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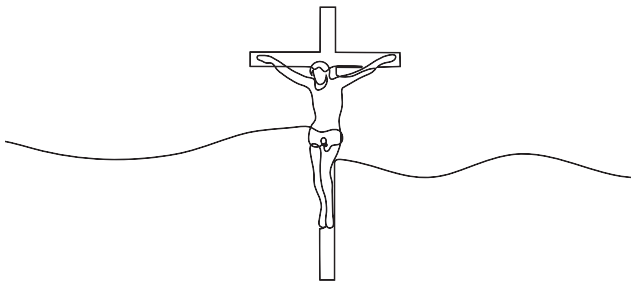
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My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?
Why are You so far from helping Me,
And from the words of My groaning?
O My God, I cry in the daytime, but You do not hear;
And in the night season, and am not silent.
But You are holy,
Enthroned in the praises of Israel.
Our fathers trusted in You;
They trusted, and You delivered them.
They cried to You, and were delivered;
They trusted in You, and were not ashamed.

- Psalm 22:1-5



“See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise.” Luke 18:31-33 (ESV)

Jesus, I Will Ponder Now

In anticipation of another Lenten season, perhaps there are several things that you can expect to hear and see at church. Maybe the first thing that comes to your mind are the purple vestments put out to represent Spirit-led repentance and the royally rich sacrifice offered by our Savior. Maybe you think of the deeply cathartic and cleansing messages preached by a rotation of pastors, reassuring your heart of Christ’s sacrifice for the forgiveness of all your sins. And finally, maybe you’re like me and you think about the hymns of Lent which provide not only vivid lyrics, rich minor keys, and emotional swells, but also convey the rich, intrinsic value of our Savior’s passion. Jesus lived a perfect life and died an innocent death so that all our sin can be laid at the foot of His cross and put away forever.

“Jesus, I Will Ponder Now” is an appropriate hymn as we enter the season of Lent, serving well to focus our minds upon the meaning of the season. This hymn movingly expresses why we observe this simple yet important time. During Lent we remember the blessings that we have every day of our lives: Jesus’ blood and righteousness. We observe how those gifts which were painstakingly earned by Jesus have become our glorious dress. Seeing this, Lent is yet another time of year where we ponder Jesus and His work of salvation given to us.

Jesus, I will ponder now on Thy holy passion;
 With Thy Spirit me endow for such meditation.
 Grant that I in love and faith may the image cherish
 of Thy suffering, pain, and death that I may not perish.

The Lutheran Hymnal 140:1

But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth. Isaiah 53:5-7 (ESV)

Ponder Jesus' Great Distress and Its Cause

Stanza two of our hymn calls us to meditate on the cross: “Make me see Thy great distress, anguish, and affliction, bonds and stripes and wretchedness and Thy crucifixion; Make me see how scourge and rod, spear and nails, did wound Thee, How for man Thou diedst, O God, Who with thorns had crowned Thee.” How graphic it is to read this stanza and see how God-made-man—Jesus Christ, the Son of God—took upon Himself not only the physical pain of crucifixion, which was some of the worst pain that one could ever experience, but also the agony of hell on the cross. This Lamb, Jesus, was brutally killed.

And why? What’s the point of this gory death? “But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities...All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” Here is the cause of Jesus’ great distress: You and your sins. We all deserve to be punished just as brutally, but we are not. Why? Because Jesus took on our punishment for us on the cross. We then are spared the horrendous punishment we deserved because of the loving sacrifice of Christ, for “the chastisement for our peace was upon Him.” He made peace between us and God, “and by His stripes we are healed.”

Yet, O Lord not thus alone make me see Thy Passion,
But its cause to me make known and its termination.
Ah! I also and my sin wrought Thy deep affliction;
This indeed the cause hath been of Thy crucifixion.

The Lutheran Hymnal 140:3

Make me walk in the path of Your commandments, For I delight in it. Psalm 119:35

Ponder Jesus' Passion and Its Effect on Your Life.

Knowing that Jesus has taken away our sins, healed us with His stripes, and made peace with God through His chastisement, the next question one may ask is, "Where do we go from here?" In the sacrifice of His life, Christ gave us the answer to that question: Heaven, eternal paradise with God. But until we are delivered there, we might ask, "How then shall we live?"

In our day-to-day lives, with Jesus' passion on our minds, would it make sense for us to give in to sinful pleasures? Would it make sense for us to live in a way that is unholy when our unholy living is the very reason Jesus died in the first place? Of course not! It would be a ludicrous notion to say otherwise. Yet where is it that we often find ourselves? We have no excuse for returning to gossip, anger, taking the Lord's name in vain, skipping church because we don't feel like going, theft, pornography, disrespecting authority; and yet that's where we return. With our sinful nature, time and time again we find ourselves giving into sinful pleasure and unholy living. What wretched people we are!

At the same time, let's not make the mistake of viewing Jesus' passion as a glorified guilt trip. The passion of our Savior Jesus is rather the very place we should turn in repentance. When we find ourselves falling into those sinful pleasures and unholy living, let's return to our Savior's passion and lay those sins at His cross. Jesus, the Son of God, suffered without measure so that all of those times we gave into sin could be forgiven. Let us then pray that through the sacrificial love of Jesus we may walk a worthy life towards God, knowing that all our failures have been forgiven in Him.

Grant that I Thy Passion view with repentant grieving
 Nor Thee crucify anew by unholy living.
 How could I refuse to shun every sinful pleasure
 Since for me God's only Son suffered without measure?

The Lutheran Hymnal 140:4

“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Matthew 11:28

Ponder Jesus’ Cross for Your Comfort.

One summer afternoon, two boys were playing in the backyard with their action figures. One boy wanted the other to give him his action figure for a moment so he could play with it. The other boy politely told him no. The first boy became enraged and threw a rock at his friend. His friend began to cry and ran back inside the house. The result was the angry boy stewing in his room after his mother sent him there. During his timeout, he became very sad and felt guilty. In his mind, He needed to make up for it, so he began to scratch his forearms in order to punish himself and make up for what he did. When his mother came to the room and found him like this, she asked him, “Judas or Peter?” The boy knew what she meant.

Judas regretted his sin but didn’t trust in His Savior. He despaired and gained nothing but damnation. Peter also regretted his sin yet he knew his Savior. He was restored by His Savior, who died on the cross to take away his sin. The mother’s point: Jesus took care of that little boy’s sin on the cross; there was no need to punish himself. The rock-throwing was forgiven and forgotten. The boy was greatly relieved.

During this Lenten season, don’t look at the cross and passion of our Lord Jesus as a reason to punish yourself. Don’t look at it as only a part of your forgiveness. Look to it as your complete and full forgiveness. The sacrifice of Christ on that cross will give you the peace of mind that you need. He took care of your “rock-throwing” once and for all.

If my sins give me alarm and my conscience grieve me,
Let Thy cross my fear disarm, peace of conscience give me.
Grant that I may trust in Thee and Thy holy Passion.
If His Son so loveth me, God must have compassion.

The Lutheran Hymnal 140:5

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” John 14:6

Ponder Jesus’ Cross as your Bridge to Heaven.

The apostle Paul instructed the Christians of Asia Minor, “We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God,” and so, living as a Christian undoubtedly has its uncomfortable crosses to bear. And yet let us ponder an anecdote for a particular perspective on the value of that cross we bear:

Imagine Jesus saying to you, “I give you this cross and all it gives you, such as salvation, total forgiveness for all sins, righteousness, and eternal life. This is the key to getting you into Heaven. Take it with you along your life’s journey.” You then proceed to uproot the cross from the ground and hang it over your shoulder as you go on your way.

This cross is heavy, and your sinful flesh is always telling you to drop it, be comfortable, give into sin if that makes you happy. The devil is always trying to tempt you that you would be a lot better off if you just dropped the cross. The sinful world ridicules and mocks you and everyone else who bears this cross, calling it weakness and lunacy.

A lifetime of bearing this cross is humbling, and every time pain and temptation comes from these outside forces, we are tempted to throw it off and run with the load off our backs. And yet, by God’s grace, we continue on with the cross until one day in our journey we come to a narrow yet raging river—the day of our deaths. How are we ever going to cross the river? The answer is simple—lay the cross from bank to bank and cross from death to life. Jesus’ cross, though it can be heavy, ultimately brings salvation. Without it, you would never be able to cross the river and pass from death to life. Thanks be to Jesus for His cross.

Grant that I may willingly bear with Thee my crosses,
 Learning humbleness of Thee, peace mid pain and losses.
 May I give Thee love for love! Hear me, O my Savior,
 That I may in heaven above sing Thy praise forever.

The Lutheran Hymnal 140:6

“A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, ‘Son, go, work today in my vineyard.’ He answered and said, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he regretted it and went. Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, ‘I go, sir.’ But he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?” Matthew 21:28-31

The Parable of the Two Sons: Pleasing God

The Parable of the Two Sons is a study in contrasts. Both sons were directed to work in the vineyard. They set aside their plans for the day and went to work for dad (grumble, grumble). If “orders” came daily, perhaps this task was especially distasteful to them. The first son responded, “Forget it!” Likely, Dad was taken aback by his son’s defiance. “Children, obey your parents in the Lord for this is right.” (Ephesians 6:1) The second son sounded compliant, “I will go!” and even added “Sir!” Dad likely thought, “That’s more like it!” However, things are not always what they appear. The first son, so unwilling, had second thoughts, repented, and went—willingly. The second son, agreeable, despised his father’s request and did not go—ever.

Are you sometimes like the second son? “Yes, God; yes, Father; yes, Sir!” I go to worship often, even the midweek Lenten services. I give my share. I send my children to confirmation class. However, what happens behind the scenes? Neglect of your children? Misusing the name of the Lord? Greedily seeking money? Carrying a grudge?

Or will you be like the first son? At first, you may have said, “No way, God! I’m doing it my way!” That’s the pattern for every sin. Yet, now you turn back to him in repentance. Amazingly, the heavenly Father gives us time to recognize our sin, repent—receiving forgiveness through Jesus—and then go forward serving with a new heart! “The Lord is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9)

The merciful Lord is pleased when you live in repentance, receiving forgiveness in Christ, and serving with a new heart.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Amen.

“Then last of all the landowner sent his son to the vinedressers saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.’ So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him. Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?” Matthew 21:37-40

The Parable of the Vinedressers: Who’s in Charge?

The Parable of the Vinedressers is a study in taking over. A landowner prepared a vineyard. He made a business agreement with vinedressers to care for the vineyard while he was gone. Perhaps their pay was a part of the harvest. In time, they became convinced that the entire harvest was theirs—“We do all the work!” At harvest time, the landowner sent servants to receive his profits due. The vinedressers mistreated the servants, even killing some. This happened twice! Such patience with such offenders. Finally he sent his son. When they saw the son, they assumed “the old man” was dead. They killed the heir, thinking they would seize the entire operation. They thought they were in charge! Imagine the wrath to come!

Prompted by Satan and the sinful flesh, sinners operate just that way. They desire to be in charge—maybe not of a big corporation, but of their own life before God. Do you at times want to be in charge of your life, to take over, to call the shots, and to be answerable to no one but yourself? Do you mistreat those whom God has placed around you? Do you feel no need for His Son? Satan tempts you to think that way. “I am in charge.” Beware of God’s wrath.

Yet, God’s patience toward such arrogance is amazing. He purposefully sent His Son to die for such shameful conduct. Go to Him, saying, “I have overstepped my bounds with each sin. I’m not in charge. Forgive me in Jesus.” Hear the wonderful words of comfort, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.” (Isaiah 1:18) Every sin despises God’s Son, but each sin is forgiven through that same Son. It’s good that He is in charge!

God, be merciful to me a sinner! Amen.

“But when the king came in to see the guests, he saw a man there who did not have on a wedding garment. So he said to him, Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment? And he was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Matthew 22:11-13

The Parable of the Banquet: You Need a Better Shirt Than That!

The Parable of the Wedding Banquet is a study in despising God’s privileged invitation. A King sent out messengers to summon his invited guests to his son’s wedding banquet. Those summoned were disinterested and unwilling; they had more “important” things to do. Some even mistreated and killed the messengers! The king was furious and destroyed them.

A second guestlist was drawn up, consisting of people off the street. They did not despise and refuse this privileged invitation. However, one arrogant man disdained the special wedding garments provided for the guests. He felt he was good enough the way he was. The King questioned the man. The man had no reply. He was shown the door—and the gates to hell.

It is also your privilege—sinner that you are—to be invited and summoned to the banquet of eternal life in heaven. Jesus, God’s eternal Son and your flesh and blood brother, has provided you a voucher and garments to enter in. In His grim and painful execution, He was punished for you. In His glorious return to life from the grave, He has guaranteed for you forgiveness and heaven. You can not qualify in your own garment. You are only properly dressed in His righteousness. It is His gift! Yet Satan wants you to plan for Christ later, when it’s more convenient. He wants you to think that you can provide your own garments of salvation. Not so! Your self-made apparel is an insult to the King. He tells you to clothe yourself with Jesus’ redemption and atonement and know that you have garments and a shirt fit for the banquet!

