

REFLECTIONS

**The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost -
The Seventeenth Saturday after Pentecost
August 25 - September 21, 2024**

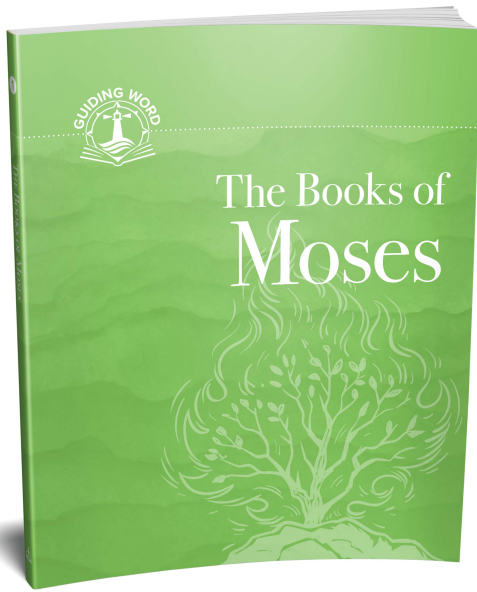


AUGUST 25 - SEPTEMBER 21

This season's Reflections were written by

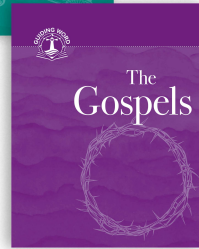
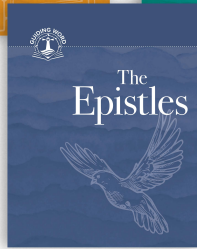
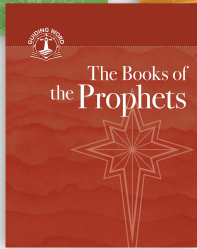
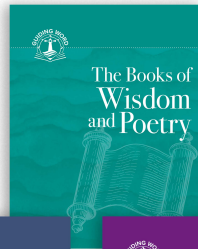
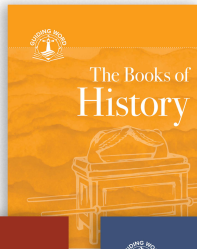
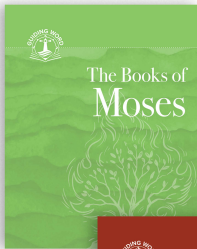
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A Short Form for Daily Reflection

ADAPTED FROM LUTHERAN SERVICE BOOK

Make the sign of the Holy Cross and say:

In the name of the Father, † Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Read the Psalm for the Day (A table of daily psalms can be found in Lutheran Service Book, page 304).

Read “Today’s Reading” if there is one listed.

Read the Daily Lectionary selections.

Read the Reflection for the Day.

Say the Apostles’ Creed.

Pray the Lord’s Prayer.

Pray one of these little prayers:

(In the Morning)

I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.

In the morning go to your work with joy, singing a hymn, such as the Ten Commandments, or what your devotion may suggest.

(In the Evening)

I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have graciously kept me this day; and I pray that You would forgive me all my sins where I have done wrong, and graciously keep me this night. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me.

If it is evening, then go to sleep promptly and cheerfully.

The Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

AUGUST 25, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 7:1-13

Daily Lectionary: 1 Kings 7:51-8:21; 2 Corinthians 3:1-18

And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'" (Mark 7:6-7)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. The Old Adam in us loves math; he is forever adding and subtracting, multiplying and dividing. When it comes to God's Word, the Old Sinner in us falls into the temptation to add to the Word of God or to subtract from it. We make the Scriptures say more than they do by adding our ideas and reasoning to the inspired Word, or we take away from the words of Scripture, especially when those particular words don't fit our views of who God is and how He works out His plan of salvation.

The Pharisees were at the top of their class in mathematics. They added their own ideas of law-keeping to the Scriptures as if following these man-made laws would multiply their righteousness before God. They were so caught up in religious accounting, micromanaging the dos and don'ts of the letter of the law, that they neglected the very spirit and heart of the law – to love God and neighbor by faith. This kind of love can only come from faith, and by this faith alone does God count one as righteous; without faith it is impossible to please God.

God has solved our math problems in Jesus. The accounting books have been settled on the cross of Christ. There, all our sins were nailed to His blood-stained cross, and there, our Lord took all our sins upon Himself and canceled our record of debt against God's holy law! You are washed, you are clean, you are forgiven, you are made holy and blameless, all on account of Jesus. There is nothing to add to His cross, and we dare not subtract from it.

This is the miracle of the Christian faith that we actually and simply believe what God has declared to be true for us on account of Jesus. I know the math doesn't add up, but God is not bound by our formulas for how we think we are to be saved. Grace throws the math out the window and welcomes you to believe the logical ridiculousness of the Good News for you in Jesus Christ. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

"Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen." (Jude 24-25)

The Fourteenth Monday After Pentecost

AUGUST 26, 2024

Today's Reading: Isaiah 29:11-19

Daily Lectionary: 1 Kings 8:22-30, 46-63; 2 Corinthians 4:1-18

In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. (Isaiah 29:18)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. If you love books, I can think of no better time to be living than now. Books are everywhere: in print, on-demand, digital books you can read on your phone, and books you can listen to in your car or while you work out. The Christian Bible remains the most widely published and read book in the world today; it is easily accessible through every form of media presently available – you can even listen to the Bible through your wristwatch!

The Bible is unlike any other book ever written; it is the very Word from God– words breathed out by God through human authors. It is alive, and it is active! It exposes and it enlightens. It kills, and it makes alive. Yet, someone can read the Scriptures and not see it as if they were blind. One can listen to God's Word and not hear it as if they were deaf. The Spirit of God must open the ears of the spiritually deaf to hear and believe! "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). The Spirit of God must enlighten the spiritually blind so that with their heart they see and believe in the Gospel.

This is the Lord's doing; this is the God's work. By His Word and Spirit, He lays bare our hearts and exposes the darkness within. He reveals our thoughts and intentions of the heart so that nothing is hidden from His sight. He works in us repentance that confesses what God has exposed to be true: I am a sinner; and then, the miracles of miracles, God works faith in us to believe His Gospel Word. "...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved" (Romans 10:9-10).

"Out of our gloom and darkness, the eyes of the blind shall see." This is the grace of God at work in us, giving us the eyes of faith to see and ears to believe in His outrageous words of promise– words that do and give what they say. God's Word is unlike any other word put down in a book, for God's Word is living and giving – giving faith, forgiveness, eternal life, and salvation! So, take up and read! Hear and believe! These Words of God are for you. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

The Fourteenth Tuesday After Pentecost

AUGUST 27, 2024

Today's Reading: Ephesians 5:22-33

Daily Lectionary: 1 Kings 9:1-9, 10:1-13; 2 Corinthians 5:1-21

"However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband." (Ephesians 5:33)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. "Wives, submit to your husbands...Husbands, love your wives." Here we have the apostle Paul's Holy Spirit-inspired instruction for a God-honoring Christ-centered marriage: submission and respect on the part of the wife and selfless, sacrificial love on the part of the husband. This certainly isn't the kind of picture drawn up in our current day and age of how relationships ought to work. Submissive wives and selfless husbands, the idea seems outdated and offensive.

