,” and Genesis 35:28 that “the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years”. Jacob (whose name means “Supplanter”) had a knack for bemoaning his plight—even manipulating his father and brother to his advantage. Even when he had been given permission by Pharaoh to live in Goshen—and given the privilege of his men being chief herdsmen over Pharaoh’s flocks—Jacob’s account of his days was one of woe.

Moses wrote in Psalm 90, “The days of our lives are seventy years; and if by reason of strength they are eighty years, yet their boast is only labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.” (v. 10) The vanity, the futility of our brief span in this fallen world weighs upon us, and the more aware we are of the vanity of our days, the more it grieves us. The days of Jacob seem lengthy and blessed to us—and they were long and blessed. But their end was as Moses said, “soon cut off”.

Our hope is not in our brief span of days, or the accomplishments of our hands. Our hope is in Christ alone, who has redeemed us from the futility of this fallen world and gives us hope of eternal life through Baptism into Him. Our lives in this vale of tears are filled with futility, but they are lived in expectation of the endless life in the presence of the Triune God, where every tear shall be wiped away, and we will dwell forever in the New Jerusalem with the living God.

TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY

The HOLY GOSPEL St. Matthew 17:1-9 (NKJV)

Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him.

Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!"

And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid. But Jesus came and touched them and said, "Arise, and do not be afraid." When they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

Now as they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead."

The COLLECT

O God, who in the glorious transfiguration of Thine only-begotten Son has confirmed the mysteries of the faith by the testimony of the fathers, and who, in the voice that came from the bright cloud, didst in a wonderful manner foreshow the adoption of sons, mercifully vouchsafe to make us coheirs with the King of His glory and bring us to the enjoyment of the same; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth, and reigneth, ever one God, world without end.

Monday, January 2: Isaiah 61:1-11 Ninth Day of Christmas

With the beginning of this new year, we have turned the calendar to A.D. 2012. The letters A.D. are an abbreviation for the Latin phrase *Anno Domini*, which translates into English as "the year of Our Lord." The number for each year marks the number of years since the birth of the Lord Jesus in Bethlehem on that first Christmas Day. Even if your calendar does not contain those initials or the Latin phrase it abbreviates, it nevertheless proclaims that this new year is another year of Our Lord Jesus.

Through the words of the prophet Isaiah for this day, Jesus adds the proclamation that this is also an "acceptable year of the Lord." This means a time that God Himself has chosen to be a time of His own favor. For us, it means a time in which the Lord wills to show His grace to the undeserving, pouring mercy upon poor sinners. The acceptable year is a time of God's good will -- and that is the time heralded by the angels who proclaimed good will toward men on the night of Christ's birth. The Lord Jesus came at the time of God's choosing to usher in an acceptable year of the Lord, a time in which He lived and died and rose again for us, so that God, for His Son's sake, would grant His favor to all who believe.

Truly, this new year promises to be another acceptable year of the Lord, for Christ promises to continue to come to us through His Word and Sacraments to bestow His grace and favor to the faithful. The Lord grant a very blessed A.D. 2012 to you!

The song of the season heralds the entrance of ten lords a-leaping today. The prophet Micah instead proclaims there is but one Lord Who is to be the focus of this day—or any day. He is the One Who reigns from Mount Zion, the location of the Jerusalem temple; this is symbolic of His Lordship over the Church in Heaven, planted eternally on the heavenly heights, the eternally dwelling of the blessed ones who live – and die-- in the Lord.

As illustrated by those ten leaping lords, there are many lords in this world who are vying for the attention and affection of men. Indeed, to have and to hold a god is part and parcel of what it means to be man. This is the testimony of the God-created heart, as well as the Word of the Lord through the prophet Micah: “All people walk each in the name of his god.” Yet, to have and to hold the One True God is truly a life-or-death matter.

That men might have life everlastingly rather than death eternally, Our Lord Christ has established His reign from Mount Zion. This is also symbolic of His Lordship over the Church on Earth, scattered into many faithful congregations but constituting one Christian communion in the one true faith. That men might have this faith—and Himself as Lord—Christ has established His Church and Ministry. It is through the faithful hearing of His Word, partaking of His Sacraments, and receiving of His Ministry that men obtain true faith in God, “walk in the name of the Lord,” and have and hold the true God Himself—now and forever!