**Heavenly Father, clothe me with the garments of salvation.
Amen.**

“And while the foolish virgins went to buy, the bridegroom came. And those who were ready went in with him to the wedding, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, open to us!’ But he answered and said, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.’”
Matthew 25:10-12

The Parable of the Ten Virgins: Are You Ready?

The Parable of the Ten Virgins is a study in readiness. Ten attendants at a wedding waited to accompany the groom in his wedding procession. All ten brought olive-oil lamps. Not knowing when the groom would arrive, only five were wise enough to bring additional oil. The five foolish virgins had to leave to buy more oil. The groom came, and those waiting went to the wedding. The doors were shut. Finally, the five foolish arrived. The groom did not recognize them as guests. They had missed their opportunity!

Entering into eternal life is similar. One must be ready. Death is surely coming. Consider obituary columns and cemetery stones! Don’t blithely think you’ll deal with it later, “when I settle down, when I am old, when I’m done working.” The exact day of your death remains unknown. “The Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not expect Him.” (Matthew 24:44) A day of answering in judgment before the Lord is coming. Only a fool says, “There is no God.” (Psalm 14:1) Do not think that somehow, by luck or the odds, you will escape. Nor will physical connections save you—a certain church, certain friends, a pastor-relative. “Two men will be in the field; one will be taken, the other left.” (Matthew 24:40) Connections won’t do.

The only way to be prepared to meet the Lord in death or in judgment is with a clean conscience. The only way for a sinner to have a clean conscience is through Jesus the crucified and resurrected Savior. In Him you are forgiven! Hold to Him by faith every day. Then you are ready!

Lord, grant that through faith in Jesus, I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a man who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord’s money.” Matthew 25:14-18

The Parable of the Talents: How Are You Using Your Gifts?

The Parable of the Talents is a study in faithfulness. A talent was a measure of weight for precious metals such as gold or silver—perhaps seventy-five pounds. The point of the parable is faithfulness. The master knew the skill levels of his servants. He allotted to each according to his ability. Quantities differed, but that didn’t matter. These talents were to be used faithfully in the master’s best interest. Later, when the master returned, he was pleased with those who had served faithfully.

The Lord gives to each of us different skills, gifts, and talents. There is no point in arrogantly or resentfully comparing ourselves with others. You are as God has made you. Faithfully use what you have been given—physical strength, intelligence, personality, stamina, skills with the hands, social ease, a soft heart, wealth, etc. He wants you to use them for yourself and others, always in service to life in His kingdom of forgiveness in Jesus.

The master in the parable was displeased with his “wicked and lazy” servant who didn’t care. He didn’t even put the money in the bank to draw interest for the master. He buried it. His excuses put the blame on the master! He was shown the door and more—the gates of hell. To squander, waste, or neglect your talents works against the kingdom of Christ the Savior. It displeases the Lord.

The Lord was pleased with the servants who invested their master’s gifts and worked hard at representing him well. Serve the Lord faithfully in your station in life. He has given you life, forgiveness, and blessings. Use them to extend His kingdom.

Lord, forgive my sins and count me faithful through Jesus. Amen.

Weekend Rest Journal

1. Parables usually have one main focal point. We should avoid pressing the details of a parable too far to make other points. In the Parable of the Ten Virgins, circle the statement(s) below that look accurate and cross out the one(s) which seem to be pressing the parable too far.
 - a. Christians should wait patiently at street corners for the Lord to return.
 - b. On the last day, 5 out of 10 (50%) will go to heaven and 50% to hell.
 - c. The Lord will return at night.
 - d. After Judgment Day, there will be no further access to heaven.

2. Usually the verses preceding a parable help indicate the main point. Look up the familiar parable of The Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14). Based on the opening verse, what is the main point that Jesus is driving at?
 - a. It is better to take a place toward the back of the church.
 - b. Fasting and tithing are displeasing to God.
 - c. To trust oneself for righteousness and heaven is always a mistake.
 - d. Tax collectors were saved, Pharisees were not.

Answers: 1. a,b,c,d 2. c

Then I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun. And behold, I saw the tears of the oppressed and that they had no one to comfort them; and power was on the side of their oppressors, but they had no one to comfort them. So I congratulated the dead who are already dead, more than the living who are still living. But better off than both of them is the one who has never existed, who has never seen the evil activity that is done under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 4:1-3 NASB

The Reality of God's Victory Over Oppression

Looking at things from an earthly perspective, Solomon is dismayed. As the news media give us an earthly perspective of the world, we may have the same discouragement. Ukraine, Russia, China, the Middle East: these names speak to us of misery and death at the hands of oppressors. Also, in our major cities, there is death and destruction. Then there is the quasi-war at our southern border.

It seems so hopeless. Do the oppressors have all the power? Is there no comfort for the oppressed? From a worldly point of view, Solomon tells us that the oppressed are better off dead than suffering. Even better off is the one who never existed. In the midst of his suffering, Job said, "May the day perish on which I was born." (Job 3:3)

That's the earthly view of the oppressed. However, the eyes of faith see the reality. The power is not in the hands of the oppressor but in the hands of God. And, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31) Truly, God is for us. He sacrificed His own Son for us. Jesus lived for us; He died for us; He rose again for us. This means that we have the victory over every oppressor and every kind of oppression. We have forgiveness, life, and salvation. Therefore, Job also said, "I know that my Redeemer lives." (19:25)

And take they our life, Goods, fame, child, and wife;
Let these all be gone. They yet have nothing won;
The Kingdom ours remaineth.

The Lutheran Hymnal 262:4

I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is the result of rivalry between a person and his neighbor. This too is futility and striving after wind. The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind.
Ecclesiastes 4:4-6 NASB

Earthly Riches vs. Heavenly Riches

There are two fools in this text: the one who works his head off trying to make a lot of money and the one who wants money without having to work for it. Both want money and they are envious of one another in the pursuit of it. Envy is such a powerful motivation; it afflicts almost everyone who wants to get rich. But it is “futility and striving after wind,” because money is vaporous. Just like the clouds, sooner or later riches will dissipate.

On the one hand, there are those who work like crazy to lure customers away from their competitors or who try to cheat their customers. Whatever it takes to make a buck. On the other hand, there are those who want to get something for nothing: gamblers and those who freeload off the government or dad and mom. Anything to make money without working.

The right way of life is revealed in Genesis 3. First, God gives a reason for living by declaring salvation for sinners through the Seed of the woman. Next, God tells them how to live out the saved life. Daily life will involve hard labor. For the woman, the fruit of her work will be children. For the man, it will be the fruit of the ground.

Knowing that our true riches are forgiveness, life, and salvation through Jesus Christ, we can face our daily lives without the lust for riches. Rather, “If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content.” (1 Timothy 6:8 NASB)

O Lord, “Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is my portion.” Amen. (Proverbs 30:8 NASB)

Then I looked again at futility under the sun. There was a man without a dependent, having neither a son nor a brother, yet there was no end to all his labor. Indeed, his eyes were not satisfied with riches, and he never asked, "And for whom do I labor and deprive myself of pleasure?" This too is futility, and it is an unhappy task. Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor; for if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up! Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart. Ecclesiastes 4:7-12 NASB

Working Together

God did not create man to be a loner. In Eden, God said, «It is not good that man should be alone.» (Genesis 2:18) Man was made to share the labor and its fruits. No one has all of the gifts nor should he hoard the fruits. We all benefit from the gifts that God has given to others. The world functions only when we work together and share. The Church functions only when we work together and share. It is an empty and grievous task to "go it alone." "Two is better than one... A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart."

The only one who HAD TO work completely on His own was Christ. No one assisted Him as He paid the price for our sins. Even His Father forsook Him. Now that the price is paid and our sins are forgiven, we work together with Christ and each other to spread this Gospel. No one spreads the Gospel alone.

Lord, who brought us here, together,
Brethren of one family,
You have made us gifted members
Of our Church, the "CLC."
Help us now and in the future,
That in love forever we
May find help in one another
And share all Your gifts so free.

John K. Pfeiffer

Guard your steps as you go to the house of God, and approach to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know that they are doing evil. Ecclesiastes 5:1 NASB

Approach God's House to Listen

People who go to NFL games often do much to prepare themselves: food for tailgating; team clothing; face painting; peculiar headgear. Money, energy, and time are dedicated to preparing for this sporting event. How do you prepare yourself for a much greater event? In Solomon's day, the Jews went to the temple to offer a sacrifice. Some of them went thoughtlessly through the motions, offering "the sacrifice of fools." To them, Solomon says, "Watch your step. You are doing evil."

To present day church-goers, also, Solomon speaks: "Guard your steps as you go to the house of God." In the "olden days," church bells rang on Saturday night, reminding fathers to prepare their families for worship. They read the Bible to them and joined in prayers and hymns. The next morning they dressed in their "Sunday-go-to-meeting" clothes. All of this served as solemn preparation for Sunday worship. It helped them to "approach to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools." Sadly, such customs have fallen into disuse. On Saturday, do you meditate on Sunday worship? Do you wear clothing that shows your respect?

How should we "guard our steps as we go to the house of God"? Solomon talks not about the outward things, but about the inward. "Approach to listen." This means that as we are going to church, we need to ponder our reasons for going, namely, to hear, learn, reaffirm, praise, and pray. The Lord is always with us, but in the worship service He is there in a special way. This is where His called servants glorify Him by proclaiming His Word and we respond with prayer and praise.

Next Saturday, think about Sunday. If the bulletin is online, look at it. Study the readings. Examine the context of the sermon text. Pray for a proper frame of mind. Thank God that you have a faithful church to attend.

**God is in His temple--All within keep silence,
Prostrate lie with deepest rev'ence.**

The Lutheran Hymnal 4:1

Do not be quick with your mouth or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few... When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for He takes no delight in fools. Ecclesiastes 5:2,4

Take Care with Your Words

In the last devotion, the Spirit admonished us to watch our step when we enter the house of God. Now, He issues a warning: when you go to God's house, be careful what you say and what you promise to Him.

Have you kept your confirmation vows, installation vows, or wedding vows? How often we promise henceforth to amend our sinful lives. Many of our prayers contain promises. Remember: this is the GOD OF HEAVEN to whom we earth-bound creatures make promises. We need to fear Him and choose our words carefully. Once we have made a promise, we should not delay to keep it.

Frail, earthly beings often do not keep their promises. However, God Almighty in the heavens does not fail to keep His promises. "Has He spoken, and will He not make it good?" (Numbers 23:19) As surely as the Son of God died on the cross, so surely, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9) Therefore, in reverence to God and with well chosen words, confess your failures to Him. God will faithfully keep His promises. Indeed, His justice requires that He forgive us.

Then, completely cleansed, exercise care in expressing your overwhelming gratitude. Don't promise what you cannot do. As for what you do promise, rest on the strength that only God can give.

When we our vows today recall, Renew us all, dear Savior.
 And when we promise to be true, May we forget it never!
 Yet, we are weak and frail When Satan's hosts assail.
 Forgive us in Your sight And grant that in the fight
 We unto death be faithful!

The Lutheran Hymnal 337:3 (adapted)

Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile.

Psalm 32:1,2

Penitence is a Good Thing

Visitors to our services have sometimes said that they are put off by the confession of sins. They are uncomfortable calling themselves “poor, miserable sinners” and saying that for their sins they deserve “temporal and eternal punishment.” We understand their discomfort at these words, for in the confession of sins we apply God’s holy Law to ourselves, and that does not put us at ease.

But why do we subject ourselves to this, Sunday after Sunday? It is that we may know and acknowledge the truth about ourselves as we are taught in the Scriptures. By nature we are poor, miserable sinners. It is necessary that when we approach God we do so as penitent sinners.

Psalm 32 shows us penitence as a good and wholesome thing, for it teaches that all who repent of their sins have the incalculable blessing of the forgiveness of all their sins. Their sins are not charged against them, and they never will be; no, not even on the Day of Judgment, for Christ paid for them all with His atoning death. For this reason we use the penitential psalms in our Lenten worship. With them we approach the cross of Christ confessing our sins. We humble ourselves before the cross, knowing that it was because of our sins that He suffered and died as we see Him do in the passion history.

In the coming week, as our introduction to Lent, we will consider the words of this great penitential psalm of David.

Almighty and everlasting God, create in us contrite hearts, that lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness we may receive from You full pardon and forgiveness through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord. Amen.

When I kept silent, my bones grew old through my groaning all the day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was turned into the drought of summer. I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD." and You forgave the iniquity of my sin. Psalm 32:3-5

The Harm in Hiding

After exclaiming the blessed state of the forgiven sinner, King David warns about the dangers of impenitence. It is the way of our sinful nature to try to deal with our sins by hiding them. We don't want to admit that we have done wrong and are afraid of God's wrath and punishment. Perhaps, we reason, we can avoid the consequences of our sins by hiding them.

In Psalm 32, David is looking back on his experiences recorded in 2 Samuel 11. He is recalling his sins of adultery and murder, his attempts to cover them up, and finally his repentance and assurance of forgiveness. He shares with his readers the understanding that he has gained.