Yet, isn't this how Christ has loved us? Think about how Jesus demonstrated His love for us in His actions. He humbled Himself by becoming a man— God taking on human flesh. He submitted Himself to His Father's will, even to the point of dying on a cross. He loved selflessly and sacrificially by laying down His life for us, dying our death, taking our punishment upon Himself, and giving up all His rights so that we would have the right to become part of God's family.

It is out of this love of Jesus for us that we are now free to love one another; after all, this is the kind of love that the Holy Spirit is working in and through us. What does this kind of love look like? It submits to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21), not just wives to husbands but all of us to one another. As Christ loved us selflessly, giving Himself up for us (Ephesians 5:2), we also live together in this kind of selfless love, not just husbands toward wives, but this love marking all our relationships with each other.

This kind of love is counterintuitive and most definitely countercultural, but isn't that the nature of the Gospel? It offends our inclination to want to keep score and get what we deserve. Grace throws all of that out the window and frees us from focusing on ourselves and instead to look to others in love. This is how God has loved you. This is the kind of love God is working in us for others. This is the kind of love a God-given marriage is built upon and how husbands and wives love one another as Christ continues to love them. May our Lord grant us the grace and working of His Spirit to love one another as Christ has loved us. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

In this union I have joined you Husband and wife, Now, My children, live together As heirs of life: Each the other's gladness sharing, Each the other's burdens bearing, Now, My children, live together As heirs of life. (LSB 922:5)

The Fourteenth Wednesday After Pentecost

AUGUST 28, 2024

Today's Reading: 2 Corinthians 6:1-18

Daily Lectionary: 1 Kings 11:1-26; 2 Corinthians 6:1-18

“Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says, “In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.” Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” (2 Corinthians 6:1-2)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. God has good ears. He always listens to the cries of His people and never turns a deaf ear to them. God has a gracious heart prompting Him into action to rescue those who cannot deliver themselves out of their troubles. God told Moses that He heard the cries of His people and would deliver them out of slavery in Egypt, and he did. Jonah cried to the Lord out of the belly of a fish; God heard and answered Jonah by delivering him onto dry land. Jesus heard the cries of two blind men, “Lord, have mercy on us.” He touched their eyes, and immediately, they recovered their sight!

All of these whom God delivered could say with the psalmist, “Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me free” (Psalm 118:5). We could say the same for us. Like Israel, we were in bondage. We were enslaved to sin without any way out. Like Jonah, we were caught up in our rebellious, self-serving ways only to be headed for Hell. Like the blind men, we were groping around without sight and forever lost in darkness. God has heard; he has listened. His gracious heart compels Him to answer your pleas for help; it pleases Him to do so, and He has delivered you. Jesus is God’s answer for all of our cries of Hosanna, “save us, we pray.” Jesus comes; He seeks, and He saves the lost. “In a favorable day of salvation I have helped you.”

God is extravagantly rich in His grace. It will never run out for you, and He will never tire of handing it over to you. As a matter of fact, He keeps on giving, so you are sure not to miss out! He sends a preacher to proclaim His forgiveness for you; He delivers the forgiveness Christ won for you through the words of Absolution; He attaches His saving and forgiving Word to water in Baptism and to bread and wine in our Lord’s Supper. Let us not neglect so great a salvation; let us not receive the grace of God in vain. Now is the day of salvation, today and every day. God hears; He comes, and He delivers! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

By grace God’s Son, our only Savior, Came down to earth to bear our sin. Was it because of your own merit That Jesus died your soul to win? No, it was grace, and grace alone, that brought Him from His heav’nly throne. (LSB 566:3)

Martyrdom of Saint John the Baptist

AUGUST 29, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 6:14-29

Daily Lectionary: 1 Kings 11:42-12:19; 2 Corinthians 7:1-16

“When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.” (Mark 6:29)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. John the Baptist is dead, beheaded at the order of King Herod. John was the last of the Old Testament prophets, and like many of the prophets of old, he was killed for being a faithful voice of God. He preached the law in its fullness; “repent” was his cry. Yet John was unique among the prophets, for he was able to point to the one who came to fulfill the law and usher in the Gospel of the Kingdom of God - “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29b). By this, John fulfilled his calling to be the one to pave the way and prepare the people for the coming of God’s Messiah.

People didn’t know what to make of John. He was a radical in the way he dressed, how he lived, and the message he preached. It didn’t matter who stood before him; his message was the same, “bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matthew 3:8). He was a law preacher who frightened some and angered others; however, his voice wasn’t meant to be the last one heard. One was coming after him, who would proclaim and give the very forgiveness that law-breaking people need.

People didn’t know what to make of Jesus. Some thought the miracle-working preacher was John the Baptist raised from the dead. Others thought he was Elijah or a great prophet. Even John the Baptist, his cousin, sent some of his followers to ask Jesus, “Are you the one or should we look for another?” Jesus’ reply leaves no doubt what we should make of Jesus, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them.” (Luke 7:20, 22-23)

God sent John to be a witness. He did so through his preaching, his baptizing, his finger pointing to the Lamb of God, and even through his skeptical question, “Are you the one?” The Good News that Jesus preached is God’s answer to John’s “repent.” There is no sin Jesus’s blood does not cover; there is no person whom God’s Lamb did not die for. Jesus’ death and resurrection is our hope for everlasting life. John is dead. His body was laid in a tomb. His bones are still there. But the tomb of John’s Savior and yours is still empty. Jesus is risen! So will John, and so will you! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

The Fourteenth Friday After Pentecost

AUGUST 30, 2024

Today's Reading: Catechism: Daily Prayers: Asking a Blessing & Returning Thanks

Daily Lectionary: 1 Kings 12:20-13:5, 33-34; 1 Kings 14:1-16:28; 2 Corinthians 8:1-24

Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good. His love endures forever. [He] gives food to every creature...the Lord delights in those who fear Him, who put their hope in His unfailing love. (SC Returning Thanks)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Prayer is faith talking. Faith can't help but want to talk to God. It's what faith does; it prays. Those of faith look to God, trusting who He is and what He has done, is doing, and will do for us. Faith grabs a hold of God's promises and speaks them right back to Him, believing He is making good on them. Prayer is a Gift from God himself. The faith to believe and the desire to call on Him are all Gifts from above.

Faith does not come naturally to us, and neither does prayer. Faith must be gifted, and prayer must be taught, and both of these are accomplished by God's Word and Holy Spirit. Martin Luther knew this, which is why he includes at the end of his Small Catechism prayers for the morning and evening as well as before and after meals. It is most appropriate that a book written to teach the Christian faith ends with teaching us how faith ought to pray.

God is good and is a gracious giver of good Gifts. When we believe this, we can't help but give thanks. God created me and still takes care of me, believing this we can't help but recognize that every day is a Gift from God and declare with the Psalmist, "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalm 118:24). We know by faith that each day we are faced with temptations to sin and are harassed by the world and the Devil himself, so we pray that God will keep us from sin and protect us from evil and the Evil One. In faith, we realize and confess that we daily sin, so we are bold to pray that our heavenly Father forgives us all our sins where we have wronged Him and others. By faith, we trust our Lord will provide all we need to get through the day, so in prayer, we look to him, knowing he graciously supplies with an open hand.