God is glorified through our weaknesses.

Jacob’s fear at the coming of Esau was a reasonable reaction. Even with all the company that Jacob had, the news of a brother who once sought to kill him coming with four hundred men is cause to be nervous. However, Jacob also had the promises of the Lord with him.

The experiences God had brought to Jacob made him a different man than when he left his brother. Before, Jacob had dealt with his brother in selfish deceit, but now he acts out of shrewdness and humility for the sake of his household. He also clings to the Word of God in his time of trouble.

God had not forgotten the things He promised Jacob. But Jacob’s prayer was a reminder to himself of the almighty blessings that God had placed on him. This is one of the wonderful reasons the Lord teaches us to pray. When we are brought before Him in faithful prayer we are often reminded of His grace and mercy by the very words that His Holy Spirit causes us to pray!

The instance of the Lord wrestling with Jacob also shows how God’s mercy is glorified in our weakness. Almighty God could have pinned Jacob to the ground easily if it was according to His will. The Lord tested Jacob and declared that He found Jacob to be strong. But still God humbled him by troubling his hip, teaching him that he will always be dependent on the Lord’s blessings more than his own strength or shrewdness. And in this Jacob was made the new man Israel.

This wisdom is true of us in Christ as well! As St. Paul reminds us: “And [the Lord] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness’” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Amen!

The Lord goes with us.

Jacob's past dealings were less than noble, so it might be said that he was getting a taste of his own "medicine" in the way Laban and his sons jealously treated Jacob. But the wisdom of God goes far beyond crude notions of "karma". Once again God shows His mercy by blessing and preserving Jacob.

All things are in the hand of the Lord, and He has holy purposes for them. The blessings of the land and the animals are His to give or withhold according to His greater will, rather than left to random chance or the manipulations of men.

In the instance of Jacob's blessings, God was still building both the faith and the wealth of this chosen son's household. The Lord reminded Jacob of His promises at Bethel and directed Jacob back to the place where His covenant would be fulfilled.

God's people are blessed in same way. Satan seeks to deal treacherously with us and keep us constant service to himself, yet the Lord can bring about great blessings through those trials. And He always calls us back to His promises of blessing in the place of His covenant. He brings us back to Christ and His Church, where His mercy dwells and He forgives our past sins. The Body of Christ is where our true family is, where our faith is strengthened and our minds are comforted with His protection and rest.

Our sins are no less than those of Jacob and Laban. But Laban had forgotten the blessings he had received from God, whereas Jacob was kept faithful by God's Words. So it is with us as well. It is not wealth, but God's Word that keeps us and truly blesses us. May He always go with us, so that we do not forget that all grace and mercy comes from Him! Amen.

"Happy New Year!" is the name that the world first gives to it while ringing it in each year. Indeed, the very name that the world gives to it while greeting it – The "New" Year – signifies the hopeful anticipation for new things to come beyond the turning of the calendar page. Soon enough, however – even on this day – the world finds its expectations disappearing, hopes fading, and the year undergoing a name change and no longer being called "new."

Yet, on the eleventh day of Christmas, the hopes and the expectations brought with the birth of God's Son in the world continue to mount. Indeed, though Christians drop the name of Christmas in their description of the Church season, our lives will continue to manifest all of the newness that Christ's life brings to the world – and our names will never change!

For God has named us in Holy Baptism, through which He has fulfilled the promises given through Isaiah: "I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off." He has baptized us in the Name above all names, the Name of Jesus, our Savior from sin. We have been baptized into Christ and His death and resurrection. We have been baptized "in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" and bear the everlasting Name of the Ever-Living God! Know that you have a sure and certain hope that never fades, an expectation that already is brought to fruition, and a name that never changes—in Him!

How fitting it is that the twelfth chapter of Isaiah is our reading for the Twelfth Night of Christmas, and not merely for the coincidence in the numbering. It is all the more fitting because Isaiah proclaims to us, on the very night that we begin to retire for another year the wonderful hymns and carols of Christmas that we enjoy singing, “For YAH, the LORD, *is* my strength and song; He also has become my salvation.” Through these words, Isaiah reminds us that the true joy of singing these songs is not found in the beautiful harmonies of the tunes, nor in the pleasant memories of past Christmas celebrations with fellow church members, family members and friends. Rather, the true joy of these songs is that the very content of them is Our Savior Himself!