David describes the wretched experience of trying to hide his sins. The result was an extreme inner discomfort that he describes as the aging and shriveling of his very bones, a misery that he expressed with deep groaning and from which he experienced no relief. Looking back on all this, David realizes that it was the LORD's hand that was pressing down on him. God loved David and would not let him rest in a false peace.

Let us learn from David and freely confess our sins to God every day, for we daily sin much. And if there is a particular sin that is troubling us, then without delay we need to acknowledge it before God that we may rejoice in the assurance that the sin that we were tempted to hide is covered by the blood of Christ.

Father, we give thanks for the assurance that the blood of Your Son Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin. Amen (1 John 1:7)

For this cause everyone who is godly shall pray to You. In a time when You may be found; Surely in a flood of great waters They shall not come near him. Psalm 32:6

Timely Repentance

Divine judgment approaches like advancing flood waters. Yet today God offers forgiveness to penitent sinners, an astonishingly gracious offer: “Your sins have been paid for by the sacrifice of God’s own Son. You owe nothing. You will not be punished for anything you have thought, said, or done.”

But the door of God’s grace in Christ will not remain open forever. There is a time of grace that God allots to us all, a time to repent of our sins, to believe the Gospel and trust in Christ for salvation. That time of grace will end when we die or when Christ comes again, and we do not know the day or the hour of either of those events.

The psalmist David here addresses the godly believers in Christ, encouraging us to live lives of repentance. This means daily confessing our sinfulness to God and by faith taking hold of the forgiveness that He offers in the Gospel. He is urging us not to do what he did, not to fall into sin and then put off repentance. This happens when a believer falls into sin and, instead of repenting, continues in the sin, staying away from church and neglecting personal prayer and Bible reading so as not to be rebuked by God’s Law.

David knew the danger in delaying repentance. He also knew the peace of forgiveness. It is to that peace that he wants to lead us. The “flood of great waters” is coming, but they will not come near those who trust in the blood of Jesus Christ.

Dear Jesus Christ, we bow in humble thanksgiving for Your assurance that all who trust in You have already passed from death to life. Amen. (John 5:24)

*I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will guide you with My eye. Do not be like the horse or like
the mule, which have no understanding. Psalm 32:8, 9*

Listening to Divine Instruction

Those with a reputation for extraordinary knowledge or skill in a certain field are much sought after for instruction. They can also charge a lot of money to share what they know. In our psalm it is God Himself offering to instruct and teach us. We don't have to come to Him and beg Him to take us on as students. We don't have to offer to pay Him any tuition at all. He wants us to be His students and urges us to attend His school.

The subject matter of His instruction is "the way you should go." Isn't this just what we need? There are many subjects that may not interest us, but we all need to know the way we should go in life. We all care about our future and need guidance. What does God offer to do for us? He says that He will guide us with His eye. We have limited vision when it comes to our future, which is why we are often puzzled about it. But God has perfect vision, knows all things, and sees the future as clearly as the present.

Don't be like a horse or mule, God says, refusing to turn or budge in the direction that it is led. Listen to instruction from the Divine Teacher. He comes to us in His Word, offering us life and salvation through the cross of Christ. He points us to a future of blessed fellowship with God, already in this life and in the eternal life to come.

Lord, we come to you in Your passion, death, and resurrection,
for You alone have the words of eternal life. Amen. (John 6:68)

Many sorrows shall be to the wicked; But he who trusts in the Lord, mercy shall surround him. Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous; And shout for joy, all you upright in heart! Psalm 32:10, 11

Surrounded by Mercy

In these verses the Lord sets before us the prospect of being surrounded by His mercy. This is the blessed state of all who trust in Him. It is mercy that hems them in on all sides. Consider what this means. If you look behind you, you see your past with its sorrows, trials, failures, and sins. But if God's mercy surrounds you, looking back you see His mercy. You see how God brought you through all those troubles, how He preserved you in the Christian faith and comforted you with the Gospel. If you look to either side you see the troubles of the present, the problems that seem to have no solution and the needs that you have. But because the Lord's mercy surrounds you, you also see His promise to help you and provide for you. If you look ahead of you to the future, you face uncertainty. If you are young, you wonder where life will take you. If you are old, you wonder how many days you have left and what trials you may yet see. But because God's mercy surrounds you, you see that He will accompany you to the end, whether your remaining days are many or few.

With this faith comes gladness and rejoicing. This is an exultant rejoicing that is unlimited by time or circumstances. This kind of joy and gladness belongs to all who are righteous by faith in Christ who died for us and rose again. It belongs to all who are upright in heart; that is, all who enjoy the blessedness of the forgiveness of sins.

Lord Jesus, by Your blessed passion, death, and resurrection give us that joy that no one can take from us. Amen. (John 16:22)

“I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours. And all Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine, and I am glorified in them.”

John 17:9-10

God Prays to God for You

One of the great blessings that Jesus’ death and resurrection won for us is the gift of prayer—that we are able to call upon the Creator of the universe at any time, day or night. We can talk to God like our loving Father and He promises to hear and answer our prayers.

However, our prayers often fall short and fail to be granted, not because God fails but because of our own failings. The Apostle Paul says, “We do not know what we should pray for as we ought.” (Romans 8:26) And James, the brother of Jesus, tells us “You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.” (James 4:3)

How wonderful it is then, to know that Jesus prays for you. When Jesus says, “I pray for them,” in the verse above, He is talking about the disciples sitting in the room with Him. But then in verse 20 He says, “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word.” This is how Jesus is praying for you.

Listen to His words: “I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours. And all Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine, and I am glorified in them.” Treasure those words! You belong to Jesus and the Father. Jesus is God and has paid the highest price to make you God’s own. When God prays to God on our behalf, we can be absolutely certain that those prayers will be granted because Jesus and the Father are in perfect harmony and agreement and you are precious to Him. He has everything invested in you. Jesus always and only prays according to His Father’s will, therefore His prayers cannot fail.

My dear Lord Jesus, thank You for praying for me according to the Father’s will. Your will is always good and right. Amen

“Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are. While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.” John 17:11-12

Jesus Prays for Your Preservation

Notice Jesus does not pray for your health. He does not pray for your daily bread or any physical blessing. Jesus prays for the preservation of your faith. Jesus knows what you are up against. He says, “Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You.” He knows all the tactics of the world to lead you astray. He also knows, “The world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.” (v.14) So He prays for God the Father to keep you.

We see how powerful Jesus’ prayer is when He told Peter, “Satan has asked for you that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail.” (Luke 22:31-32) Peter failed when he denied His Lord, but God kept his faith from failing entirely. Jesus restored him to faith and repentance and apostleship.

Isn’t it wonderful to know that Jesus prays for you this way? This is our greatest need. Shouldn’t we also pray earnestly and daily that God will keep ourselves and our loved ones from the perversions of the world?

Notice that God keeps us through His name. God’s name is everything He reveals to us about Himself. The more we know about God the more He draws us closer to Himself. Solomon says “The name of the Lord is a strong tower; The righteous run to it and are safe.” (Proverbs 18:10) God’s name is only revealed in His Word.

Gracious Father, I am weak. May I run to You daily in your Word, to find my refuge and strength in Your name. Amen.

“But now I come to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.” John 17:13-14

Jesus Prays for Your Joy

Yes, the world may hate you because you are not part of the world. Just speak openly what God says about homosexuality and you will see how the world hates you. Yet we still have joy in Christ. Jesus says His joy is fulfilled in us.

Nehemiah said to the people, “Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” (Nehemiah 8:10) Jesus gives us HIS joy. We can see how strong that is when we read Hebrews 12:2: “looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” The joy that was set before Him, namely the joy of fulfilling His Father’s will and accomplishing our salvation, was so great that He was able to endure the pain and shame of the cross for us. With that joy of Christ in your heart you will receive incredible strength to withstand the wiles of the devil and the temptations of the world.

It is the joy of being loved and accepted by God, the joy of God’s grace and forgiveness, the joy of eternal life. Such joy gives the strength to endure any and every sorrow and trial in this life as we serve the Lord with gladness, awaiting our eternal home with Him. There is so much joy in having a life with God that the apostles even rejoiced “that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.” (Acts 5:41)

Lord, You have said Your joy is fulfilled in us through the “things that you speak in the world.” May Your Word dwell in our hearts that our joy may be full. Amen.

“I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth.” John 17:15-19

Jesus Prays for Your Sanctification

To be sanctified means to be set apart for a special purpose. By bringing us to faith in Jesus Christ, God has set us apart from the world. As Jesus says, “They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.”

God’s Word of truth exposes the corruption of the world which separates one from God and leads to misery and eternal condemnation. He says, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.” (1 John 2:15-17)

For what special purpose has He set us apart? “As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.” God sent Jesus into the world to save the world. Jesus sends us into the world to give that salvation to all.

We need the sanctifying power of the Word to strengthen and equip us to carry out our God given purpose of glorifying His name in the world. We glorify His name when we show His love in the way we deal with others, especially our enemies. All this gives opportunities to tell people about the loving God who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light.

**Dear Father, help me continue in Your word of truth and sanctify me, so that I may glorify your holy name in the world.
Amen**

“I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.”

John 17:20-21

Jesus Prays for Our Unity

This is the second time Jesus prays for our unity in fellowship. In verse 11 He prayed for His Father to “keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are.” Then again in the verses for today, 20-21. When we are sanctified by His Word of truth, God blesses us with a unity of faith and fellowship.

God has brought us together in this fellowship of true unity so that we can encourage and strengthen each other. When Jesus told Peter that He prayed for him that his faith would not fail, Jesus added, “and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren.” (Luke 22:32) Peter was overwhelmed with Jesus’ love to restore him after denying Him. He did not want to ever deny Jesus like that again. Jesus wanted him to share his experience of Jesus’ love and forgiveness with other believers to strengthen them.

That is what our fellowship is about. God urges, “Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.” (Hebrews 10:23-25) Our unity in the Word is a tremendous blessing.

Notice it is not only for our own strengthening but “that the world may believe that You sent Me.” When the world sees the love and care for each other that happens where there is true unity, they are drawn to discover what holds them together.

Lord, keep us steadfast in Your Word, that in true unity of the Spirit we may strengthen and support one another in love. Amen.

Weekend Rest Journal

1. Jesus said, "Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:32) We can be certain that Jesus' prayer for us will be granted because God desires nothing more than to preserve you from the world and bring you to Himself in Paradise.
2. Read Ephesians 1:3-14 and write the amazing spiritual blessings which God has graciously given to us through Jesus Christ.

vs. 3-4

vs. 5-6

vs. 7-8

vs. 9-10

vs. 11-12

vs. 13-14

And he will show you a large upper room furnished; prepare the Passover meal there. Luke 22:12 ESV

Upper Room – Jesus vs. Jesus

While we might not really know exactly where all of these events occurred or how they appeared, what happened at these locations altered human history. During this time Jesus was battling the powers of darkness, Satan, temptations, His own desires, and all this was for our eternal salvation. This week we will focus on Jesus' confrontations at five different locations during Holy Week.

We're not sure how the disciples were arranged around the table in the upper room, but what was done there was far more important. Jesus gave us the blessed sacrament of Holy Communion to assure us of the forgiveness of our sins. He also gave us a new commandment. He said to them, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35)

It often seems the demands of others on our time, talent, and treasure are just too much. We'd like nothing more than to unplug awhile and simply take care of ourselves. That's because we are a selfish lot by nature—yet, Jesus reminds us that He loves everyone. He died for everyone. Likewise, He commands us to love everyone. In two short sentences Jesus instructs us to love one another three times. And Jesus doesn't leave it up to us to decide how much we ought to love others but He gives us the qualifying phrase, "just as I have loved you." Not much room for self-centered behavior at all.

Jesus did not look out for Himself in this world. He left Himself in the care of the Father and looked out for the best interests of others even to the point of sacrificing Himself for sinners like you and me.

Oh, that all people would know that we are Jesus' disciples by the love we have for one another! Holy Spirit grant it! Amen.

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane.

Matthew 26:36 ESV

Garden of Gethsemane – Jesus Will vs. My Will

I know my strengths and positive attributes. Yes, I know my weaknesses and frailties too. Others close to me will know these things about me as well. But the secret longings and desires of my heart, unless I share them, are known only to me, and of course, the Lord. God knows our secret thoughts before they are even formed in our minds. If we are honest with ourselves, we know that our will or desire often does not align with His.

We work hard. We suffer and sacrifice in this life. Is it too much to ask for some pet desires to come our way even if they may be outside of God's will? Couldn't God just overlook these little indiscretions? Doesn't God want me to be happy? Yes, God wants us to be eternally happy! He knows the passing pleasures of this world are nothing compared to the blessings He has in store for us. He also knows that sin serves as a wedge between us and Himself. He would have us confess our sins and turn from them.

That is why in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed, "Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done." (Luke 22:42b) Jesus was asking that the cup of humiliation and suffering would pass from Him and perhaps another avenue of salvation be found. But God was adamant. Jesus' path of suffering, crucifixion, and death was the only way for the payment of sins and salvation of mankind. So Jesus bent His will to that of His heavenly Father's.