Faith can't help but give thanks for all the ways our good Father in heaven daily cares for us, especially when we have come to believe He does all this not because we have earned or deserve it but solely out of His goodness and merciful love for us. God's goodness and mercy meet you every morning and follow you not only through your day but every day of your life. Indeed, the Lord delights in those who put their hope in His unfailing love. That's what faith does. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

The Fourteenth Saturday After Pentecost

AUGUST 31, 2024

Today's Reading: Introit for Pentecost 15 - Psalm 51:7, 10-12; antiphon: Psalm 51:2
Daily Lectionary: 1 Kings 16:29-17:24; 2 Corinthians 10:1-13:14; 2 Corinthians 9:1-15

“Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.” (Psalm 51:7, 10-12)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Psalm 51 is a prayer of a broken man. David has nowhere to hide; his sin is exposed. He has nowhere to turn except to the one he has sinned against. David knows he has a gracious and merciful God, and so it's to God he turns with pleas for forgiveness and restoration.

Can you relate to David and his prayer? Are we as honest and as utterly broken over our sin as David? When we are caught red-handed and the darkness of our heart is exposed, where do we turn? Where do we go? We, too, turn to David's Lord. We find God's tender answer to our pleas for forgiveness in Jesus. After all, He is the one in whom all the prayers for mercy find their “amen.”

Jesus knows our struggles and our failings, and He did something about it. He shed his blood so that “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.” (Ephesians 1:7). Jesus also knows how we are prone to question, “Am I really forgiven? I don't feel like it.” The Devil loves to create doubt in us as well, “How can God forgive you? Look what you've done! Again!”

God does not want his children to live in doubt. His forgiveness is real, complete, and certain. He wants you to be certain, too, so that you might live in the joy of his gracious love, so he gives you the Gift of Baptism.

In Baptism, we find all of David's pleas before God answered in the promises of your Baptism. By the water of your Baptism, God has washed you and made you clean from all your sins (Titus 3:5; 1 Corinthians 6:11; Acts 22:16). You have been born again from above by water and the Spirit, making you a new creation with a new heart (John 3:3-5). Through your Baptism, you are joined to Christ, and so He is present with you always. He has wrapped you in the garments of salvation; you are clothed with Christ (Isaiah 61:10; Galatians 3:27). In your Baptism, you now live walking in newness of life – God upholding you by His Spirit (Romans 6:4). What grace! What love! For you! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

The Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

SEPTEMBER 1, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 7:14-23

Daily Lectionary: 1 Kings 18:1-19; Ephesians 1:1-23

"Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?... What comes out of a person is what defiles him." (Mark 7:18-20)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Have you ever heard the question asked, "Do we sin because we are sinners, or are we sinners because we sin?" How one answers this question reveals what they think is the source of our sin problem and how we can "fix it."

The Pharisees, as true devotees to the Law, believed we are sinners because we sin. On the surface, this idea makes sense and seems true to experience; after all, it is the dominant view of the religions of the world. Yet, what is at the heart of this view of sin and us— because it is a matter of the heart. The gist is this: a person is born with a pure, undefiled heart and only becomes a sinner when one chooses to sin. So, what's the remedy? Stop sinning! Make better choices! Control yourself, and you will become less and less sinful. We can clean ourselves up by keeping the dos and don'ts of the Law. A person, in theory, by avoiding sin, has the power within to make themselves pleasing to God. In other words, we become our own saviors. Jesus had a problem with this sort of religious self-cleaning attitude and practice.

Jesus gets to the heart of the matter by getting to the source of our "sin problem." We sin because we are sinners. We have a heart problem. We were born with an unclean, defiled heart, and we can't "fix it" by changing our behavior or by our self-determination to do the things we know we should and to stop doing the things we know we shouldn't. You do not cure a disease by simply making the symptoms go away, and you cannot cure our sin problem by doing this or avoiding that. We need a new heart, and we can't fix that! We need a physician of the soul to do heart surgery.

Jesus not only helps to identify our sickness (our hearts), but He actually does something about it. He's not into symptom management; rather, He goes after the disease for it's a fatal one. "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:12). Jesus has taken our disease upon Himself and dealt with it once for all. He has given us a new heart wrought by the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:9). God no longer sees us as "sinners who sin" but as new creatures in Christ purified in him! You are a walking miracle of redeeming grace! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

The Fifteenth Monday After Pentecost

SEPTEMBER 2, 2024

Today's Reading: Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Daily Lectionary: 1 Kings 18:20-40; Ephesians 2:1-22

“And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you. (Deuteronomy 4:1)”

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” This was the question asked of Jesus by a Jewish lawyer, an expert in the Law of Moses. How did Jesus answer him? He pointed the lawyer back to the words Moses had written down in the Law; “Do this and you will live.” It’s really not all that complicated, inheriting eternal life. It’s actually quite simple: keep the Law given to Moses, and you will live forever with God in the Promised Land of Paradise.

It’s true; you can climb the ladder into heaven without Jesus – you can save yourself. God promises eternal life to you, but there is one condition. You must keep the entire law of God perfectly from the heart. To simplify things further, you could reduce the whole Law of God into just two: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself– that’s it. Do this, and you will live. God guarantees it.

God isn’t playing games with us by making an impossible promise. He knows we can’t be perfect, as He is perfect. He knows we do not and cannot love Him perfectly from our hearts, let alone love others in complete selflessness – but that really is the point, isn’t it? God uses the Law to bring us to the point where we realize we can’t keep our end of the bargain. God wants to bring a confession out of us, “Who then can be saved?” When the Law has done this, we are ready for Jesus’ answer: “With man it is impossible, but not with God” (Mark 10:27).

Jesus has done what we cannot do. He alone whole-heartedly loved and obeyed His Father. God sent His own Son not to abolish the Law but to fulfill it, every bit of it. Jesus has made what is impossible for us possible! He fulfilled the righteous requirement of the law for you (Romans 8:3-4). What’s the catch? What’s the condition so that we might be certain that eternal life is ours? There is no condition; there is only the promise: “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (John 5:24). There is nothing left to do that Jesus has not already done, and Jesus has done it all for you! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

The Fifteenth Tuesday After Pentecost

SEPTEMBER 3, 2024

Today's Reading: Ephesians 6:10-20

Daily Lectionary: 1 Kings 19:1-21; 1 Kings 20:1-22:53; Ephesians 3:1-21

*"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."
(Ephesians 6:12)*

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. We are in a war! Make no mistake about it: being a Christian has thrown us into battle. Our enemy is three-fold: the world, our flesh, and the Devil himself. Satan is the Commander-in-Chief overseeing and enabling his troops for battle; he is behind every opposition to faith, every doubt that undermines faith, and all the temptations that cause faith to stumble. Our combat is against spiritual forces of evil!

We are way over our heads when it comes to this fight. Who has the strength and weaponry for such combat? We are outnumbered and are fighting against an enemy we can't see. It makes a person want to give up! What hope do we have to win such a war? That's what Israel thought when Moses sent twelve spies into Canaan to check out the land God had promised them. All they saw was an enemy they could not defeat on their own, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are" (Numbers 13:31). They wanted to go back to Egypt, back into bondage, rather than trust God's promise that the land was theirs. They trusted their eyes and not their ears; they were trusting in their strength and not in the might of God to deliver on his promise.

"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might" (Ephesians 6:10). There it is! The key to victory! We enter daily into battle not in our own power but in the strength of our almighty God. And we fight with our ears! For it is through our hearing that faith is given and strengthened to trust in our Lord's unfailing promises and Gifts. He gives us armor to fight against and withstand the devilish attacks. It's not our armor but God's, and He dresses us up for battle with Gospel gear wrought by Jesus himself.

The belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit – the word of God – all these are Gifts for you. They all have one thing in common: they all find their source in Jesus. You are dressed up in him – your Baptism assures you of that. Greater is he that is in you and he that is in the world (1 John 4:4). So we enter into daily battle in Jesus with faith grabbing onto him, and in him we are more than conquerors! In the Name ✠ of Jesus.

The Fifteenth Wednesday After Pentecost

SEPTEMBER 4, 2024

Today's Reading: Ephesians 4:1-24

Daily Lectionary: 2 Kings 2:1-18; Ephesians 4:1-2

"I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called," (Ephesians 4:1)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Paul is behind bars! He's got time on his hands, which gives him time to think, to pray, and to write. What's on his mind? You and me and all those who have come to faith in Christ. He has words of encouragement to build us up as we live out our faith together.

"Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called." This is not Paul laying some law on us that we "must do" to be a worthy Christian. You can see it that way if you think living out your Christian life is something that is up to us. That would be a burden too heavy to live under, wouldn't it? Where is freedom in that? Where can we find joy in that? No, rather, Paul is urging you to live out who you are already in Christ in light of how God has called you.

You have been called not by the law but by the gospel. You have been called out of darkness into Jesus' marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9). So, we now walk as children of the light because that's who we are (Ephesians 5:8). You have been called by grace through faith to believe and to receive our Lord's gospel Gifts and those Gifts are at work in you!

Paul goes on to describe the life reborn by God's grace; it is a life marked by humility, gentleness, patience, and selfless love. Isn't this how God has acted toward us: Humbling himself – becoming a man to save us; having compassion and being tender-hearted toward us – giving us what we don't deserve; being patient and not calling us to judgment but rather working repentance and faith in us; loving us even when we were unlovable?

Paul's urging is not another law. Rather, he is passionately calling us to live out who we already are in Christ. And Christ is at work in us so that our lives are masks of His. This, too, is all Gift – Gifts given by the Spirit of God. "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22-23). In other words, you are free! Free to live your life hidden in Christ with Christ living in you! This is your calling. This is the worthy life of faith, fixing our eyes on Jesus as we live out our life of faith together. Christ for you! Christ in you! Christ through you! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Heavenly Father, direct us by Your Spirit that we may daily grow in grace and the knowledge of our Savior until we shall stand before You in the joy of everlasting glory. Amen.

The Fifteenth Thursday After Pentecost

SEPTEMBER 5, 2024

Today's Reading: Catechism: Table of Duties: To bishops
Daily Lectionary: 2 Kings 2:19-25; 4:1-7; Ephesians 4:25-5:14

"He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it." Titus 1:9

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. It's good to know what you are getting into when deciding on a vocation. I remember taking a college and career class in high school. We would explore different professions, finding out the educational requirements as well as the job description for a particular occupation. I'm not sure if the job of "pastor" was included on the list we could choose from. If it was or wasn't, you could not find any better job description for a pastor than the one given to Titus by the Apostle Paul.

The pastor only has one job: hold firm to the Word of God and faithfully hand it over; that's the job description. We know there are other responsibilities a pastor has, but if they fail in their primary duty, does anything else really matter?

"Hold firm to the trustworthy message as he has been taught." Thank God for all those who have put the Gospel into our ears. Thank God for all the pastors and teachers who have been true and faithful voices of his Word. This is why Paul encourages a young pastor named Timothy to guard the Gospel that was entrusted to him so he may hand it over to others who will faithfully pass it on as well. It is easy to lose sight of the job description for both pastors and parishioners. Paul knows this, so he is persistent with young pastor Timothy to fight the good fight, wage the good warfare, and do not neglect the gospel of Christ entrusted to you.

Hold firm! Declare and defend the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the duty of a pastor – to be a faithful voice of Jesus. And you can be sure the Devil will do all he can to tempt pastors to deviate from their primary calling. Timothy needed Paul, and he needed the support of his congregation to be strengthened to carry out his duties faithfully. So let us, too, be a source of encouragement and strength to those who are called to be servants of God's Word. Pastors need our prayers and need our support to continue to fight the good fight. As we do this, we, too, find ourselves in battle, striving side by side for the faith of the Gospel. Help us, Lord, we pray. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

The Fifteenth Friday After Pentecost

SEPTEMBER 6, 2024

Today's Reading: 2 Kings 4:8-22, 32-37

Daily Lectionary: 2 Kings 4:8-22, 32-37; Ephesians 5:15-33

"And he said, "At this season, about this time next year, you shall embrace a son." And she said, "No, my lord, O man of God; do not lie to your servant." But the woman conceived, and she bore a son about that time the following spring, as Elisha had said to her." (2 Kings 4:16-17)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. God is in the business of resurrection. He brings life into the non-living. It's who He is— He is life, and it's what He does— He is the giver of life. God may give life directly by Himself, or He may use someone or something else, but He is always the source.

In the beginning, God brought forth life out of nothing by His Word and Spirit. He breathed life into dead dust, and Adam became a living being. He gave life to Sarah's womb, and she bore a living son, Isaac. Scripture is full of stories such as these, and they tell the wonderful story of the life-giving God who is in the business of making alive what is dead.

Elisha, the prophet of God, told a woman from Shunem that she would have a son, although she and her husband could not have children. Sound familiar? Sure enough, God was true to His Word, and she bore a son. Tragedy struck, and her first-born only son died. In faith, she sought out Elisha and told him the news. Elisha entered into the room of her dead son, prayed to the Lord, touched him, and he awakened from death.

"Talitha cumi... Little girl, I say to you, arise" (Mark 5:41). Jesus spoke these words over the lifeless body of Jarius' daughter. Death had to bow to the Lord of life. Jesus' words breathed resurrection life into her, and she became a living being.

Word, breath, Spirit, and life – God's instruments for resurrection given to the dead to make alive. "And you were dead in [your] trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1). What hope do we have of life when we are already born dead? Like Adam, Sarah, Jarius' daughter, and the son of the Shunammite woman, who needed life to be given to them, so do we, and God did.

"God, being rich in mercy...made us alive together in Christ, by grace you have been saved" (Ephesians 2:4). Jesus died! He was buried! And on the third day, he rose again from the dead that he might be the firstfruits of those who have died (1 Corinthians 15:20). And if Jesus is the firstfruit, that means there are certainly more to follow.

Christ has covered all your sins by His death, and He has conquered your grave through His life. We Christians do not fear death. No, Jesus' words trump our sin and our death. They hold no power over us. His Word has been spoken over you. They are words of life. You are forgiven! Arise! Eternal life is yours! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

The Fifteenth Saturday After Pentecost

SEPTEMBER 7, 2024

Today's Reading: Introit for Pentecost 16 - Psalm 28:1-2, 6-7; antiphon: Psalm 28:8

Daily Lectionary: 2 Kings 4:38-5:8; Ephesians 6:1-24

"The Lord is the strength of his people; he is the saving refuge of his anointed."
(Psalm 28:8)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. What separates those who have faith in God and those who do not? If you look just at the outside of someone's life, you may not see much of a difference, especially when it comes to having difficulties or experiencing suffering. Believers and unbelievers alike face hard times in their lives and even great tragedy. Being a Christian doesn't give us a pass from heartbreak or disaster, but we do know who to put our trust in when we are overwhelmed with hardship. We turn in faith to God and call on his name.