Indeed, the joy of singing any Psalm, hymn, or spiritual song is the marvelous truth that we convey Christ Jesus Himself through such song. For the Word of God is a Living Word; it is an Incarnate Word. Wherever His Word is present, Christ Himself is present, in His very flesh. When we chant and sing His Word in liturgy or hymn, we sing and chant Him, confessing Him before God and men -- even your very own self. In your hearing of that Word, you again receive Him Who is your very salvation, strengthening your faith in Him and your faithful song about Him Who forgives your sins for His own sake, gives you new life through Himself, and assures you of eternal life with Him.

The Lord grant that He Himself be your strength and song and salvation until your next celebration of His birth, whether here in time or there in eternity!

The Lord works through humble things.

In today’s reading we see a humble contrast with the previous readings this week. Yesterday we observed Jacob’s holy dream of heavenly visions and God’s glorious promises. And the readings of the previous days showed the dramatic events of the sons of Isaac and their wickedness concerning their inheritance that descended from Abraham. Today we simply see Jacob’s pursuit of a wife and the servitude he gave to obtain her. But even though the events of the reading seem mundane, they are far from insignificant.

Martin Luther often emphasizes in his writings that the simple duties of life performed by faithful men and women of God are greater than any grand achievement done apart from true faith. After Jacob’s encounter with the Lord in his dream we now see him carrying out those simple duties, showing love and servitude, which are far better works for a man of God than the dealings Jacob had done concerning his brother Esau.

Similarly, our own days may seem rather mundane, but we ought not forget that God is working through those things as well as the grand events that happen in other times and places. The events of Jacob at the well would eventually lead to the birth of the tribes of Israel. Our own events can be used by the Lord as well, as He uses our talents and our works to bless others in the family of Christ’s Church!

*“This is none other than the house of God,
and this is the gate of heaven!” (Genesis 28:17)*

Buildings and institutions are not the “house of God”. People often refer to church buildings as such, but the thing that truly makes a place a house of God and a gate to heaven is His Word and the promises of the Gospel.

The Church has that same character as the place where Jacob woke from his dream. They are both places where God has promised to give His abundant blessings. It was in that land where Jacob slept that God would give His greatest blessing through His Son, Jesus Christ. And it is that same Christ who is preached in the Church.

The buildings and places are ultimately meaningless without God’s Word in them. This is the reason that His people can gather in homes and humble circumstance, because the structures serve the Gospel! The Kingdom of Heaven is truly opened to us in these places when the messengers of God bring to us the wisdom and forgiveness of His Word and the strength of His holy sacraments.

Jacob realized that God had come down and blessed him. Unfortunately, Satan often confuses people to see churchly structures more like the tower of Babel, where man claims reach the heavens, rather than the pillar of Jacob, where God comes to us. When this sinful confusion arises, the idolatrous notions must be torn down so that the teachings of Christ and His cross are made clear.

Through faith in Jesus Christ we truly stand as the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as we are blessed by the presence of God with us. Thanks be to God!

“Oh, worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness! Tremble before Him, all the earth!” On this feast day, the Church witnesses with amazement the worship of the magi from the East, the Wise Men, in fulfillment of this prophecy. We would expect God’s holy people to seek out the One Who has been born King of the Jews in order to kneel before Him, their King. Yet we are utterly amazed that these men who live far away from the Jews of Jerusalem – men who are Gentiles, no less! -- come as the representatives of all the earth to kneel down before Him in trembling worship.

Yet that is precisely the point of this episode. This Boy King is King of kings and Lord of lords, and so it is right that all kings – Jew and Gentile – submit to His royal reign and holy dominion. And these travelers from afar knew Whom they had come to see. They had been guided to Him not merely by a star, but by the very Word of God that prophesied His star, His kingdom, and His lordship (Num 24:17). They believed the Word that proclaimed the Christ to be King, Prophet, and Priest, and brought gifts testifying to their faith in Him and His saving work. They trembled before Him because they, through faith, recognized Him as God in the flesh; yet they worshiped Him in the beauty of their holiness, as sinners redeemed by the shedding of His blood as the Lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world, reckoned righteous and holy on account of faith in Him.