May the Lord help us see His will, which desires our eternal salvation, and shape our will and desires accordingly.

**Go to dark Gethsemane, Ye that feel the Tempter's pow'r;
Your Redeemer's conflict see, Watch with Him one bitter hour;
Turn not from His griefs away, Learn of Jesus Christ to pray.**

The Lutheran Hymnal 159:1

Then they seized Jesus and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. Luke 22:54 ESV

Palace of the High Priest – Jesus vs. Religion

It is surprising how many people claim to be “spiritual” or even religious yet have no knowledge of God, His Word, or His designs for mankind. Man-made religions can be a vehicle for presenting God to the world, but if “religion” becomes our focus, our message will be muddled at best, and at worst may lead others away from God.

The Jews of the Old Testament had direct revelation from God concerning His will and His Word. The prophets received His Word and transmitted it to the people. Their worship and manner of life were clearly spelled out by the LORD in His Word. However, by the time of Christ, many of the Jewish leaders had made their religion their focus. No longer were they focusing on God and His plan of salvation but rather, priority was given to how they were following God and keeping His commands in comparison to others. This is why these Jews, preserved by God to proclaim the Messiah to the world, rejected God’s very Son when He came to them. Jesus preached in their synagogues and temple. He worked miracles and fulfilled all that His heavenly Father commanded Him. Yet, when the very Son of God stood before the High Priest and Jewish council He was not accepted because He didn’t fit their perception of religion.

Earthly churches are important, valuable, precious even. However, if our focus ever becomes our religion, the way we do things for God, we have lost sight of God’s truth. The Holy Scriptures from beginning to end focus on Jesus, Jesus, and only Jesus. What Jesus has done for us is our sure hope of salvation. His life, His death, His resurrection make us heirs of heaven.

May our worship and the focus of our faith and our Christian practice be ever and always focused on Jesus and His work for all mankind.

Lord Jesus, help, Thy Church uphold,
 For we are sluggish, thoughtless, cold.
 Oh, prosper well Thy Word of grace
 And spread its truth in ev’ry place.

The Lutheran Hymnal 292:3

Pilate brought Jesus out to Gabbatha. John 19:13 ESV

Gabbatha – Jesus vs. Public Opinion

Public opinion is a fickle thing and yet we often get caught up in it, not wanting to be considered an outsider or member of a fringe group. Jesus was popular as well as notorious during His lifetime. People followed Him, plotted against Him, loved, hated, despised and believed Him.

This led Pontius Pilate into a problem. Tumults were arising because of this Jesus. After questioning Jesus, Pilate determined He was innocent of any crime. Yet, public opinion was mounting against him. The Jewish leaders and crowd were crying for Jesus' blood. So on the Gabbatha, the public pavement porch, Pilate caved to the pressure. He sentenced Jesus to death by crucifixion.

Jesus didn't need to wet his finger to find which way the wind was blowing. He didn't need a focus group or public poll to figure out what He should say or do. Jesus came to reveal truth. "I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." (John 18:37b) True power is not with men but comes from heaven. Jesus had come from heaven to accomplish His work of salvation. He would return there when His work was finished. All who would believe the truth of Jesus' sacrifice for their sins will one day arrive safely in heaven as well.

Jesus stood up for the truth and fulfilled His work so that we can stand righteous before God. When public opinion cries out against us, when popular ideas that run contrary to God's Word pull at our hearts, may we stand with Jesus. Trust the Holy Spirit to give you the words to defend your faith and give you the courage to stand until Christ returns.

Are there no foes for me to face? Must I not stem the flood?

Is this vile world a friend to grace To help me on to God?

Sure I must fight if I would reign; Increase my courage, Lord!

I'll bear the toil, endure the pain, Supported by Thy Word.

The Lutheran Hymnal 445:3-4

And they brought him (Jesus) to the place called Golgotha.

Mark 15:22 ESV

Golgotha – Jesus vs. Death

“In this world, nothing is certain except death and taxes.” The years seem to have proven Ben Franklin spot on. Not only has the number and amount of our taxes grown over the centuries but mankind is surely no closer to finding a “cure” for death. The moment we are conceived the clock begins ticking away our moments. In our younger years it is easy to put off thoughts of death as a dim prospect in the distant future. As we age however, the relentless march of time, the inevitable loss of loved ones, the breakdown of mind and body, cause the specter of the grave to loom large and definite.

Most people don’t know when their death will come but Jesus knew His was at hand. Rather than waiting for time and circumstances to carry Him to some foregone conclusion, Jesus relentlessly marched toward death. Jesus knew that His death was the only acceptable payment for the sins of the world. He knew that His sacrifice on the cross on the hill of Golgotha was what His Father required. Jesus knew that His death would be the death of death itself. When Jesus surrendered His spirit to His Father He was swallowed by death. But in actuality, Jesus gutted death from the inside. His resurrection turned death into a hollow shell, a shadow in the valley we need no longer fear.

Jesus’ death and resurrection are our death and resurrection as well. Our sins were nailed to the cross. In our baptism we died with Him and His glorious resurrection is proof that we too have already been raised to new life in Him. Death must now serve us. Death may still be certain, yet now it is merely the doorway to paradise and our Lord Jesus awaits us just on the other side.

Thy death, not mine, O Christ, Has paid the ransom due;
 Ten thousand deaths like mine Would have been all too few.
 To whom save Thee, who canst alone
 For sin atone, Lord, shall I flee?

The Lutheran Hymnal 380:4

“May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard it. Mark 11:14 ESV

Quiet Monday

For us, many Mondays are “quiet” because we’ve had a busy Saturday and Sunday.

For Jesus, the first day of the week (Palm Sunday) was indeed a busy day, beginning with his ride into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey’s colt. After a busy day, Jesus retraced the steps of the colt back over the Mount of Olives, returning to the village of Bethany, the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. (Mark 11:11)

The next morning Jesus and His disciples returned to Jerusalem. Along the way they came upon a fig tree having no fruit. The fig tree had spent all its energy producing leaves, not figs. Jesus said: “Let no one eat fruit from you ever again.” It wasn’t a loud sermon, but a quiet word on the way.

The noise on Monday of Holy Week didn’t come from Jesus, but from those who exchanged money and sold pigeons in the temple. There was a place for sales, but it wasn’t in the temple. The temple was to be a place of quiet meditation and prayer. The loud haggling made that difficult, if not impossible. Jesus drove the earthly-minded loudmouths from the Temple courts.

Today let’s make it a quiet day. Let’s take some time for quiet meditation on God’s Word. Let’s speak with our God in prayer. The shouts of “Hosanna” still ring in our ears, and they remind us that God hears our prayers because Jesus went the way of the cross and the grave. He is God’s Anointed Savior.

**Bowed down beneath a load of sin, By Satan sorely pressed,
By wars without and fears within, I come to Thee for rest.**

The Lutheran Hymnal 456:3

“Have faith in God. Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” Mark 11:22–24 ESV

Busy Tuesday

Jesus and His disciples had returned to Bethany Monday evening. In the morning they made their way back to Jerusalem and along the way noticed the fruitless fig tree was dead, withered away.

Matthew and Mark, both tell us that Jesus took the opportunity to teach His students of the strength of faith – when its object is the Living God. Jesus doesn’t instruct us to go out and curse fruit trees. He does confirm that if what we ask is in agreement with God’s Word it will be done. Faith’s strength comes from its object. If the object of your faith is the Living God and it is His will, mountains can move. Prayer is powerful because the Living God is powerful and answers prayer.

Tuesday of Holy Week was a busy day for Jesus. He didn’t only teach His students; He also curtly corrected the religious leaders. He told a parable to the religious leaders pointing out that they were all “yes men” but in reality, didn’t do God’s will. He also taught the people.

Today let’s block out all the noise and listen to the Savior. Let’s take some time to thank Him for all that He has done to make us His children. Then God helps us to open our mouths to speak of His glory.

**Take my voice and let me sing Always, only, for my King;
Take my lips and let them be Filled with messages from Thee.**

The Lutheran Hymnal 400:3

Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread drew near, which is called the Passover. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to put him to death, for they feared the people. Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was of the number of the twelve. He went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers how he might betray him to them.

Luke 22:1-4 ESV

Silent Wednesday

When you take what each of the Gospel writers says about the events of Holy Week, it's difficult to say with certainty what exactly happened each day. We shouldn't let this bother us, because it matters less when these things took place than the fact that they did.

Judas Iscariot had been a disciple of Jesus for some time. He was sent out by the Savior to preach the Good News of the Kingdom with the others. He witnessed many of the miracles of Jesus. He heard Jesus' word for perhaps 3 years. While we are given little insight into what was happening in Judas' head, it seems clear that he no longer believed that Jesus was the Messiah and instead money had become his god. He went to the chief priests and scribes and discussed how he might betray Jesus to them.

It's easy for us to look at Judas with contempt. It's easy for us to tell ourselves that we would never have betrayed Jesus. If we think such things because we rest on our strength and willpower, let us beware. Satan is more than our match should we try to go one on one. There is a traitor within each of us. We call him the old Adam and he needs to be beat back every day.

Praise God that the Spirit of God enables the new man to do just that by taking up the sword of the Spirit. Let us seek His help halfway through the week, that we may be prepared to witness the ultimate sacrifice and to rejoice in our freedom.

Oh, let Thy sufferings give me pow'r
To meet the last and darkest hour!
Thy blood refresh and comfort me;
Thy bonds and fetters make me free.

The Lutheran Hymnal 148:4

Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat it." Luke 22:7–8 ESV

Maundy Thursday

We celebrate it on a Thursday. It's a national holiday upon which many eat special foods like turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes and gravy, and pumpkin or sweet potato pie. The menu may be different in your home, but we all celebrate Thanksgiving Day.

They began their celebration on a Thursday. That was when each household took the lamb they had purchased, sacrificed it, and prepared its flesh over fire. They ate it with special symbolic foods, bitter herbs, and unleavened bread. It was a time for remembrance, a national holiday for the Jews.

It was an opportunity to remember the past, how the Passover lamb's blood had delivered them from death and resulted in their departure from Egyptian slavery. It was an opportunity to remember God's rescue and discuss it as a family group. No doubt Jesus and His disciples celebrated a traditional Passover meal when they gathered on Maundy Thursday. No doubt they remembered and discussed God's great deliverance by means of the blood of the lamb.

Then Jesus took bread and broke it and gave it to them. "This is my body," He said. Jesus took a cup of grape wine at the close of the meal and said, "This is my blood."

We still take up the bread and the cup today and remember that He gave His body and His blood to deliver us from death eternal. We listen carefully and know that He speaks to each of us personally. "This is my body given for you."

**Search not how this takes place, This wondrous mystery;
God can accomplish vastly more than seemeth plain to thee.**

The Lutheran Hymnal 310:4

“They cried out, ‘Away with him, away with him, crucify him!’ Pilate said to them, ‘Shall I crucify your King?’ The chief priests answered, ‘We have no king but Caesar.’ So he delivered him over to them to be crucified. John 19:15–16 ESV

Good Friday

Wow... talk about a 180-degree change. I'm not talking about the weather.

On the first day of the week, a crowd went in front of Jesus from Bethany to Jerusalem and another crowd came out to meet Him from Jerusalem shouting, “Hosanna, Son of David!” They greeted Him as the Messiah King and called upon Him to save them.

Six days later a mob abandoned the same Messiah King. He was bleeding profusely dressed in a robe and wearing a crown of thorns. They beat him with a faux scepter. They declared their allegiance to the Roman Emperor in their hatred of Jesus: “We have no king but Caesar.”

It was like they had turned into the Israelites who wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Who complained about everything. Who accused God of seeking to kill them. Who longed for their years of slavery.

But in rejecting the King when He came, the Jewish mob laid waste to their future. They rejected the only one who could deliver them from sin and eternal death. Fair-weather citizens.

We count Him our king, even when beaten and bloodied. We know that He bears our sin and guilt.

O sacred Head, now wounded,
With grief and shame weighed down,

Now scornfully surrounded
With thorns, Thine only crown.

O sacred Head, what glory,
What bliss till now was Thine!

Yet, tho' despised and gory,
I joy to call Thee mine.

The Lutheran Hymnal 172:1

“Why do you seek the living among the dead?” Luke 24:5

Why Would Jesus Be Here?

The women were lost in despair and grief. They went to the last place anyone had seen Jesus: dead in the tomb. But the angel’s question was: “Why would He be here? Why didn’t you understand and believe what Jesus had promised? He is living and not dead!” The women should have known. They heard Him tell them several times that He would die and rise again.

Why didn’t they believe and understand? Because what they had seen on Good Friday filled their hearts with fear, grief, despair, and loss. Where should they have looked? To Jesus’ Word! The angels said, “Remember how He spoke to you.”

All too often, when our faith is weak and full of doubts, we look for Jesus in all the wrong places. Where are we supposed to find Jesus? Dead in the grave? No, we find Him alive in the Gospel. We find Him in the Word that is preached to us. We find Him in our Bibles. We find Him in our Baptism and in the Lord’s Supper.