In this psalm, we find David at his rope's end; he feels himself sinking under the weight of his struggles. He doesn't turn inward to find inner strength; he has none. He doesn't turn to other people or things to give him hope or peace. No, David turns to the one who will not let him down, no matter how bad things may seem. He turns to the Lord, who is his rock and his refuge. That's what faith does, and that's who faith trusts: the one true God who promises to hear us and never abandon those who belong to him. David is teaching us what faith looks like in the middle of the whirlwinds and storms of life.

David is not only a portrait of every believer but a foreshadowing of our Lord Jesus. He, too, was not exempt from suffering, even though he was God. He, too, felt abandoned at the grimmest time of his earthly life – being crucified and dying on a Roman cross. He cried out, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). And yet, Jesus never loses faith. He endures in faith and finally calls out in his dying breath, "Into your hands I commit my spirit!" (Luke 23:46) That's faith talk. That's what faith does, even in the darkest of times when you feel God is nowhere in sight.

David prayed, and he invites us to pray in the thick of our struggles through the words of this psalm, "The Lord is my strength and my shield, in him my heart trusts, and I am helped" (Psalm 28:7). We may not see it, and we may not feel it, but faith prays and trusts in the Lord who is our saving refuge. David's prayer and ours finally finds its "amen" in Jesus. "Oh, save your people and bless your heritage! Be their shepherd and carry them forever" (Psalm 28:9). Our Good Shepherd has laid down his life for us and will carry us through life and into the joys of heaven! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Jesus, refuge of the weary, Blest Redeemer, whom we love, Fountain in life's desert dreary, Savior from the world above: Often have your eyes, offended, Gazed upon the sinner's fall; Yet upon the cross extended, You have borne the pain of all.
(LSB 423:1)

The Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost

SEPTEMBER 8, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 7:24-30, 31-37

Daily Lectionary: 2 Kings 5:9-27; Philippians 1:1-20

"And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha,' that is, 'Be opened.'" (Mark 7:34)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Jesus puts His fingers in the deaf ears of the man and touches the man's garbled tongue with His holy saliva, and He looks up to heaven and sighs. It is a word that can also mean "groaning." Just as Jesus weeps at the grave of His friend Lazarus, here He groans at ears and a tongue that do not do what He made them to do.

It was not always this way, of course. In the beginning, there was no sighing, no groaning. But it was not long before groans and sighs show up. The noun shows up in the Greek translation of the Old Testament already in Genesis 3! In the curse that follows sin, God says to Eve that He would multiply her pain and groaning (Genesis 3:16, Septuagint). Groaning goes with sin, with the burden of our sin and the sins of others that weigh us down. Sighing is the nature of the whole creation. In Romans 8, St. Paul says that the whole creation groans together, and not only the creation but we groan also (8:22-23). If you've ever gotten to the end of a day, or a week, or a semester, or a year and found yourself sighing; if you've ever found yourself grieving, struggling, guilty, or ashamed, and you groan or sigh because you can't see a way out or a light at the end of the tunnel, you know the nature of this creation. It is hard to hear the Word of God, and it's hard to speak God's promises, even to yourself. Things are not the way they're supposed to be.

But Jesus knows, too. Just as God heard the groaning of Israel in slavery (Exodus 2:24; 6:5) and their sighing under their oppressors (Judges 2:18), God has heard your sighs and groans. Not only are all things made through Him, but He entered this world in a body made for Him. And though He is without sin, He, too, groans because He is in the midst of it. It is all around Him, and it is not the way He wants it to be. He groans and weeps and suffers and dies. He rises from the dead, and as a sign of that resurrection, He puts His fingers in the deaf man's ears and loosens his tongue with a touch. So He opens your ears to hear again His promises and your tongue to sing His praise. This, too, is a sign of the coming resurrection, when, as God promises through Isaiah, "the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away" (Isaiah 51:11). In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

The Sixteenth Monday After Pentecost

SEPTEMBER 9, 2024

Today's Reading: Isaiah 35:4-7a

Daily Lectionary: 2 Kings 6:1-23; 2 Kings 6:24-8:2; Philippians 1:21-2:11

"Say to those who have an anxious heart, 'Be strong; fear not!' Behold, your God...will come and save you." (Isaiah 35:4)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. What I like about those words, "anxious heart" is that "anxious" is directly related to speed or haste. The "hasty heart." And isn't that how it is for us? Anxiety comes because we believe everything depends on us. We have trouble depending on other people, let alone on God. God seems distant from us, which causes us to feel like we have to work harder, and the harder we work (at school, at work, at relationships, at life), the more anxious we become. Everything speeds up, everything is now, and we find ourselves in the center of that swirling, self-involved storm.

This is part of the point of the Sabbath command in the Old Testament. It is not only about resting our bodies from work; it's about resting our bodies, minds, and souls from thinking that everything depends on us. No doubt, we have responsibilities and things we have to do. The various relationships into which God has put us have the requirement of loving service attached to them. But our worth and our identity are not in our work or our success. As soon as we think they are (and pastors are no more immune to this than anyone else!), our working and doing speed up, and anxiety comes crashing down on us. God wanted to make sure His people knew that all things depend on Him and not on them. They (and we) are not God.

But now the Sabbath is not one day only, in which we rest from our work and hear God's Word (although we certainly need that and received it yesterday). Now, the "Sabbath rest" of God is found entirely in Jesus, who fulfilled the Sabbath command when He rested on the seventh day from all His saving work that He had done. And you are always in Jesus, baptized into His Name. In Christ, you are completely surrounded by God's rest, which is not simply taking a break from work but being protected from all the enemies of God's people, particularly sin, death, and the devil. God has come to save you, to "pay you back," not with punishment for sin, but with the blessing of Christ and His eternal life.

Everything around you says to hurry, speed up, go faster, and do more. But rest and find peace in the promise of Jesus that everything depends on Him. Because you belong to Him, you can go about your daily work without anxiety, without a hasty heart. Be strong. Fear not. Your God has saved you and will keep you until the day when all things are restored and the dry deserts of anxiety give way to the refreshing springs of peace. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

The Sixteenth Tuesday After Pentecost

SEPTEMBER 10, 2024

Today's Reading: James 2:1-10, 14-18

Daily Lectionary: 2 Kings 9:1-13, 10:18-29; 2 Kings 13:1-18:8; Philippians 2:12-30

"So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." (James 2:17)

In the Name † of Jesus. Amen. St. James reminds us that there are no exceptions under the Law of God. Just as Jesus Himself says that even lust is adultery, and even hatred is murder (Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28), so James says that there are no exceptions to the command, "Love your neighbor as yourself." You could keep the whole thing, but if you stumble at even one point, if you fail to love even one person, you are guilty of the entire Law. The Law is whole, not divided. So, a failure to love one person is, before God, the same as failing to love everyone. Love, like the Law, cannot be divided up.

Our failures to love are failures of faith. There is no true faith that does not produce works. We cannot claim to have faith if it does not show itself in works. The reason such faith is dead and cannot save is not because it does not have works, but because it is not faith. As Paul tells us in Ephesians, the one who walks around in sin and trespasses is dead in those sins. But the one who has been saved by grace through faith alone walks around in good works (Ephesians 2:1-2, 8-10). Being dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus always produces love for those around us.