On this day, and all of our days, let us likewise be wise men, and worship the Lord in the beauty of our own holiness in Him!

“The prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended.” It is a marker signifying the end of this section of David’s writing. Yet it also a wonderful conclusion to Psalm 72, which prophesies the sending of the King’s Son by God the King Himself to bring to His people justice – through the Law -- and righteousness – through the Gospel. We see this fulfillment in the birth of Jesus and the subsequent appearance of the Gentile kings of Tarshish, Sheba, and Seba, who present gifts to the newborn Son of David and fall down before Him in humble worship. And, in all of this, we see God’s answer to all of the prayers of David!

For all of the prayers of David – indeed, all prayers made to God by any Christian – find their fulfillment in Christ! For He is God’s ultimate Word to the world. It is because He is God’s Son that we pray trustingly to Our Father in Heaven. It is because the Holy One came to save us that His Name is hallowed among us. It is for the sake of enduring faith in Jesus that God gives us His kingdom, His Holy Spirit. It is through Jesus that God’s will is done for us and among us. It is His love in Christ that moves Him to provide our daily bread. It is on account of Christ that He forgives our trespasses, empowers us to forgive others, leads us not into temptation but instead delivers us from the Evil One into His glory forever and ever.

Yes, the prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended, for they have been answered in God the King’s sending of the King’s Son, to save His people forevermore! God grant it to us also, for Jesus’ sake! Amen!

Christ’s mercies are greater than the sins of man!

The story of Jacob obtaining his father’s blessing, which was meant for Esau, can seem odd to some people. It almost seems as though the blessings that God gave to Abraham and his descendants can be obtained through deceitful swindling like a family fortune or piece of property.

However, the things of God are not so easily stolen. God’s use of Jacob and Esau’s behavior are an important example of the fact that even the sins of men cannot conquer the promises of God. It also shows that the Lord is quite able to bring about good even through corrupt men.

If we think of ourselves as any nobler or any less sinful than Jacob we deceive ourselves. Our fallen nature inspires all kinds of dishonesty within our hearts, but many of us are fortunate that God has kept us from the temptation of opportunities to commit sins similar to Jacob’s. Yet there are still plenty of other trespasses for which we could repent. And every one of them can be forgiven on account of Jesus Christ.

The sins of even the most dishonest man or scheming woman cannot defeat God’s promises of salvation in His Son. We can only let those sins pull us away from His blessings. Esau’s foolishness caused him to lose his birthright, and his jealousy would have lead him to greater trouble by killing his brother. Likewise, our own foolishness and selfishness can squander and destroy the faith that the Holy Spirit creates in us if we cling to our sins rather than the cross of Christ. But again, His grace and mercy can accomplish great things through any of us, no matter how sinful. That is the almighty power of the Gospel of Christ crucified! Amen.

The Kingdom of God is our birthright in Christ.

Today's reading is the familiar story of Esau selling his birthright to his brother for some bread and stew. And the Scriptures say, "Thus Esau despised his birthright." Esau's carelessness is even more significant when we remember that his birthright was more than a regular family inheritance. His birthright was the continuation of God's holy promise to Abraham to raise up a favored nation by which all mankind would be blessed!

That blessing has come to fulfillment in Jesus Christ and His atonement for our sins. And that blessing has also become our inheritance and birthright. We are made children of God through Christ so that we may enjoy forgiveness and hope now, and eternal glories at the end of the age! Yet we often act as though we would trade it all for a bowl of soup.

Our sinful carelessness makes it far too easy for us to despise our holy birthright in Christ. We neglect the teachings and the promises that the Lord has given us and we wear ourselves out with day-to-day living. This should not be! In fact, it truly ought to be the other way around. Our focus and devotion to the Law and the Gospel of God's holy Words should be foremost and shape our daily lives. Regard for the Lord's blessings should not be an afterthought after working, and eating and drinking. It should be a reminder of the many blessings we have from our heavenly Father, as well as a humble preview of the blessings to come in Paradise!

So let us not take our holy birthright in Christ lightly! May the Lord help us to cherish it above all things, even our present life. And may we show forth that hope of eternal life in Christ so that others may receive His birthright as well!

The GOSPEL

St. Luke 2:41-52 (NKJV)

His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. And when He was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem according to the custom of the feast.