The angels told these women to remember what Jesus had said to them. They told them to remember the Gospel: Jesus died and rose for them. The great irony of the resurrection is that Jesus is not found where people expect Him to be. Instead, He’s found right where He said He would be: in His promises, in the Gospel, not someplace else.

The Scripture says that after seeing the empty tomb, “they remembered His words.” Suddenly, it all came flooding back to them. The power of the Holy Spirit through the Word creates, strengthens, and clarifies faith. And what did they remember? They remembered the promise of everlasting life. That’s where the power is, in His Word, and when these women heard it, they believed it and they ran to tell the disciples. (Luke 24:9)

Dear Jesus, in our doubts, fears, and worries, may we always remember that You are alive again and look to Your Word for strength, comfort, peace, and joy. Amen.

“Why are you weeping?” John 20:15

Slow of Heart to Believe!

Mary Magdalene is emotionally distraught—filled with fear and confusion, tears and sorrow. What happened to the Lord’s body? The tomb is empty. The body of Jesus is gone! By this question Jesus is really asking, “Mary, why don’t you open your eyes of faith and see what is clearly before you? The empty tomb, the presence of God’s angels, the linen bands lying as they are, and the head covering neatly folded? Don’t these things remind you of My words and My promise: “On the third day I will rise again”? All of this was lost on Mary. Like the other disciples, she too was slow of heart to believe.

Before we shake our heads too much and wonder, “how in the world couldn’t she have remembered,” all we have to do is look at ourselves. We’re in this same picture. This conversation could be one with each of us. Jesus could be asking us just about every day: “Brother, sister, why are you weeping, why are you so sad today, so depressed, so despairing, so worried, so burdened with cares?”

Sad to say, in our troubles and trials we often do not remember the promises and assurances Jesus gives to us in His word, just like Mary. Preoccupied with our own troubles and heartaches, trials and losses, fears and distresses, we fail to see a risen Savior, One who lives forever and gives us through His Word comfort, peace, joy, strength, and courage; but instead, we act as if Jesus were still dead and lost to us.

There are many reasons why we weep in this world, because this world is a valley of sorrows. But ultimately we also know that those tears will turn to joy. We know that, by His resurrection, Jesus will wipe away every tear from our eyes. Mary needed to learn that and so do we!

**Dear Jesus, when we are filled with tears and sadness, lead us to remember that Jesus lives and comforts us with His powerful Word of love and assures us of everlasting peace with Him.
Amen.**

“Whom are you seeking?” John 20:15

Whom Are We Seeking?

This is Jesus’ second question to Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb. Jesus is saying, “Mary, aren’t you on a futile pursuit—looking for someone who is dead? What did I promise you? Think about what you are doing, looking for the living, resurrected Christ in a grave. Lift up your eyes in the confidence of faith and see a living Savior, never to die again.” Here again, Mary does not understand the deep meaning behind this second question. Do we understand the meaning?

Whom are we seeking? Do we seek the living Jesus in our daily lives? Do we live our lives victorious over sin with a resurrected Christ by our side? Or do we act as if He can’t hear us when we say those mean words to others? Do we act as if He doesn’t know when we think those immoral thoughts? Do we suppose He can’t see us when we do those selfish things that we know are contrary to God’s commandments? Do we act as if Jesus were dead and can’t see our sins of neglecting His Word, not coming to His house to hear His Word, not reading His Word in our daily devotions?

Whom are we seeking? In troubles and trials, seek Jesus’ help in His Word first and foremost. Don’t run to the world for the temporary panaceas of comfort and feel-good counsel. Don’t run away from problems through workaholism. Because He has risen, you can face up to your responsibilities and problems of life. You can be present, communicative, caring, and loving. You might be tempted to blame others, or blame God, or seek self-pity, but the risen Jesus is right here for you to seek, to give you His love and service, so you can serve and love God and others. May we seek a living Jesus through whom we are justified (declared righteous) by the Father and with the power of His resurrection, cause our hearts to leap for joy and not weep for sadness.

Dear Holy Spirit, keep us ever seeking the resurrected Lord Jesus in His Word every day of our lives. Amen.

“What kind of conversation is this that you have with one another as you walk and are sad?” Luke 24:17

Hope to Hearts that Are Disappointed

On Easter evening, as two distraught, confused, extremely sad disciples traveled from Jerusalem to Emmaus, a stranger joined them. The stranger heard their words and saw their animated discussion and sad faces. So this stranger asked them what they were talking about with such a sad countenance. They were talking about the events of the last few days. They explained how Jesus, “a prophet mighty in deed and word,” was condemned and crucified. They ended with these despairing words: “But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel.”

Jesus removed their fears, doubts, sadness, and confusion. He used the Old Testament to show them that the suffering and death of Jesus was God’s plan to save mankind. Their hearts burned within them with confident faith, zeal, love, devotion, courage, and dedication. They ran back that evening to Jerusalem to tell the disciples how they had seen the Lord. They had received comfort and joy to their grieving hearts.

We too are saddened and oftentimes confused by the pressures of daily life, broken relationships, the pain of the death and loss of loved ones, the anxiety of sickness, the emptiness of a meaningless life, the fear and uncertainty of the future, the guilt of sins committed, monetary problems, our workload and job commitments, and a multitude of other problems in life.

The good news is that our Savior comes up beside us in His word and speaks to us. Through His glorious Gospel, Jesus renews our hope, gives us the Spirit’s understanding, and showers us with the comfort and joy of His resurrection. In despondent, bewildering, confused, and distress-filled, sorrowing days He is there with His promises of forgiveness, peace, and eternal life and shows us how it applies to each of us.

Dear Savior, abide with us, speak to us with the joyous and powerful message of Your death and resurrection. Amen.

“Why are you troubled? And why do doubts arise in your hearts?” Luke 24:38

Joy to Troubled and Doubt-filled Hearts

It has now been almost 12 hours since the report of the women that Jesus was alive! But what has been their response? We are told the disciples “did not believe the women for their words seemed like idle tales.” But now, suddenly, as they are gathered behind closed doors, Jesus appears before them all. His first words are “peace to you.” Instead of peace filling their hearts, they were terrified and thought they were seeing a spirit. So Jesus lays this question upon their hearts and ours: “Why are you troubled?”

To remove their doubts and calm their fears, Jesus showed them the marks the tell-tale marks of His nail wounds in His hands and His feet. He says, “Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.” To prove it even further Jesus asks for and receives some food which He then ate for all to see. Now the disciples believe. Why? Not because their minds and eyes told them to, but because the Holy Spirit convinced them through the Word. Two verses after our text we read, “He opened their understanding that they might comprehend the Scriptures.”

To the natural human mind, the resurrection from the dead is an impossible event. Mankind begrudgingly accepts death as a natural process and an end to life. It is inevitable. But why are we so troubled? For we learn from Jesus’ resurrection that death has come to an end, and that it is now the resurrection from the dead that is inevitable! It was not possible for death to hold this victim within the grave. Jesus paid the punishment of sin for us. He who had no sin was made to be sin for us. When that payment was made and that satisfaction was given, death could no longer hold Christ. Resurrection was inevitable because the death of Jesus declared us righteous by God. The death and resurrection of Jesus have made a difference in our lives.

Dear Savior, make a difference in my life every day with the good news of Your death and resurrection. Amen.

Weekend Rest Journal

1. The Bible clearly states that God the Father raised Jesus from the dead. Look up these passages and note what they say about your absolution from sin (“objective justification”): Acts 2:24; 3:15; 4:10; Rom. 6:4; Eph. 1:20
2. The Bible also clearly states that Jesus raised Himself from the dead: John 2:19-21; 10:17-18. What does this action of Christ prove about His person?
3. How has Jesus’ resurrection made a difference in your life in regard to your job, work/school, health, finances, friendships, and family relationships?
4. Martin Luther writes about the resurrection from the dead: “No article so contradicts experience as this one does. For our eyes see that all the world is swept away by death and dies. Emperors and kings, high and low, young and old...Therefore it is necessary for every Christian to have before him the testimony of Holy Scripture concerning the resurrection of the dead and also the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, proved and attested by certain revelation.” Pray for resurrection based hope and courage in the face of any difficulties you are dealing with.

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

John 11:25-26

The Same Jesus

Martha, Mary, and Lazarus made their home together. Seemingly none of the three had a spouse when they opened that home to Jesus and His disciples. So when Lazarus died it must have been particularly hard for Mary and Martha—as though they had lost a brother and a spouse at the same time. What a change!

Both sisters met the arrival of Jesus with the same plaintive fact: "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus' response was encapsulated in what he said to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life." In other words, "Nothing has changed, I am still the same Jesus. The same Lord in whom you believed when you first confessed, 'I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.' Nothing has changed. I still have the power to raise the dead and I have power to give them eternal life."

The sisters still did not understand all that Jesus meant, even when the stone was being rolled back from Lazarus' tomb. But then... then the truth of Jesus' authority over life and death became so, so clear. In raising Lazarus Jesus validated the truth of His description of Himself. With the miracle of raising Lazarus Jesus made His words the promise of another resurrection—to life eternal.

Today when a close loved one dies, the change it makes in our lives can seem overpowering. We too might wish Jesus had appeared to prevent death from happening. Yet Jesus is here with us. Nothing has changed.

He is still the LORD of death and of life. Still He says to us, "I am the resurrection and the life."

**I am flesh and must return Unto dust, whence I am taken;
But by faith I now discern That from death I shall awaken
With my Savior to abide In His glory, at His side.**

The Lutheran Hymnal 206:4

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

John 11:25-26

I am is I AM

This was not the first "I AM" statement of Jesus. Earlier in His ministry He had stated of Himself: "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35), "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12), "I am the door of the sheep" (John 10:7), and "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:14). Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were among those who heard and believed these statements. No doubt each did not grasp all that each statement meant but with each statement one thing became clearer and clearer. Jesus was not only saying "I am the Messiah" but also "I am I AM."

He who created Adam and Eve in the Garden, the Source of all life, the LORD who spoke to Moses at the burning bush, came into our world. He spoke to His Apostles. He spoke to Mary and Martha and Lazarus. He speaks to us. That means the word He gave to Mary and Martha when Lazarus died and was raised, He has spoken to our hearts as well. He is the LORD.

When we stand at the graveside of a close loved one—someone whose death leaves a hole in our family and our hearts, let us remember Jesus' words of comfort and promise to Mary and Martha—and how He showed His words to be entirely and completely true by raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus stands by us at the graveside today as the One who died, rose, and ascended so that we might know His words to be utterly and completely reliable. These words continue to make us confident that He has prepared for us a place where "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain; for the former things are passed away." (Revelation 21:4 KJV)

There rest and peace in endless measure
 Shall be ours thro' eternity;
 No grief, no care, shall mar our pleasure,
 And untold bliss our lot shall be.
 Make haste, my soul, forget all sadness;
 For peace awaits thee, joy and gladness—
 The perfect rest is nigh at hand.

The Lutheran Hymnal 615:4

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

John 11:25-26

Center Your Faith in Christ, the Resurrection and the Life

When Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life," He was stating that He was the source of both. There is no resurrection apart from Christ. There is no eternal life apart from Christ.

When Jesus said, "I am the resurrection," Martha assumed He was speaking of "the resurrection at the last day." Simultaneously, Martha showed she was thinking that time was an insurmountable obstacle where death was concerned. In effect, Martha was saying, "It's too late to help Lazarus (the time is past), so now we must wait (let more time pass) for the resurrection on the Last Day."

But Jesus showed that neither death nor time is an obstacle for Him. Outside the tomb, Jesus "cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth!' And he who had died came out." (John 11:43-44) Death has no dominion over the Christ who came to defeat death once and for all for us. Nor does death have dominion over those who by faith are in Him (1 Corinthians 15:54-55). Because He lives, we live. Because He is Life, we have life eternally. Clearly, in Christ, death is but a "sleep" (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

Like ourselves, the faith of Mary and Martha too often fell short of taking hold of all of the grace and the glory which the Lord holds out to us in His revelation of Himself. That's why, after declaring Himself to be the resurrection and the life, Jesus invited Martha to refocus her faith with the all-important question: "Do you believe this?"

May Martha's answer be ours as well: "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world." (John 11:27)

**Crown him the Lord of life Who triumphed o'er the grave,
And rose victorious in the strife For those he came to save;
His glories now we sing Who died, and rose on high.
Who died, eternal life to bring And lives that death may die.**

The Lutheran Hymnal 341:4

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

John 11:25-26

I Know that My Redeemer Lives

If you had been with Martha that day when Jesus spoke these words as He comforted His grieving friend, how would you have understood them? Soon after this Mary and Martha, along with those who had come to comfort them, walked out to the tomb of Lazarus with Jesus. As you walked along, how would you have unpacked and applied the words of Jesus?