Of course, we still fail at love because we still have an unbeliever living in our flesh. The Old Adam refuses to believe, and so refuses to love. Jesus, however, completely trusts His Father, and so loved, and loves, completely. He loved us so completely that He would not leave us dead in our sin. "God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:4-7).

Until our sinful flesh dies completely, we live as two because both Law and Gospel are entire: a living believer in the Father through Christ, loving our neighbors as ourselves, and a dying unbeliever, dead in sin, refusing to love. "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin" (Romans 7:24-25). In the Name † of Jesus. Amen.

O grant that nothing in my soul May dwell, but Thy pure love alone; Oh, may Thy love possess me whole, My joy, my treasure, and my crown! All coldness from my heart remove; My ev'ry act, word, thought be love (LSB 683:2)

The Sixteenth Wednesday After Pentecost

SEPTEMBER 11, 2024

Today's Reading: Philippians 3:1-21

Daily Lectionary: 2 Chronicles 29:1-24; Philippians 3:1-21

"Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." (Philippians 3:8a)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. When it comes to salvation, there is Jesus, and there is everything else. We can divide everything into categories: is this Jesus? Or is this something else? If it is something else, it cannot save me, and it has no life in it. Daily, weekly, we are brought back to this reminder that "all the vain things that charm [us] most" are empty. When we put our trust in something other than Jesus – otherwise known as an idol – it will always fail us. People fail us, the government fails us, money fails us, we fail ourselves. So, write it all off now. Count it as loss. Consider it "rubbish" (which is a polite word for what goes in the toilet).

All of it together is nothing compared to the far better thing that Jesus is your Lord. He has purchased you not with the perishable, empty things of this world, like gold and silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death. And that purchase price is confirmed by His resurrection, which makes that gain eternal. The goal is to be found in Jesus, having His righteousness, which will lead to resurrection, whatever suffering might come to us in this life.

Paul had a pretty good claim to boast in his own righteousness: everything in his life, his genealogy, his belonging to the covenant, his blamelessness under the law as a Pharisee. But even that would not put him with Christ, and therefore with God's eternal life. There was, for Paul, Jesus on one side and everything else on the other. One meant a righteousness of his own in which he could boast, and the other meant life and resurrection. He realized that the only one worth boasting about was Jesus. "Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, save in the death of Christ, my God."

Is this thing, whatever it is, something other than Jesus? Then I will lose it anyway. Is this Jesus? God will not only give me Him and His righteousness through faith, but He will give every other good thing along with Him (Matthew 6:33). "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things" (Romans 8:32)? In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast Save in the death of Christ, my God; All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to His blood (LSB 425:2)

The Sixteenth Thursday After Pentecost

SEPTEMBER 12, 2024

Today's Reading: Catechism: Table of Duties: What hearers owe their pastor
Daily Lectionary: 2 Chronicles 31:1-21; Philippians 4:1-23

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Hebrews 13:17)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Along with the rest of these passages in this part of the Table of Duties, or the “House Table,” this is a difficult word. We live in an age where it’s everyone for him- or herself, where we do not trust leaders of any kind to do what is good and right for us. Even if we know that not every leader of a certain type is represented when individuals fail, still we have heard a lot of stories about leaders, including pastors, failing to live up to their office or their promises. So why would we obey them and submit to them?

Here, the author of this letter is clearly talking about pastors, since it says that “they are keeping watch over your souls.” And just as it is no advantage or benefit for children to disobey their parents, so there is no advantage for Christians to refuse to hear their pastors. Pastors, like parents, are no less sinful than hearers or children. They do indeed fail, just as parents, children, and all Christians fail. When pastors fail, it can be much more public, which is why James says, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For we all stumble in many ways” (James 3:1-2). It is also why three of Paul’s letters in the New Testament are addressed to pastors.

But the fact that pastors are sinners does not remove the obligation to hear the Word they preach, and obey and submit to their preaching of that Word. Just as we must obey our parents, who are sinners, so hearers obey the word and promises attached to the Office of the Holy Ministry. Our confidence and certainty, however, are not tied to the person who may fail in his office or promises. We are bound to the Office into which God has put men and the promises He has attached to that Office. And God does not fail! In spite of pastors’ failings, God will deliver to you forgiveness of sins through the Office of the Ministry. God will deliver to you the certainty of His own promises in Christ. And that’s good news, not only for hearers but also for pastors, who will have to give an account to God of their ministry. God keeps pastors faithful in their Office and keeps hearers faithful to the Word delivered through that Office! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

The Sixteenth Friday After Pentecost

SEPTEMBER 13, 2024

Today's Reading: Introit for Pentecost 17 - Psalm 31:14-16; antiphon: Psalm 31:24

Daily Lectionary: 2 Chronicles 32:1-22; Hosea 1:1-14:9; Colossians 1:1-23

"But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, 'You are my God.'" (Psalm 31:14)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. What does it mean to have a God? We confess that the First Commandment requires us to "fear, love, and trust in God above all things." So whatever it is in which we put our trust is our God. Whatever we fear can easily become our God. What we love with our time, money, and energy is our God. Let's not try to get out from under this judgment of God's law. We are no different from the Israelites, who made another God when Moses did not show up for a month. When we do not find the answers we want or think we need, when our money, the government, or our families seem more immediate, and we turn to them most quickly when we are in trouble, then we have our gods exposed.

But the God who delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt refused to let the people have any other gods. No other god made everything that exists. No other god delivered them from slavery. No other god would bring them into the land that Yahweh had promised to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. "I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God" (Exodus 6:7). God does not want us to make other gods for ourselves, not so much because we should choose Him out of all the gods there are, but because there are, in reality, no other gods. "Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I know not any" (Isaiah 44:8).

So the only God there is sends the only Son in order to gather all of us god-makers back to Himself. Idolaters are as idolaters do, and so the only true God gets crucified as a false god. But the resurrection demonstrates that He alone is God. "Ask ye, who is this? Jesus Christ it is, of Sabaoth Lord, and there's none other God" (LSB 656:2). And the Spirit of this Jesus preaches the true God back into our ears and hearts by His Word, and creates a true fear, love, and trust. And now we rejoice with all the believers in the true God, and we pray with the psalmist: "But I trust in You, O Lord; I say, 'You are my God.'" In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

O God, Your dwelling is with us in Christ. Dwell with us always, that we may be Your people, and that You may be with us as our God (Revelation 21:3). Keep us as Your people until the final day, when we say, Behold, this is our God; we have waited for Him! Let us be glad and rejoice in His salvation (Isaiah 25:9)! Amen.

Holy Cross Day

SEPTEMBER 14, 2024

Today's Reading: John 12:20-33

Daily Lectionary: 2 Chronicles 33:1-25; Jonah 1:1-4:11; Colossians 1:24-2:7

"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."
(John 12:32)

In the Name ✝ of Jesus. Amen. The cross looks like defeat, but faith sees the victory of Jesus over sin and death. The cross looks like helplessness, but faith sees the power of God for salvation. The cross looks like humiliation, but faith sees the exaltation of Jesus and His coronation as King. "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself." The death of Jesus on the cross is a result of sin. And since everyone who has ever lived on the earth (except Him) is a sinner, the cross is where He draws all sinners to Himself. He "came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father" (Ephesians 2:17-18).

The Greeks said to Philip, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" (John 12:20). In response, Jesus spoke of His coming death as His glorification and said, "If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also" (12:26). The servants of Jesus are with Him in His death: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3-4).