When they had finished the days, as they returned, the Boy Jesus lingered behind in Jerusalem. And Joseph and His mother did not know it; but supposing Him to have been in the company, they went a day's journey, and sought Him among their relatives and acquaintances. So when they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking Him.

Now so it was that after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard Him were astonished at His understanding and answers.

So when they saw Him, they were amazed; and His mother said to Him, "Son, why have You done this to us? Look, Your father and I have sought You anxiously."

And He said to them, "Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" But they did not understand the statement which He spoke to them.

Then He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them.

But His mother kept all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

THE COLLECT

O Lord, we beseech You mercifully to receive the prayers of Your people who call upon You; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfill the same; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness.”

Our Lord Jesus Christ was made man on Christmas, and throughout Christmas we celebrated our Lord’s incarnation—His taking on our flesh to cleanse and purify it from all sin, and from the power of death and the devil. In the beginning of creation, darkness covered the whole Earth. During this season of Epiphany the literal darkness that existed at creation is used to illustrate the spiritual darkness that dwells over our world now.

At creation the Triune God divided the darkness from the light with His word. Now, during Epiphany, He divides the darkness from the light through the revelation of THE Word, our Lord Jesus Christ—the Light of the World.

The Light of the World has come into this dark world to divide and conquer the darkness of sin, death and the devil, and free us who live in their prison house, so that we might walk in the light, no longer prisoners to the spiritual darkness with which they veil this dark and evil world. Our Father sees the perfect obedience of His Son Jesus and His sacrifice in our place and calls it “good.” Therefore He sends forth His Holy Spirit to hover over the waters of Holy Baptism, to cleanse and purify us of all spiritual darkness, so that we may be raised up as new creations, filled with His eternal light.

The HOLY GOSPEL

St. Matthew 8:1-13 (NKJV)

When He had come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed Him. And behold, a leper came and worshiped Him, saying, “Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.”

Then Jesus put out His hand and touched him, saying, “I am willing; be cleansed.” Immediately his leprosy was cleansed.

And Jesus said to him, “See that you tell no one; but go your way, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.”

Now when Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, pleading with Him, saying, “Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, dreadfully tormented.”

And Jesus said to him, “I will come and heal him.”

The centurion answered and said, “Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes; and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”

When Jesus heard it, He marveled, and said to those who followed, “Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel! And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Then Jesus said to the centurion, “Go your way; and as you have believed, so let it be done for you.” And his servant was healed that same hour.

The COLLECT

Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities, and in all our dangers and necessities stretch forth the right hand of Thy majesty to help and defend us; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son our Lord, who liveth and reigneth, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

“Now Rebekah had a brother whose name was Laban, and Laban ran out to the man by the well. So it came to pass, when he saw the nose ring, and the bracelets on his sister’s wrists, and when he heard the words of his sister Rebekah, saying, ‘Thus the man spoke to me,’ that he went to the man. And there he stood by the camels at the well. And he said, ‘Come in, O blessed of the LORD! Why do you stand outside? For I have prepared the house, and a place for the camels.’ Then the man came to the house. And he unloaded the camels, and provided straw and feed for the camels, and water to wash his feet and the feet of the men who were with him.

Well, I’m sure that Abraham’s servant wasn’t the only one who was nervous at the strange meeting at the well. Let’s not forget the one this centers on: Isaac’s bridal candidate Rebekah. Surely she must’ve been a little stunned by the peculiar meeting with Abraham’s servant. Not surprisingly, she runs home to tell her family all about it. The first person she sees is her brother Laban, who is impressed by the traveler’s lavish treatment of his sister.

Now, even though Laban will be revealed as a rather shrewd character later, his good behavior here seems genuinely sincere. His actions speak favorably as a man only seeking the comfort of this unusual visitor. Laban too must’ve been overwhelmed by the evidence of God’s hand, as he and Rebekah’s father declare in verse 50: “The thing comes from the LORD . . .” May we also stand in awe of the Lord’s work—taking His Word at face value—and trusting in that Word with all our heart, soul, and mind.

“And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.”

We are all dirt! Doesn’t that sound wonderful? When we think of dirt, we think of filthiness, uncleanness, and impurity. For example, when a piece of food falls to the ground we think, “We shouldn’t eat that; it’s been in the dirt.” Then we invoke the “5-second rule.” Dirt is something that we try to clean off of stuff; we try to destroy the dirt. But this is out of what the Triune God formed us; the dust of the ground.