"He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live." That day, at these words one's thoughts could not have been kept from turning to Lazarus—not if you knew him and had heard him express his faith in Jesus. But would you have connected Jesus declaring, "I am the resurrection," with what he was going to Lazarus' grave to do? Would you have expected it? Martha didn't. She questioned whether it was a good idea for Jesus to have the stone rolled from the grave four days after her brother had been buried.

After Jesus called Lazarus back from death and the grave, could any believing heart fail to see the connection between Jesus' words and Lazarus? And Jesus' next statement and themselves? "Whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die." Just as Jesus made plain that He was able to raise the dead by raising Lazarus, He there also made plain that He could and would raise all the dead on the Last Day and give eternal life to those who died trusting in him.

"Whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die." Since Jesus has promised to raise from death to eternal life all who believe in Him, death is no longer a permanent thing for us as Christians. We who are alive in Christ today actually have an advantage over Mary and Martha and those who witnessed Lazarus' resurrection. Jesus' words to Martha that day have been made certain twice over to us—at two different tombs. God bless the cloud of witnesses, who share the faith that we confess.

**The women at the tomb and Martha in her grieving,
The thief upon the cross and Stephen killed believing
With Job we know the life God gives,
"We know that our Redeemer lives!"**

Worship Supplement 2000 734:2

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

John 11:25-26

Victory Over Death

Because of what Jesus says here some Christian churches no longer have "funerals" but rather a "victory service." This is not a word game. Funeral is from the Latin for "dead body." Victory service is from Jesus' declaration to Martha and from 1 Corinthians 15:56-57: "The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Jesus kept the law in the place of sinners and on the cross suffered the punishment for sin that we by our sins deserved. When we, through faith, are connected with Christ, who is the resurrection and the life, then our dying physically does not mean dying forever. And when death is but a sleep from which our Savior will wake us to live forever with Him, then death is no longer death at all. The "King of Terrors" is now a shadow of its former self, a joke.

Have you ever gone to an event with someone who didn't need a ticket because of who he was; who only had to say "he or she is with me" and you were in? Hold fast to Jesus and the truth of his declaration to Martha your whole life through. And when you come to death and it seems like a terrible wall with no door at all, remember Jesus has been this way before. He's with you. He'll get you through. David knew that too when he said, "By my God I can leap over a wall." (Psalm 18:29)

"God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him." (1 Thessalonians 5:9-10)

Since Thou the power of death didst rend,
 In death Thou wilt not leave me;
 Since Thou didst into heaven ascend,
 No fear of death shall grieve me.
 For where Thou art, there shall I be
 That I may ever live with Thee;
 That is my hope when dying.

The Lutheran Hymnal 594:4

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich. 2 Corinthians 8:9

The Definition of Christ's Humiliation

We do not like to be humbled. We do not like to be thought of as less than who we think we are. In fact, we can even become guilty wanting to be recognized for our humility. Christ's humiliation was genuine and literal. He lowered Himself in order to be our Savior.

It is one thing for a mortal to be humbled. It is quite another to consider that the holy, almighty, eternal God would even consider being humbled, much less actually do it. Yet this is exactly what Jesus did for the sake of sinners. He lowered Himself, not only in taking on flesh and blood, but also by the type of Man He became. Though His birth was announced by angels, everything else about it was lowly—the place, the first visitors, His earthly parents. As He entered into His public ministry, His disciples included fisherman and even a tax collector. He routinely worked among those despised and outcast by society. When He died, all that He had were the clothes on His back. Jesus lowered Himself to be a Servant. The Creator served those whom He created.

Why would Jesus enter into such a state? Love is the answer. He became poor so that you and I might become rich. He went through hell so that we could go to heaven.

We are rich, for He was poor; Is this not a wonder?

Therefore praise God evermore Here on earth and yonder

The Lutheran Hymnal 97:3

He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Philippians 2:8

The Extent of Christ's Humiliation

We may think that if we were around Jesus when He walked the earth, then surely we would have recognized Him as the Son of God. After all, He taught with authority. His miracles were of great renown, including raising people from the dead. He fulfilled all the Old Testament prophecies. Yet the reality is that we would not have been much different than the rest of the population at the time of Jesus.

He lowered Himself so completely that His closest friends and fiercest enemies alike forgot or were unaware of His divinity. After all, His enemies believed they could capture Him with swords and clubs even though He had previously walked past and through them. Though His disciples witnessed all of His miracles, they thought that He could not help Himself during His arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

His humiliation and Servant-obedience took Him not only to the point of death, it took Him to the death of the cross. That was a death reserved for the worst of criminals. The crucified were exposed and subjected to the most torturous death. His death on the cross went even further. He was regarded as a sinner and punished by none other than His heavenly Father. He was forsaken and found guilty in the place of sinners so that all who believe in Him are now children of God. What great love our Savior has that He stood between us and divine judgment! His ultimate humiliation and obedience ensures that believers not only avoid the fate of destruction but also are provided robes of righteousness for eternity.

A Lamb goes uncomplaining forth, The guilt of all men bearing;
And laden with the sins of earth, None else the burden sharing!
Goes patient on, grows weak and faint,
To slaughter led without complaint, That spotless life to offer;
Bears shame, and stripes, and wounds and death,
Anguish and mockery and saith, "Willing all this I suffer."

The Lutheran Hymnal 142:1

Christ Jesus, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation... He humbled Himself. Philippians 2:6-8

Christ Voluntarily Humbled Himself

As the events of Maundy Thursday night and Good Friday unfolded, it seemed that everything was going wrong for Jesus. It appeared that He walked into a trap in Gethsemane and that His enemies had the upper hand as they arrested Him and subsequently beat and degraded Him at their pleasure.

In spite of all appearances, Jesus was in control. He willingly and voluntarily put Himself on the cross. Through all His time on earth He retained His glory as the Son of God, but He chose not to use His power to resist the way of the cross. He completed His mission on the cross for the joy that was set before Him in redeeming the souls of sinners.

The world may see Jesus as weak or ineffectual and merely as a martyr for a cause. Christians may at times forget the glory, honor, and power of Jesus. We do so when we fail to ask Him for help in our time of need, callously disregard His commands, and forget the saving power of His innocent blood. Remember that the same Jesus who created the world was in control on the cross and continues to control events for the good of those who love Him.

**What punishment so strange is suffered yonder!
The Shepherd dies for sheep that loved to wander;
The Master pays the debt His servants owe Him,
Who would not know Him.**

The Lutheran Hymnal 143:4

Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name. Philippians 2:9

Christ's Exaltation is Complete

There are times when believers feel hopeless. Increasingly, it seems that Satan is in control. He is indeed on a rampage. In some parts of the world, he leads active persecution through government force. In others, he slyly infiltrates hearts through incremental increases in godlessness and false doctrine.

We need not despair. We have a living Savior who reigns from on high. Though He set aside His glory for a time on earth, He has reclaimed His throne. The Apostles' Creed walks us through His exaltation post crucifixion.

He descended into hell but not to suffer more. Rather He was a one Man victory parade proclaiming His triumph to the spirits who were in prison. He rose from the dead proving that He is indeed true God and that the grave could not contain Him. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father. From on high He uses His power for the good of God's children. From controlling world events to being involved in an individual's smallest needs, He uses all of His divine attributes to help believers. From there He will come to judge the living and the dead. People mistook Jesus as a mere mortal in His first coming. There will be no mistaking who He is in His second coming. When He returns, every knee will bow, willingly with joy or unwillingly in terror.

What great knowledge is yours that you know Jesus beyond the cross! You know of His triumph and continuing power and love.

Look, ye saints, the sight is glorious;

See the Man of Sorrows now!

From the fight returned victorious,

Ev'ry knee to Him shall bow.

Crown Him! Crown Him! Crowns become the Victor's brow.

The Lutheran Hymnal 222:1

"Because I live, you will live also." John 14:19

Christ's Exaltation is Shared by Those who Are His

The celebration of an Easter service gives us a spiritual boost as we are reminded of Jesus defeating death and the grave. We revel in His promise of our own resurrection. At times, that glory seems impossibly far away and unattainable. We are afflicted in both body and mind. We tend to rely on our eyes, and we have not seen anyone glorified. The devil feeds into that doubt. We know that we have a heavenly inheritance, but it can be like living in a hut knowing that you're a billionaire.

Remember that Christ's resurrection belongs to you. It proves that your sins have indeed been forgiven. If not, He would still be in the tomb. You have the wonderful assurance that your grave will be a temporary place for your body to reside. Your faith so intimately ties you to Jesus that you will follow Him through death into heavenly bliss and glory.

As we study God's Word, we find promise after promise fulfilled. The Lord never breaks His Word. The promise of your own resurrection and home in heaven is no different. Would this be the one promise that God won't keep? We know that not to be the case, but we need our faith and resolve to be strengthened. Find full confidence in Jesus saying: "Because I live, you will live also."

Jesus, my Redeemer, lives; I, too, unto life will waken.

Endless joy my Savior gives; Shall my courage, then, be shaken?

Shall I fear, or could the Head

Rise and leave His members dead?

The Lutheran Hymnal 206:2

Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness but have the light of life." John 8:12

Jesus: The Light of the World

The word "epiphany" means, literally, to "shine upon." During the Epiphany Season we consider how Jesus shone His light upon this sin-darkened world. John's Gospel emphasizes Jesus as "light." Our devotions this week will be based upon verses from that Gospel.

Jesus' opening statement is bold... some might even say audacious! He claims, "I am the light of the world." How can anyone make such a claim? No one other than Jesus can! John, earlier in his Gospel, explained the basis for Jesus' statement. He began his Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:1-3, 14) Jesus is that "Word!" He is "the only begotten" Son of God, who became a human being to dispel the darkness sin creates. Therefore, He can rightfully claim to be "the light of the world."

Our present world is very dark! Thousands of lives are lost in wars. Millions of human beings are sold into slavery. Religious minorities in many countries are persecuted.

Jesus brings the light of His Father's truths into this world and dispels darkness from the minds and hearts of all who "follow" Him. Jesus delivers His believing followers from the darkness of sin and bestows upon them "the light of life." Jesus assures those who follow Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:31-32) By God's grace Jesus has shone upon us and freed us from darkness, enabling us to serve joyously within His kingdom of light and life!

Dear Jesus, thank You for being the light of the world—
dispelling darkness and enlightening us with Your gospel of life!
Amen.

In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world. John 1:4-5,9

Jesus: The Light Shining in the Darkness

Life is God's most precious gift! Without life, no other gifts matter. Wealth, health, relationships, opportunities—name whatever you wish, without life none of them matter. They cannot be utilized or enjoyed without first possessing life.

God is the source and the sustaining force behind all life. Scripture informs us: God “has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord... though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17:26-28) If God did not create life, it would not exist. If God did not sustain life, it would cease to exist.

Jesus entered a world plagued by death. “In Him was life” as its Creator, its Sustainer, and its Restorer! Sin led to the darkness of death and the physical end of life. Jesus came into this darkness to restore that lost life. He came as “the light of men.” He shone the light of truth into the darkness that blanketed people's souls. These darkened souls, sadly, did not “comprehend” God's truths, and many rejected the Light and its gift of life.

Fortunately, the rejection of Jesus by many does not negate His light nor remove its gift of life. Jesus remains “the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world.” Jesus' message of light and life is intended for everyone. His Father “loved the world” and so sent Jesus into this world. God promises: “Whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16)

Dear Jesus, thank You for shining the light of Your truth into the darkness of this world. Thank You for sending Your Spirit to work faith within our hearts, thereby bestowing upon us the gifts of light and life. Amen.

“This is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.”

John 3:19-21

Jesus: The Light Drawing Those Who Practice the Truth

Jesus once said concerning false prophets: “By their fruits you will know them.” (Matthew 7:20) Jesus here announced the condemnation of all who rejected Him as “the Light of the world.” (John 8:12) What were their fruits? Jesus explains, “The light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light.” Why was that the case? Jesus says, “Because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.”

The Bible describes human beings by nature as God’s “enemies” (Romans 5:10), unable to understand God’s truths (1 Corinthians 2:14), and being “dead in trespasses and sins.” (Ephesians 2:1) Unfortunately, people by nature like pursuing sins that satisfy their fleshly desires. They most often do not like those sins exposed and so try to hide them.

Jesus came to overcome sin, for sin harms those who practice it. The simple fact is that “the wages of sin is death.” (Romans 6:23a) However, the Bible assures us that “the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 6:23b) While those who refuse to repent of their sins will be condemned eternally, those who are led by the Spirit to repent of their sins will enjoy the gift of eternal life.

These are truths proclaimed by Jesus as “the light coming into the world.” All who believe in Jesus and “do (that is, practice) the truth” are drawn to His light. Their actions are clearly seen as enabled and approved by God.

Dear Jesus, shine Your light on our hearts and within our minds, so that we are drawn to Your light and practice those things acceptable in Your sight and pleasing to Your Father. Amen.

"I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." John 9:4-5

Jesus: The Light Working the Father's Works

Jesus' disciples once saw a blind man and asked, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus responded, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him." (John 9:2-3) He then continued with the words of our text.

Jesus entered this fallen world with all its suffering. That suffering can be caused by personal sins, but as Jesus observed, suffering is often simply the result of living in a sin-filled world.