Jesus gathered you to Himself on the cross by your baptism so that you would be always with Him, not only in death but even more— in His resurrection. "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Romans 6:5). This is the mystery and contradiction of the holy cross: here, Jesus wins victory in defeat, power in weakness, and exaltation in humiliation. "Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle; sing the ending of the fray. Now above the cross, the trophy, sound the loud triumphant lay; tell how Christ, the world's redeemer, as a victim won the day. ... Faithful cross, true sign of triumph, be for all the noblest tree; none in foliage, none in blossom, none in fruit thine equal be; symbol of the world's redemption, for the weight that hung on thee" (LSB 454:1, 4)! In the Name ✝ of Jesus. Amen.

Merciful God, Your Son, Jesus Christ, was lifted high upon the cross that He might bear the sins of the world and draw all people to Himself. Grant that we who glory in His death for our redemption may faithfully heed His call to bear the cross and follow Him, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

SEPTEMBER 15, 2024

Today's Reading: Mark 9:14-29

Daily Lectionary: 2 Chronicles 34:1-4, 8-11, 14-33; Nahum 1:1-3:19; Colossians 2:8-23

“But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.” (Mark 9:27)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Between predictions of His death and resurrection, Jesus' divine glory is displayed on the mountain, and Jesus gives life to an apparently dead boy in the valley. This is beyond the disciples; it comes only from firm belief and prayer. Jesus is the true believer and the doubtless pray-er, but He is in the midst of an unbelieving generation. Apparently, the other nine disciples had been waiting at the foot of the mountain for Jesus, Peter, James, and John to return. While they were gone, a man brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus, but since Jesus wasn't there, either the man or the disciples decided to try the exorcism on their own.

Jesus comes down the mountain, and the disciples, the crowd, and the scribes are arguing with each other. Jesus says, “O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?” (Mark 9:19) When Moses came down from the mountain and found the people worshiping a golden calf in place of Yahweh, God said that Israel was a stiff-necked, stubborn, idolatrous people (Exodus 32:7-10). People have not changed from that generation to this. We still alternate between pride and helplessness; we still waver between trust in God and the gods we make with our own hands or in our own minds. “I believe; help my unbelief!” There is no cure except death and resurrection. We have been this way since childhood— from conception.

So Jesus goes to Gethsemane to pray, to weep, and to bear all the unbelief of all generations. This is how long He puts up with us: to death on a cross, to the grave. This devil, this death, this sin; they can only be driven out by death and resurrection, just as He says. And He gives a glimpse of it with this boy. “And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, ‘He is dead.’ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.” (Mark 9:26-27). So the Jesus who died and rose stretches His hand out to those dead in sin and pulls them up from the water by His Word, and we arise to live in new life before Him forever. “Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him” (Romans 6:8). I believe; help my unbelief! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Lord Jesus Christ, our support and defense in every need, continue to preserve Your Church in safety, govern her by Your goodness, and bless her with Your peace; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Seventeenth Monday After Pentecost

SEPTEMBER 16, 2024

Today's Reading: Isaiah 50:4-10

Daily Lectionary: 2 Chronicles 35:1-7, 16-25; Zephaniah 1:1-3:20; Colossians 3:1-25

"He who vindicates me is near..." (Isaiah 50:8)

In the Name † of Jesus. Amen. In the words of Isaiah the prophet, we hear our Lord, the Man Jesus, who suffers as the holy and righteous Servant of God. As a man, He hears the Word of God, learns it, grows in the knowledge of it, and obeys it (see Luke 2:52). He does not exercise His human will in rebellion to His Father's (and His) divine will. He goes willingly to the suffering and death that is the wages of human sin. He gives His back to those who strike and His face to those who pull out the beard. He does not hide from disgrace and spitting. The Lamb goes uncomplaining forth.

But He doesn't do this for Himself. He does it for you. His knowledge, earned in the flesh by His life, suffering, and death, is for all the unrighteous, for those who do not do the will of God, who do not want to hear His Word, and who rebel against Him. "Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities." (Isaiah 53:11).

He knows His Father and has full human trust in Him. So He knows that He will not be left in the humiliation of the cross or ashamed in His trust. The Father raises Him from the dead and vindicates Him. So we, too, have been given Jesus' holy confidence in the Father: "Behold, the Lord God helps me; who will declare me guilty?" (Isaiah 50:9a). Paul says it this way: "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us." (Romans 8:31-34).

The One who has been vindicated in righteousness, the Holy One whom the Father would not let see decay in the grave, now stands alive forever, interceding for you by His death and resurrection. If this is how God has helped you, neither sin nor death nor anything else can condemn you as guilty. Nothing in all creation will be able to separate you from the love of God that is Christ Jesus, our Lord. If God is for you, who can be against you? In the Name † of Jesus. Amen.

O Lord God, You have justified and vindicated us in Christ. Cause all those who walk in darkness to trust You, the Light of the world, and keep us forever in that same faith. Amen.

The Seventeenth Tuesday After Pentecost

SEPTEMBER 17, 2024

Today's Reading: James 3:1-12

Daily Lectionary: 2 Chronicles 36:1-23; Philemon 1-25; Colossians 4:1-18

"From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so." (James 3:10)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Isn't it strange how little control we have over our tongues? Why do we continually have to apologize to people because we "didn't mean to say that"? What did we mean to say? And if we meant to say something else, why didn't we say that? The tongue is a restless fire, and the words we say can burn down or build up. And it's not only James who says it. Jesus says, "I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak," (Matthew 12:36). The words we speak mean far more than we often think. There is an old campfire song that goes, "It only takes a spark to get a fire going." It only takes a single word to change completely a relationship. Sticks and stones may break our bones, but words can also harm and destroy. It should not be so.

But it is also a word that restores, heals, and forgives. It doesn't start with our words, trying to "take them back" or fix what we've said and done. Sin is not like that. There is no fixing what has been broken in the past, what has been burned down, and all the idle and useless words we've spoken. It is only an entirely new word, a pure word, a living word, that can rebuild and restore. The Word made flesh enters a world of lying words, damaging words, and killing words and embodies the life and forgiveness of God. He hears words like "Crucify!" and He speaks words like "Forgive." He hears words of death, and He speaks words of life. He hears words like "If He is the Son of God, let Him come down from the cross and save Himself," and He speaks the dying word, "It is finished."

But this Word will not be silenced. He rises from the dead, and the first word He speaks to the disciples in the Upper Room is "Peace." Peace between God and people; peace between people. Peace that heals where our words have broken; peace that pours quenching water on our burning, igniting words. Peace that spreads from the risen Jesus to His people, spreads from one of His baptized believers to another, spreads from the baptized people of God to those who do not know His peace. His Word is not idle or useless or powerless. His Word alone does at all times the good that He means to do: I forgive you. Take and eat, take and drink; this is My Body and Blood, given and shed for you. His Word is everything, for us and between us, until we see the truth of His Word: "Look! I am making all things new!" (Revelation 21:5) In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

The Seventeenth Wednesday After Pentecost

SEPTEMBER 18, 2024

Today's Reading: Haggai 1:1-2:23

Daily Lectionary: Nehemiah 1:1-2:10; Haggai 1:1-2:23; 1 Timothy 1:1-20

"The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts" (Haggai 2:9)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. The people who returned from exile in Babylon had begun to rebuild the temple, as Cyrus, the Persian king, had allowed them to do. But then, in the face of opposition and threats, they stopped building. So God sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to exhort them to start again and give them a promise about His ongoing presence among them.