God may have created Adam out of the dust of the ground, but He created him perfect, without sin. He was clean dirt. Now doesn’t that sound odd? But it is only odd, because Adam messed it all up by sinning. Therefore, the clean dirt that was Adam became the unclean, filthy and impure dirt that we are today. We are full of this sin of Adam—this original sin.

But just as the Triune God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, so too, are we by the waters of Holy Baptism, cleansed of all of our dirtiness and uncleanness, and are breathed into by the Word the breathe of new life. Our sins are washed away. We are no longer unclean. We are no longer filthy. We are no longer impure, but we have been raised up as a new creation; a creation formed by water and Word, which has been buried with Christ, and raised again to a new clean life.

“And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth, ‘For God has appointed another seed for me instead of Abel, whom Cain killed.’”

Adam and Eve were horrible at naming their sons. Adam and Eve’s firstborn son was named, “Cain.” Cain means, “Gotten One.” Many people believe that Eve named Cain this, because she thought he was the one promised in Gen. 3. Therefore this “Cain”, this “Gotten One” was the Savior who would save them from their sin.

Perhaps this is why on their second child they place the name of “Abel.” Abel means “breath” or “vapor.” We are perhaps more familiar with this Hebrew word in its use at the beginning of the book of Ecclesiastes, “‘Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.’” The Hebrew word translated “vanity” is Abel. In other words, Adam and Eve’s second son is named, “Nothing.”

“The Chosen One” and “Nothing” both offer their gifts to the Lord. “The Chosen One’s” gift is not accepted, and “Nothing’s” is. Our Lord God chooses the lesser and inferior things in the minds of mankind as His chosen vessels. However, Cain, the chosen one in the eyes of the world, kills his brother Abel, who is nothing in the eyes of the world. This is a picture of our Lord Jesus Christ, who was nothing in the eyes of the self chosen scribes and Pharisees, and so they killed Him on the tree of the holy Cross.

From this we see that Adam and Eve learn to name their children properly at the birth of their third son, Seth. Seth means, “Gift.” From this gift of God, would be born the true gift of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ, Who would choose us nobodies to be His brother.

“But you shall go to my country and to my family, and take a wife for my son Isaac.” And the servant said to him, “Perhaps the woman will not be willing to follow me to this land. Must I take your son back to the land from which you came?” But Abraham said to him, “Beware that you do not take my son back there. The LORD God of heaven, who took me from my father’s house and from the land of my family, and who spoke to me and swore to me, saying, ‘To your descendants I give this land,’ He will send His angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there.”

At the time of this passage, Abraham is now 140 years old, and his wife Sarah has died. He knew that his time, too, was short—and wanted to complete an important task before he himself was called to glory. So much of Abraham’s life centered around the promise of descendants, and soon the focus would be on the next in line: his son Isaac. The lengthy instructions in today’s reading focus on the all-important selection of Isaac’s bride. Even a casual glance at them seems to indicate a low probability of success. But this is yet another instance of God’s wisdom, not ours. Even though we may not fathom how such a plan may work, God’s word guarantees its success.

Many a man on his way to seminary—this author included—had doubts how God could make something out of nothing. And yet, pastoral candidates, far from perfect, were produced. We were called to equally imperfect congregations, where trust in God’s hand was paramount. And to this day, wise pastors still trust that God continues to offer the miracle of faith through the most unlikely of means: human beings.

“And the LORD visited Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken. For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him. And Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him—whom Sarah bore to him—Isaac. Then Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Now Abraham was one hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. And Sarah said, “God has made me laugh, and all who hear will laugh with me.” She also said, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? For I have borne him a son in his old age.”

In the first verse of today’s text, we see the emphasis on the Lord’s action. It is He who is gracious. It is He who makes the 89-yr-old womb of Sarah fertile. It is He who’s done what He’s promised to do. The long-awaited son of Abraham and Sarah has been borne in the fullness of God’s time. What was once considered impossible even laughable has been made possible by the almighty hand of God. It is fitting, then, that the son’s name is Isaac, which means “laughter”. Sarah, who had once mocked God’s promise in laughter, can now look back at her own foolishness—and know that with God all things are possible.