God the Father was unwilling to abandon us to our sin and suffering. Therefore, He sent Jesus as "the light of the world" to overcome sin with its suffering and thereby restore His Father's relationship with mankind. To that end, Jesus came to complete the work entrusted to Him by His Father. While on this earth, He revealed the light of His Father's love, removing sin's dark night and revealing God's light day!

For the blind beggar, this meant Jesus restoring his sight, thereby revealing the grace and power of God. Jesus spat on the ground, mixed a bit of mud, smeared it on the man's eyes, and told him to "wash in the pool of Siloam." (John 9:7) The man did so and received his sight. Jesus, the light of the world, demonstrated His light by opening the eyes of this man born blind!

Sadly, the man was taken to the Pharisees who determined that Jesus must not be from God for He had broken their Sabbath rules. The newly-sighted man could not believe such spiritual blindness. After defending Jesus, he was cast out by the Pharisees. Later, his eyes beheld Jesus and embraced Him as Savior and Lord. Jesus continued as the light, fulfilling the Father's works all the way to Calvary!

Dear Jesus, open our eyes to the light of Your truths, so that we see You clearly and confess You boldly! Amen.

Then Jesus said to them, "A little while longer the light is with you. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you; he who walks in darkness does not know where he is going. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light." John 12:35-36

Jesus: The Light Leading Us to Become Sons of Light

Jesus spoke these words a few days before His death. He would be visibly present with His disciples only "a little while longer." Jesus would soon ascend into heaven. While He was still with them as their "light" Jesus urged His disciples to "walk" lest darkness overtake them.

Walk where? What was Jesus urging His disciples to do? Jesus wanted His disciples to walk with Him and to Him in faith as they had opportunity! Judas had already walked away and had entered Satan's darkness by betraying Jesus for mere money (cf. Luke 22:1-6). Jesus' other disciples would abandon Him in the garden, fleeing in fear from the soldiers and servants sent to arrest Him (cf. Mark 14:27). They would then face a crisis of faith resolved only by the powerful light of Jesus' resurrection.

After His resurrection, Jesus would remain with them only a short time, shining His light upon God's truth and love. He did so to remove Mary Magdalene's sorrow by appearing to her at the empty tomb (cf. John 20:14-16). He did so to remove Cleopas' and his friend's confusion by studying biblical prophecies with them on the way to Emmaus (cf. Luke 24:25-27). He did so to remove Thomas' doubts by directing him to place his fingers and his hands in His wounds so that he might truly believe (cf. John 20:24-29). He did so to remove Peter's self-reliance by questioning his love so that Peter might rely solely upon his Savior (cf. John 21:15-17).

By so walking, the disciples believed in the "light" and became "sons of light." Let us also walk with and to Jesus by meditating upon His Word. May His light shine within our hearts, leading us to an ever-stronger faith as "sons of light."

Dear Jesus, move us to walk with You always, so that we may be enlightened by Your truths and remain sons of light. Amen.

Then Aaron shall cast lots for the two goats: one lot for the Lord and the other lot for the scapegoat. And Aaron shall bring the goat on which the Lord's lot fell, and offer it as a sin offering. But the goat on which the lot fell to be the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the Lord, to make atonement upon it, and to let it go as the scapegoat into the wilderness. Leviticus 16:8-10

Atonement

Literary heavyweights Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, according to some sources, did not much care for each other's works. Faulkner belittled Hemingway's use of short, precise language while Hemingway said that emotion did not come from Faulkner's "ten-dollar words." Yet, if you were to ask readers who they thought the better writer was, they might hesitate to answer. Both were good in their own right.

It takes short, simple words and the occasional ten-dollar word to get points across. There are larger words we find in the Bible that we certainly do not use in our everyday conversations, but these words describe in precise detail what God had planned in His Word and accomplished through history.

One such word is atonement. The Leviticus passage above is from a wider reading concerning the Day of Atonement. On that day, certain rituals and sacrifices took place by the people and through the priests that would make payment for their sins. Though they observed the old covenant, the goats pictured Christ and the new covenant. How? One would die as a sin offering while the other—the scapegoat—had the sins of the assembly placed upon it. It was then released into the wilderness, never to be seen again.

To "atone" for something means to make it right by satisfying the payment. Our sin made us enemies of God. God, in love, sent His Son as the sin offering and the scapegoat. Our sins were killed and cast away from us. His atonement for our sake gives us fellowship instead of banishment, life instead of death.

The holy, meek, unspotted Lamb,
Who from the Father's bosom came,
Who died for me, e'er me t'atone,
Now for my Lord and God I own.

The Lutheran Hymnal 371:3

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. 1 John 4:10

Propitiation

The word “atonement” describes what Jesus did for us on the cross. He made a satisfactory payment on our behalf in order to rescue us from sin and death. That is what “propitiation” means: it is a satisfactory payment to God. A payment was needed to bring us back from the depths of despair we were in. But as we learned yesterday, we could not make that payment ourselves. Our God is holy and just. He despises that which is not holy and just. Even if a person tried his best, without Christ, no work or payment would be acceptable.

One of the beautiful truths we find in this short passage from John’s first epistle is the divine recognition of this fact. John had just explained that God is love: “In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him.” (1 John 4:9) Of this same love, Paul writes one of Scripture’s most comforting passages: “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8)

God loved us despite our sin. Knowing that we could not make the satisfactory payment for it, He sent His Son into the world to pay the price. It was no cheap deal—it cost Him dearly. The Son of God made Man endured the trials, sufferings, and pains of this life while also enduring the pains and sorrows of death and hell in His last hours. Yet through all of these, He remained sinless and obedient to His Father.

This was not the mere blood of goats and lambs being shed. God and Man hung from that cross. That precious blood that He shed is poured over you. It is the one and only satisfactory payment for the sins you have committed. It is forgiveness. It is admission to heaven, where your loving Father invites you with open arms.

Lord Jesus, we thank You for the gift of life and salvation.
Amen.

Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. Romans 5:18

Justification

You may have noticed that your pastor really likes to use this word called “justification”. There is a good reason for that! This doctrine (teaching) is central to our whole Christian faith! If someone were to be justified in the sight of another, that would mean that they are declared “not guilty” of whatever offense they committed.

This courtroom term proclaims an especially wonderful truth in the gospel. We, as sinners, are far from innocent. If we were to stand before the Almighty and just Judge of all mankind, we could only accept the eternal punishment that we brought upon ourselves. For each and every sin we ever committed—from the ones that keep us awake at night to the ones we brush under the rug—have incriminated us.

Through one man's offense came judgment and condemnation. Through one Man's righteousness came justification and life. The Man Jesus fulfilled the requirements of God's perfect law, and as our Substitute, gave that perfect righteousness to us.

In the divine courtroom, without a hope in the world of redemption, God looked at sinners such as you and I and the hammer fell. “Not guilty!” He declared. Your sins, even those ones that cause you grief, are blotted out for Jesus' sake. You are declared not guilty. You are declared righteous in His sight!

By grace I'm saved, grace free and boundless;

My soul believe and doubt it not.

Why stagger at this word of promise?

Hath Scripture ever falsehood taught?

Nay; then this word must true remain:

By grace thou, too, shall heav'n obtain.

The Lutheran Hymnal 373:1

Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. Hebrews 9:12

Redemption

The old covenant was a bloody contract. In the temple, over a thousand animals—from bulls to lambs to birds—were put to death every year in observation of the covenant promises of God. The offerings were in line with God’s word and will, picturing a new covenant that would come with the Messiah. These old covenant sacrifices, though offered to God, were not enough to obtain the redemption the people so dearly needed.

The word “redemption” lines up with some of the words we have looked at this week. To “redeem” something means to buy it back. When Adam and Eve sinned in God’s perfect creation, they ushered in imperfection. Life now ended in something called death. The joys of living were now weighed down with pain and suffering. They could not pay the price to get back into God’s favor. God gave people His perfect law centuries later and—guess what—they could not pay the steep price either!

The price was steep. It was blood. Even the unblemished lambs that the people offered were not enough to pay the price. They would have to repeatedly offer these symbolic sacrifices.

The Messiah, Christ Jesus, made the one sacrifice as our sin offering. It was His innocent blood that covered us guilty sinners that satisfied the steep payment. His words, “It is finished!” meant that the payment was made and accepted, and the transaction of our souls from death to life was complete. He has obtained the redemption which every soul so desperately needed, and having obtained it, He gives it freely. We are brought back to God, bought back at the highest possible cost by our Savior.

Redeemed, restored, forgiven Through Jesus’ precious blood,
Heirs of His home in heaven Oh, praise our pard’ning God!
Praise Him in tuneful measures Who gave His Son to die;
Praise Him whose sev’nfold treasures Enrich and sanctify.

Worship Supplement 779:1

God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. 2 Corinthians 5:19

Reconciliation

Sometimes you will be reading a familiar passage or singing a familiar hymn when all of sudden, something new dawns on you that makes you appreciate it all the more. That happened to me a few Christmases ago while we were singing “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” during a Christmas service. The line comes from the first stanza: “God and sinners reconciled!” That lone line tells us why His birth was necessary and why it is so special—He was to be the reconciliation between God and man.

The big words we have looked at this week have been rooted in the Old Testament promises that found their fulfillment in Jesus. “Reconciliation” is no different. We had innumerable trespasses stacked up against us. If we go back to that divine courtroom and look at the evidence against us, we would see truckloads of incriminating evidence. We were at enmity with God, meaning, we were His enemies. There was no troubled relationship between God and fallen humanity because there was no relationship at all.

The cross of Jesus mended the gap between God and us. With each drop of blood, with each labored breath, with each minute that passed when Jesus suffered separation from the Father, the price was paid and the bridge built up. By no work of our own did we earn this. Jesus took hold of us and brought us to Him.

Now the word of reconciliation is given to us. In it we find our purpose and being. In it we find the words to share with those still wandering in the dark. God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. God and sinners have truly been reconciled at last. Thanks be to Christ for restoring that relationship with our Father!

Christ, the Victim undefiled; Alleluia!

God and man hath reconciled; Alleluia!

While in strange and awefull strife; Alleluia!

Met together Death and Life. Alleluia!

The Lutheran Hymnal 191:3

Then Jesus said to them again, "Most assuredly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep." John 10:7

I AM the Door

They keep things out. They let things in. Sometimes they stick. They come in all different shapes and sizes. Children never seem to remember to shut them. The big thing about doors, however, is that they all lead to somewhere. The door to your home leads to love and acceptance, warmth and safety. The door to your church leads to opportunities to worship God with your fellow Christians, and to grow in the grace and knowledge of your Savior. The door to the concert hall leads to an evening of enjoyment and warm memories. While the prison cell door leads to loneliness and regret.

But what if there was a door that led to death? A door that led to never ending death and misery? Would people still turn the handle to such a door and walk into where it leads? They would, and they do. The Scripture says: "Wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it." (Mark 7:13)

There is one, and only one door that leads away from death and hell. That door has a name—Jesus Christ. That door is smeared red with His cleansing blood. Jesus, the door, leads to life and unending joy! It's the only door that truly leads to somewhere.

Thank God for leading us to this door—to faith in Jesus. But maybe right now you need to open it a little wider. Maybe you're shutting peace out of your life because of some unconfessed sin. Perhaps you keep running into a dead end as you struggle with life's problems. Or could it be that your worries are blocking the joy of salvation from entering your heart? If so, open wide THE DOOR to your life!

Dear Lord, open Your Word to me and lead me into the everlasting love of my Savior. Amen.

"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me." John 10:14

I AM the Good Shepherd

Sheep are perhaps the most needy creatures on earth. Sheep have no natural defenses—no fangs or claws—and so are easy prey to all kinds of predators. Sheep are naturally very timid. They have been known to stampede at the sound of thunder, or at a rabbit rushing out from behind a tumbleweed. Nor are sheep known for their intelligence. They are famous for drinking from parasite polluted mud holes, for eating poisonous weeds, and for grazing on pasture land infested by their own body waste. Sheep aren't the kindest of creatures either. In the desire to be top sheep they will butt and bite at each other, causing a great deal of unrest within the entire flock.

Notice any similarities? It's no accident that Scripture repeatedly refers to people as sheep. We have no natural defenses against the great soul predator, Satan, nor against the wolves who try to bite into our faith with their false teachings. We, too, are timid creatures filled with many worries and fears. And when it comes to knowing the way to heaven, we have no innate intelligence. People, if left to themselves, will always opt for the polluted water and contaminated food of worldly philosophy and man-made religion. By nature we are also unkind, unloving, and entirely selfish.

How blessed we are as Jesus' little lambs. He is the Good Shepherd Who laid down His life for the sheep. Who took His life back that we may live with Him forever in heaven. The One Who guides us down good and true paths as we make our way through this life. He is the shepherd who meets our every need, keeps us safe, who loves us with an everlasting love!

Dear Jesus, thank You for being our Shepherd-Savior. Forgive our sins and give us new and loving hearts. Amen.

"I am the living bread which came down from heaven."