In the face of the idolatry and the blasphemy of the priests and people, the prophet Ezekiel saw the glory of Yahweh depart from the temple (Ezekiel 9-10). Now, after the exile, God promises through Haggai and Zechariah that the glory will return to the temple and that the glory will be greater than it was previously. But this will not be a glory according to human expectations. "Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes" (Haggai 2:3)? The appearance does not match the reality of the promise.

The temple is tied to the giving of peace, of shalom, which is a whole, entire peace and well-being, where everything is right and there are no more enemies against God's people. God has them rebuild the temple, even though they are currently surrounded by threats and opposition, based on His promise and their trust in Him.

But the temple always points forward to the day when there will be no more threats, only shalom. So Jesus promises that the temple will be torn down and He will rebuild it in three days. He cleanses the temple because something greater than the temple is here. When that hour comes, when it appears as if Jesus, the place of God's presence and shalom, is being destroyed, that is actually the glory of God being revealed in the world. "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (John 12:23), and "when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to Myself" (12:32).

Jesus says that His servants will be where He is, and where He is, in that place, God will give shalom. We wait, like the returned exiles, for the day when all enemies and threats will be removed from this creation, but He gives us His saving presence now—even in the midst of our enemies—at the Table, in the flesh and blood of our temple, Jesus. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

The Seventeenth Thursday After Pentecost

SEPTEMBER 19, 2024

Today's Reading: Catechism: Table of duties: of civil government

Daily Lectionary: Nehemiah 2:11-20, 4:1-6; 1 Timothy 2:1-15

"For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (Romans 13:1)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Sometimes, we think that if other people are not doing what they are supposed to do, then we can do what would otherwise be wrong. We think that we will do what we're supposed to do when they do what they're supposed to do. We'll obey our parents when they do everything God has commanded them to do. Husbands will only sacrifice themselves for their wives when their wives submit, and wives will only submit when husbands act like Jesus. Likewise, we think that we will be subject to the governing authorities when the governing authorities do what God has given them to do.

But all of those are contrary to God's word. The fact is, of course, that the sinners in the government, in families, and in marriages will never do everything that they are supposed to do. But God's Law does not have exceptions. We don't get to decide whether we will follow God's word based on what other people do. We obey God, not people. And obeying God means that we obey those whom He puts into authority over us, whether parents or governing authorities (which are extensions of the Father's authority). The explanation of the Fourth Commandment reminds us: "We should fear and love God so that we do not despise or anger our parents and other authorities, but honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them."

What does this mean? What should we do when the government does not act according to God's will to protect the innocent and punish the evildoer? The most obvious example is when governments persecute Christians. What will submission to the governing authorities look like in that case? It will mean continuing to hear God's word and receiving His sacraments. The government may abuse its authority and put us in prison or put us to death. Even so, we trust the God who instituted them more than those He put into authority. As Jesus says to Pilate, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:11). Jesus does not deny Pilate's authority to put Him to death, but He tells Pilate that his authority comes from God.

We must continue to do what God has given us to do according to our vocations. We pray that everyone else properly carries out the vocations God has given them. We pray that when they do not act rightly, God will replace them. Above all, we pray that God will have mercy on all of us in Christ. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

The Seventeenth Friday After Pentecost

SEPTEMBER 20, 2024

Today's Reading: Introit for Pentecost 18 - Psalm 37:5-7; antiphon: Psalm 37:4
Daily Lectionary: Nehemiah 4:7-23; 1 Timothy 3:1-16

"Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act" (Psalm 37:5)

In the Name † of Jesus. Amen. Waiting for the Lord to act when things do not appear to be going the way they should be going is one of the most difficult things to do. We see whatever evil is going on. Does God? If He does, why does He allow it to continue? When will He intervene? Will He?

In Psalm 37, David says, "Fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices. Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil" (37:7-8, emphasis added). God certainly knows all the evil in the world, and He knows it far better than we will ever know it! He knows not only all the evil that is happening right now but all the evil that has ever happened and will ever happen.

But God does not only know of evil. Not only will He set it right when evil-doers are caught and punished; not only will He put all things right on the Last Day, ridding His creation of sin, death, and the devil; He has already put evil right on the cross. Jesus' crucifixion is where all evil comes to its full expression, in the killing by creatures of their Creator. And Jesus takes all that evil, including your sin and mine, and dies under its weight. By doing that, He buries sin and death in His grave and leaves it there when He rises from the dead.

It is true that we still see evil in the world after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, but that is only the death rattle of this old creation. The present form of this world is passing away (1 Corinthians 7:31). God has made this known to us by His Spirit. And He has made us part of this same story in our Baptism; the same old/new, death/resurrection line now runs through us as it does through the creation. Because of this, we can be still before Yahweh and wait patiently for Him (Psalm 37:7). When Christ is revealed, then He will transform our lowly bodies to be like His glorious body (Philippians 3:21), and "He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday" (Psalm 37:6).

Your future is assured by Christ's resurrection, so you can be patient as God works all things together for our good in Christ. He who has called you according to His promise in Christ is faithful. He will surely do it (1 Thessalonians 5:24). In the Name † of Jesus. Amen.

Saint Matthew the Apostle and Evangelist

SEPTEMBER 21, 2024

Today's Reading: Matthew 9:9-13

Daily Lectionary: Nehemiah 5:1-16, 6:1-9, 15-16; 1 Timothy 4:1-16

"Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:13)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Matthew certainly sacrifices something. He sacrifices his certain income and the wealth and status that goes along with it. And every Christian sacrifices something in order to follow Jesus. There are certain roads closed to us once we belong to Christ. It cannot be otherwise. But that is not what Jesus is talking about when He cites the prophet Hosea: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6). In Hosea, the sacrifice is the sacrifice for sin, offered in the temple over and over again. God says that the people are like a morning cloud that comes and goes, fickle and wavering. They come and offer the prescribed sacrifices, but then they depart from God in their idolatry and sin.

Tax collectors were perceived as doubly evil by the people around them: they made their living off what they collected over and above what was required in taxes, and they collaborated with Israel's oppressors in Rome. Their critics among the Pharisees and the leaders of Israel no doubt gave the proper sacrifices at the proper times, upholding the Law of God. Their outward acts are righteous and holy. It wasn't just the Pharisees who believed it about themselves, but the people around them would have thought so as well. Jesus appears as both the sacrifice and the mercy. Once He shows up, the line of righteousness does not run between Pharisees and tax collectors but between everyone and Jesus. There is no one healthy, no one righteous. And Jesus has come to call every sick person and every sinner.

Everything depends on where you stand. If you stand with the outwardly righteous, Jesus will be a threat and an enemy. But if you know that you are a sick sinner, Jesus is the healing physician and the forgiving mercy of God. Matthew sits there at the table with Jesus, not in self-righteousness, but in the perfect relief of being the object of the mercy of Jesus, who would be sacrificed for the sins of the whole world. That is where you and I find ourselves, as well: at the table of Jesus' mercy, in the all-encompassing forgiveness of God, eating and drinking as forgiven sinners with the sacrificial Lamb of God. Thanks be to God for His gracious calling and merciful welcome of sinners such as us! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

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