How often it is that we treat God’s promises as did Sarah—looking at them in disbelief. “How can God become a man?”; “How can God die that we might live?”; “How can God be in the midst of bread and wine?” Let us not doubt, but believe for we have God’s Word on it.

“And he called his name Noah, saying, ‘This one will comfort us concerning our work and the toil of our hands, because of the ground which the LORD has cursed.’”

Lamech, Noah’s father, named him because he would “comfort us concerning our work and the toil of our hands.” Noah’s name means, “Rest,” therefore, according to Lamech, Noah would be the one who would bring rest to the people of the Earth.

Now, let us remember that the flood came in the 600th year of Noah’s life, so what comfort is Noah supposed to be bringing to an Earth that is soon to be destroyed by a deluge? The comfort is in the fact that through Noah, and his sons and their wives—eight people—mankind was saved from utter destruction in the flood.

The ground was cursed by the Lord, because of the sin of Adam, and mankind’s continual sin led to its further decay. Therefore, Noah is a Savior of mankind and he is therefore a picture of the true Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ, Who also saves us through the flood of the waters of Baptism, burying us and our sin in the waters and raising us again, into a new life.

One other thing needs to be pointed out concerning this reading, and that regards the genealogy. Usually when genealogies are read, our eyes gloss over, and we don’t think about the names, or their significance. But this genealogy traces the line from Adam to Noah, which will eventually lead to the Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and then to Judah, and David, and to our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is the true rest of mankind. And by whose death, mankind is rescued from the curse that came about because of Adam’s sin.

Friday, January 13: Genesis 6:9-22

Epiphany 1

“And God said to Noah, ‘The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with violence through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth.’”

In these readings at the beginning of the Epiphany season, we get a lot of water and flood references. This is to point our attention to Holy Baptism. For the octave of Epiphany (Jan. 6) is the Baptism of our Lord (Jan. 13). Therefore, with the visit of the Magi to our Lord, our Lord’s baptism is also a chief theme of the first part of the Epiphany season. It is where our Lord is first revealed as the one Who would cleanse and purify the Jordan River, and all waters, and make them worthy for use in Holy Baptism.

In the Jordan River, He cleanses our flesh, the flesh which He took upon Himself; the flesh which He began to cleanse in the womb of Mary, taking on our flesh, but not our sin, thereby already beginning to purify our flesh of sin. So too, at His baptism, He begins to purify and cleanse our flesh from sin. This cleansing will be finished on the holy Cross, where His flesh will be put through the violence with which this world is filled. And, His flesh (and all our sin with it) will be destroyed in His body. Therefore, in His death and burial there is an end of all sinful flesh. It is once and for all buried in the grave.

Therefore, when we come to the waters of Holy Baptism, our sinful flesh is destroyed and left in the grave with our Lord Jesus Christ. And when we are brought forth from the waters of Holy Baptism, just as our Lord was raised from the dead, so too do we walk in newness of life. So then, let us call to our minds often our Holy Baptism, so that by daily contrition and repentance, we may drown all sin and evil desire within us, and live before God as a new creation.

Wednesday, January 18: Genesis 19:1-29

Epiphany 2

“Then the LORD rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, from the LORD out of the heavens. . . . And it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the plain, that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot had dwelt.

We’re not told the means which God used to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. All we know is that the destruction was total. Even with the terrors of modern technology, there are always survivors in wars—however few. But with God, His word is absolute and His judgment complete. Lot, his wife & two daughters were told to flee Sodom for no one would be spared. God cannot be mocked. When corruption is rampant and hearts are hardened, with the only possibility being a spread of the cancer, God arrests the sin and judgment is pronounced.

Such is also a warning to today’s world. Given the gift of salvation, we’re to be good stewards of that gift eagerly desiring to partake regularly of God’s Means of Grace to preserve & strengthen our faith. We’re also to live lives in accord with God’s will. But if we ignore or despise that gift, and live as if God didn’t matter, then our fate will be far worse than even Sodom and Gomorrah. Jesus had these words for His disciples: “And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the Day of Judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.” Let us always remember that we have a God who hates sin so much—that He paid for it in full with His very life—all that we might not suffer its ultimate penalty.