John 6:51

I AM the Living Bread

We know it's important to eat right and keep our bodies in reasonable shape. As Christians our bodies are, after all, temples of the Holy Spirit. However, staying fit is easier said than done. What about your spiritual diet? Apathetic church attendance statistics, the small number of people who attend the average Sunday Bible class, the absence of family devotions, are clear indications that faith fitness isn't at the top of many a Christian's list of priorities. In fact, there isn't one of us who doesn't fail to stick faithfully to his gospel diet.

Jesus declared: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever." With those words our beautiful Savior invites us to go on a diet that cannot fail. The Savior invites us to eat and drink the truth of His death for all sinners. He bids us to digest His amazing Easter victory over death. He calls us to taste of all His wonderful promises.

Do we need to make some kind of resolution to stay on a Jesus-diet? Not if those resolutions are based on our own will-power, for then we're sure to fail. What we need is Spirit worked repentance. Repentance, first of all, involves taking an honest look at ourselves. Are we giving Jesus and His Word short shrift? Next, we turn in certain confidence to our Lord, who forgives all of our sins, including the sin of not making the preaching, teaching, and reading of God's Word our greatest concern. Such repentance will then lead to a greater craving for the Bread of Life! Through such repentance God will give us the wonderful blessings expressed by the hymn writer:

Go, my children, fed and nourished, Closer to Me;

Grow in love and love by serving, Joyful and free.

Here My Spirit's power filled you;

Here His tender comfort stilled you.

Go, My children, fed and nourished, Joyful and free.

Worship Supplement 800

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." John 8:12

I AM the Light of the World

In the movies, vampires and other monster types come out at night. Creepy, crawly, creatures on the cinema screen thrive in the murky shadows. They hate the light and love the darkness. Ever since the fall into sin, man has been in love with the darkness of his own sin and unbelief. Man loves his false teachings, his self-righteous pride, his lies, his lust, his greed. He loves a life in which he keeps God at arms length. But if a person remains in the darkness, he will one day be cast into outer darkness where there is never ending weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Jesus says: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." The first miracle ever recorded in the Bible was when God said, "Let there be light, and there was light!" But even more amazing is when God's saving light penetrates into the dark recesses of the human soul. When the Spirit and Word bring Christ the Light to a sinner, causing him to honestly confess his sin, to trust alone in Jesus' blood and righteousness for salvation, to walk away from the worthless philosophies of the world, to be empowered to say "no" to ungodliness and "yes" to godliness, that is a miracle of unmatched beauty and magnitude.

In this world we are surrounded by darkness. Satan is a monster who constantly bombards us with what are supposedly better offers than what God has freely given us. Everyday our own sinful flesh tries to pull us away from the sunshine of God's love. Lord, keep us in the Light! Oh, Jesus, shine into every corner of our hearts and lives! For you, indeed, are the Light of the world!

Beautiful Savior, King of Creation,
Son of God, and Son of Man!
Truly I'd love Thee, Truly I'd serve Thee,
Light of my soul, my Joy, my Crown.

The Lutheran Hymnal 657:1

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." John 15:5

I AM the Vine

My wife is the gardener in the family. She loves her flowers and knows what they need to survive and thrive. Her hands skillfully work at plotting, planting, and pruning. Without her loving attention her petunias, tulips, and begonias would soon wither and die. Even more so, our heavenly Father is the gardener who knows just how to care for us so that we grow and prosper spiritually under His expert care. What the Father knows is that everything depends on the sinner's connection to His Son. Tenderly, then, he has grafted us into Jesus, Who says: "I am the vine; you are the branches."

Attached to Jesus in living, Spirit-worked faith, we have already been cleansed of the rot and disease of all sin. Connection to Christ means connection to His cross. Connection to the cross means forgiveness and salvation. But the Father is also interested in growth. He wants us to bear fruit for Him, the beautiful fruit of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." (Galatians 5:22-23) As the branches, we draw from Jesus the necessary nutrients needed to produce this lovely fruit of faith. Jesus says, "If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." The Savior's growing power flows into us through the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. The fruit we bear is evidence that we are in Him and He is in us.

Yes, a vine bears fruit through its branches. Christ accomplishes His purposes through you and me—His believers! Our feet run for Him! Our hands work for Him! Our mouths speak His Truth! So go, my friends, and bear fruit for your Savior! Draw your strength from Jesus the Vine!

Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed His blood for me;
Died that I might live on high, Lived that I might never die.
As the branch is to the vine, I am His, and He is mine.

The Lutheran Hymnal 342:1

The LORD God said, “It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” Genesis 2:18

A Blessing for the Man

Before the first mother, came the first wife. I hope nobody has the idea that Eve was an afterthought. Like God said, “Goodness, now that I’ve made man, I just feel like something’s not quite right. Hmmm, now what did I forget...” God’s no dummy. He made all the other creatures with mates, He didn’t just forget when it came to man. God knew full well what He was doing when He made Adam alone. He was making the first piece of the human puzzle. The second piece soon followed.

Eve completed Adam. She filled in his deficiencies, and he hers. I’m not saying God made man and women less than perfect. I’m saying that man and woman were a matched pair from the beginning. They wouldn’t be complete without each other just as the sky wouldn’t be complete without birds, nor the sea without fish.

Man and woman complement each other. Whether it’s men and women from different families that are good friends, or men and women who are joined together in the intimate bond of marriage. They complement each other. God meant for men and women to live side by side.

Personally, I can’t imagine who I would be without my wife. I’m not saying I’m so great; rather it feels like I’d be a lot less without her. I guess that’s why God gave her to me. Proverbs 19, verse 14 says... “Houses and wealth are inherited from parents, but a prudent wife is from the LORD” (Proverbs 19:14 NIV)

So, husbands, thank your wife for all she is to you. For all she does for you. For helping make you who you are. And thank the gracious God above for giving her to you.

Thank you heavenly Father for creating the bond of marriage and through that union establishing the family. Amen.

My son, keep your father's commands and do not forsake your mother's teaching. Bind them upon your heart forever; fasten them around your neck. When you walk, they will guide you; when you sleep, they will watch over you; when you awake, they will speak to you. For these commands are a lamp, this teaching is a light, and the corrections of discipline are the way to life. Proverbs 6:20-23

A Blessing to the Child

From the very beginning, a mother is a teacher. When she cradles her newborn to feed him the first time, his schooling begins. The first lesson is love. It is followed by lessons in patience, diligence, self-sacrifice and duty. Later these lessons will be spoken, but, at first, mom simply teaches by example.

The subjects in a Christian mother's classroom vary widely. She teaches simple day-to-day things like tying your shoes and chewing with your mouth closed. But she also teaches profound lessons, like respect for others, selflessness, and honesty.

A Christian mother's curriculum begins with the Bible. She wants her child to know and understand this world. But more than that, she wants her child to know and love the world's Creator. She wants her child to look in hope and trust to the Savior from sin that the Creator sent.

How many children have been held by their own mothers as they were baptized into the Kingdom of Christ? How many Bible story books were opened by mom? How many alarm clocks were set, so that the children will be there for Sunday School? How many Sunday School lessons were taught by mom herself? How many children have learned to trust the God of the Bible by watching how mom trusts and communicates with Him?

Paul wrote the following to a young pastor named Timothy...“I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also” (2 Timothy 1:5 NIV)

Thank you God for Christian mothers who continue to teach us about You. Amen.

Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too. Romans 16:13 NIV

A Blessing to the Church

Is Mother's Day just for women who have given birth? I don't think so. Many a mother has never felt the pains of labor. There are some who are barren. There are others who adopt. There are many women who care for other children in their daily lives and vocations. These mothers are worthy of honor on this day also.

Take, for example, a Christian mother like Rufus' mom. Rufus' mom took the apostle Paul under her wing as if he was her own flesh and blood. And Paul didn't forget that loving concern. Can you imagine how touching it must have been for Rufus' mother when she heard this letter read to the congregation at Rome? Here at the end Paul is greeting different people in the congregation, and then he mentions her in this tender way, "Greet Rufus... and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too."

Paul once instructed pastor Timothy, "Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity." (1 Timothy 5:1-2 NIV) Here we are reminded of the intimate unity that God desires His followers to have. The older women of your church are like mothers to us all.

Jesus has brought us into a relationship with God the Father by taking our sins away. By faith in Jesus we are God's own children. And in God's family, we have many mothers. By their loving service to their fellow Christians, these mothers bring honor to God's Name.

Let's do what Timothy was instructed. Let's treat the older women among us as our mothers in Christ. Let's love them, care for them and show the world our faith by our love. Jesus told His disciples, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34 NIV).

Thank you heavenly Father for providing many ways that the women of Your church care for Your family. Amen.

My spirit rejoices in God my Savior. Luke 1:47 NIV

A Blessing to Mary

Let's not forget the mother of our Savior. When Jesus was just a child, it was His earthly mother and father who were in charge of his care. Once, at age twelve, Jesus went missing during a journey to Jerusalem. Mom and Dad got worried and went about searching all over for Him. They finally found Him in the Temple where He told them He was tending to His Father's work. Joseph and Mary ordered the young man to come home with them, and like a faithful son, he willingly went along and was subject to them.

Mary pondered Jesus' words for some time to come. Like a mother, Mary knew Jesus was special. But Mary knew Jesus was special in a way unlike any mother could know. Mary knew she would have to give him up. He had a greater purpose to fulfill and it would not be hers to control or determine. He would soon be a man and she had to let him go into the world to fulfill his mission. She would have to bear such a cost, even to the point of watching him die.

We know that God had been preparing Mary for her own loving sacrifice from the time that the angel visited her with the news of her conception. When still pregnant with the Christ Child, Mary sang these words: "my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." (Luke 1:47 NIV) Mary knew she was a sinner who needed a Savior. And she knew that she had one—the Child in her own womb. She pondered her Son's purpose and calling so deeply in her heart, that the Holy Spirit within sang forth a song of faith and praise.

Even in the letting go of a child, God can still work a great miracle. Faith lays hold of a power greater than death itself: God promises that the resurrection will return Mary's Son to her and to the whole world. God is teaching all mothers, and all believers, to ponder these things in our hearts and to let go of the temporary things, so we can lay hold of the eternal.

Father, keep our loved ones in Your everlasting arms. Amen.

But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. Galatians 4:4-5

A Blessing to Me

The Son of God had a mom. He became human so that he could suffer and die for the human race. Although He had existed from eternity, Jesus was born to His mother and humbled under the law to be obedient to her.

When the twelve-year-old Jesus was found by His parents in the Temple, He did not object to their orders to come home. Even though He was right in His heavenly Father's house doing what He was meant to do, He also had the business of His human parents to tend to. Jesus never forgot to love and respect His parents.

This love and honor was with Jesus all the way to the cross. When He looked down from the cross and Jesus gave His mother into his friend John's safe-keeping. He said to her, "Dear woman, here is your son." And he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." (John 19:26-27 NIV) Jesus honored and thought of his mother, even while dying.

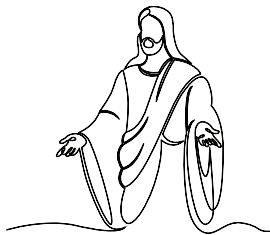
This is the sort of Savior we have. We've sinned against our mothers too many times to count, perhaps even forgetting about her or neglecting her. We've been disobedient, disrespectful, unloving, impatient, petty and ungrateful. Thankfully, Jesus is the sort of Savior that not only remembers His mother, but also remembers you. His perfect life under the Law completely replaces and fulfills our life under the Law. During His own sacrificial death, He looks down and remembers every mother, every son, every daughter. He remembers everyone, making sure that by His sacrifice and resurrection, you too will always be cared for.

Thank You heavenly Father for our Savior and Your Son, who makes me acceptable as Your child through His atoning blood. Amen.

I will declare Your name to My brethren;
In the midst of the assembly I will praise You.

You who fear the LORD, praise Him!
All you descendants of Jacob, glorify Him,
And fear Him, all you offspring of Israel!
For He has not despised nor abhorred
the affliction of the afflicted;
Nor has He hidden His face from Him;
But when He cried to Him, He heard.

- Psalm 22:22-24



Daily Rest

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*Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden,
and I will give you rest. Matthew 11:28*

Our Lord Jesus Christ speaks these words of invitation to those who are heavy laden. Our lives in this fallen world are burdened by sin and guilt. The world further burdens us with distractions, appointments, and false hopes. Jesus has come to give you rest from your labors. He has taken up the cross for you and calls you to follow, so that you might learn from Him. His gentle, lowly way reveals that God's purposes are not to burden or trouble you, but to give you rest for your soul. Daily he is laboring with you and daily he is offering rest. Each day, He is saying to you, "Come."

Daily Rest is a devotional invitation to follow Jesus and find daily rest for your soul. It is our prayer that through these devotions, Jesus might teach you His lowly, gentle ways and deliver you from the powers of sin, death and the devil. We pray that, in Him, you would find rest for your soul each day.

Daily Rest is a publication of the Church of the Lutheran Confession with devotions supplied by a volunteer staff of CLC pastors and teachers.