“Then the LORD appeared to him . . . as he was sitting in the tent door in the heat of the day. So he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing by him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the ground, and said, “My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight, do not pass on by Your servant. Please let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. And I will bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh your hearts. After that you may pass by, inasmuch as you have come to your servant.” They said, “Do as you have said.”

Today we learn of another appearance of God to Abraham. And this time we’re given a rather descriptive setting. It’s the heat of the day, and activity has slowed as a result. Abraham is sitting at the entrance to his tent, probably trying to get some air—and whatever breeze there may be. But just when it seems like a siesta is in order, three strangers appear nearby. Startled, Abraham hurries to greet them, and bows down before them. As it turns out, one of them is God Himself, the other two being angels. Abraham treats them with gracious hospitality, as we hope that he would. The guests acquiesce, humbly allowing themselves to be treated like ordinary travelers.

This is always how God deals with His people. Out of love, He wants to be in our company and therefore comes to us where we are. God knows we cannot endure His unmasked presence, so He came to Abraham as a traveler and to Nazareth as a carpenter. God comes to His people in very ordinary ways. Through the person of Jesus, and through the Means of Grace, God is our Immanuel—our “God with us” not to overwhelm, but to comfort and to save.

“So He destroyed all living things which were on the face of the ground: both man and cattle, creeping thing and bird of the air. They were destroyed from the earth. Only Noah and those who were with him in the ark remained alive.”

“Only Noah and those who were with him in the ark remained alive.” This shows how corrupt the world had become on account of sin. Everything is destroyed, both man and cattle, creeping thing and bird of the air. They were destroyed from the Earth; sin had so pervaded the world, that every living thing on the Earth had to be destroyed, except for those in the Ark.

The Christian Church on Earth is often compared to the Ark. We are in the Ark of Christendom. We are being tossed to and fro by the waves and storms of this life, on account of our sin, and sinfulness in this world. The rains of the consequences of our sins pour down upon us, and we bear the guilt and shame of past deeds; some haunting us throughout our lives.

But we remain safe and secure within the holy Ark of Christendom, no matter how hard the rain of guilt beats down, nor how fiercely the waves and storms of this evil world beat against us. We will prevail safe and secure throughout this life, until we reached the Mountain of our Lord, our heavenly home, where the doors of this tomb in which we traverse this life will be burst open, and we will at last forever be free from the storms, waves, and rains of this life. May the Lord, Who has purchased and redeemed you by flooding Himself with your sin so that He might destroy it, bring you safely to your heavenly harbor, through His Word and Sacraments.

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany

The HOLY GOSPEL

St. John 2:1-11 (NKJV)

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Now both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding. And when they ran out of wine, the mother of Jesus said to Him, “They have no wine.”

Jesus said to her, “Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come.”

His mother said to the servants, “Whatever He says to you, do it.”

Now there were set there six waterpots of stone, according to the manner of purification of the Jews, containing twenty or thirty gallons apiece. Jesus said to them, “Fill the waterpots with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. And He said to them, “Draw some out now, and take it to the master of the feast.” And they took it. When the master of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom. And he said to him, “Every man at the beginning sets out the good wine, and when the guests have well drunk, then the inferior. You have kept the good wine until now!”

This beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory; and His disciples believed in Him.

The COLLECT

Almighty and everlasting God, who does govern all things in heaven and earth, mercifully hear the supplications of Your people and grant us Your peace all the days of our life; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

Monday, January 16: Genesis 17:1-22

Epiphany 2

“When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, . . . “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

Here the Lord appears to Abram, and confirms the promises He’d made to him long ago. Surely with all the time that’s passed, Abram and his wife Sarai had many opportunities to doubt that God’s covenant with them would really come to pass. After all, Abram was now 99 years old—and Sarai a spry 89. It was natural, therefore, that they’d think God was “dragging His feet” and time was running out for this aging couple. In their human weakness, God understood this and therefore came to bolster their confidence in His promises. So God now brings specifics. He changes Abram’s name to “Abraham”—meaning “father of many”. He also promises the newly-named patriarch that the land of Canaan would be guaranteed for him and all his descendants. He even names the first offspring as “Isaac”.

So at last, the time of fulfillment was at hand. Abraham would indeed be the father of many nations, from which would come the long-awaited Messiah. Thanks be to God that He fully understands His people—and comes to us even when our weakness is great.