

## What Comfort?

Isaiah 40.1–11 for Advent 2B on December 10, 2017

Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

*“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God”* (Isaiah 40.1). Does anyone else have a problem with that? We already have all the comfort we can handle, living in the most comfortable situation in the history of mankind. And while we’re trying to celebrate Advent, to listen to the voice of God, there are voices all around us screaming “Comfort!” Comfort yourself, pad your existence, make yourself happy with luxury. We’re not just comfortable, we’re bloated. We’re so comfortable, it’s painful. No more, please!

We’re comfortable spiritually, too. We’ve believed that “Jesus” is just a good feeling that can help you get through the day, or get you what you want, or make you happy. He’ll never push you or challenge you or refine you. He’s like silk instead of sandpaper. We even start to believe that if anything challenges our comfort, it just can’t be from Jesus. We create a god in our image who just likes to spoil us.

So, *“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God”* (40.1). But I say, “No. Not today.” That is not the voice you and I need to hear. We’re already entirely too comfortable with ourselves, with this world, and with God. This text is like coming home with even more Christmas presents when there are already too many under the tree to begin with. It’s as if God keeps giving comfort and we have no place to put it. So, you know what? These words aren’t for us. These words are for people who need them.

You know how to boil a frog, right? Don’t boil the water first or he’ll jump out. You have to throw him in when it’s nice and cool and *comfortable*. He’ll enjoy the extra warmth, at first, but it will kill him in the end. Then you can eat him. The heat is rising at Christmas time. Materialism. Gluttony. Euphoria without real content. We don’t need a soft voice of comfort today. We need a wakeup call before it’s too late.

And God sends it. He says comfort, but then He brings in the bulldozer; a voice that lifts up the valleys, makes the mountains low, levels out the uneven ground, and makes the rough places a plain (40.3–4). Nothing will stand in God’s way and there is no comfort in that.

So, when John the Baptizer appeared, seven hundred years after Isaiah, he was not comfortable or comforting. Camel’s hair. Wilderness. Repentance. If your life is crooked, straighten it out. Start fresh and get it together now because, when God comes, anyone in sin will not be an innocent victim. John echoed the Prophet Malachi who said, *“But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap”* (Malachi 3.2).

That’s a far cry from our Christmas celebrations. The food and festivities have us too drunk and distracted to recognize Jesus when He actually comes. Who can stand? Not the sinner. Not the person who is selfish, lustful, or hateful. Not the person who is indifferent toward God. Not the comfortable sinner. So, as God prepares to bring comfort, He first sends out that voice that yells, “Repent!”

Isaiah’s cries the same message in the same wilderness. *“All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass”* (40.6–7). In other words, we might be comfortable, but we’re all waiting for the other shoe to drop, living in dying bodies and a dying world. Even the comforts get old and die.

So, enjoy the moment. Right? Who knows what tomorrow will bring? Surround yourself with comfort and ignore the uncomfortable realities about yourself, your sin, judgment, death, and hell. Is that what the voice of St. Peter says? All the stuff of life will be dissolved, he says. So, what sort of people should we be? *“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever”* (Isaiah 40.8).

If you set yourself against this God, He will level you. If you love this life and everything in it rather than God, He will take all your comfort away from you. He will judge you with His Word, His eternal, unchangeable, powerful Word that created all things and will make all things new. But, if you realize that you are grass, a fading flower who all too often loves this life that is fading away, that you are way too comfortable *without* God, then you are ready to hear His voice.

*“Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Behold your God!’”* (40.9).

God’s comfort is for people who need it, for people who are grieving losses and sufferings pains; and not just things that are difficult or uncomfortable, but things that a direct result of our sin. We have actions that need stopping, attitudes that need checking, sins that need forgiving, consciences that need consoling, sicknesses that need healing, and death that needs conquering.

*“Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense [that is, compensation, payment] before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young”* (40.10–11). Not only is our God powerful, He’s gentle. Not only is He gentle, He is powerful.

When Mark begins his narrative about Jesus, he calls it “the gospel” (Mark 1.1). The gospel is a simple report. It’s a news report that is good, news that God has decided to do something in the world through His Son, Jesus of Nazareth. He has decided to bring comfort to those who need it.

Jesus is the Son of God, born a man. He lived in this world. He died as a criminal. If Jesus only died, then there is no good news. But He promised something different and He did something different. He rose. His life, death, and resurrection is the recompense, the ransom price, paid for you and me and all people to free us from our sin and destruction. That is the good news of what God has done in Jesus Christ.

But let’s not forget that God is still, in Jesus, doing things in the world. God is acting today. He cleanses you today. He takes away your selfishness, your addiction to comfort, and your guilt of the past. He calms you today. He takes away the pressure of being in control, by taking control for you. He is your God and He calls you to be His child. With Him, there is no more fear of the future. And, He comforts you today. He surrounds you with His presence and even joins you to Himself. He holds nothing against you anymore.

Because Christ was born, lived, died, rose, ascended, promises to return, and is ruling all things right now, God is still acting in and through His Son today. He is comforting people who need it. So, this is His voice to you today: “In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all of your sins.” This is the comfort we need. This is the comfort we have in Christ both now and forever.

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

# *The Face of the Lord*

Isaiah 64.1–9 for Advent 1B on December 3, 2017

Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

The text for the sermon this morning is the Old Testament Lesson from Isaiah chapter 64 where Isaiah opens with a prayer, reflects on that prayer, confesses his sin, reflects a little more, and then closes this text same way he opened it, with a prayer. Let's follow Isaiah this morning.

## **I. Petition**

Isaiah begins with a desperate prayer, a plea: *"Oh that You would rend the heavens and come down."* And don't just come down in some sort of psychological or emotional way, but let us know that You are here. Make the mountains quake. Make the nations tremble at Your presence. The Hebrew word for *presence* (~*ynIP'*) can also refer to someone's face. *"Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake when they see Your face."* Isaiah prays that God would show His face, condescend, descend, and to take care of some business.

Isaiah saw prophetically that Israel would be taken into exile. In 587 BC, Nebuchadnezzar marched into Jerusalem and marched off with God's people. How could God just watch that happen? Maybe He's not strong enough to stop it. Maybe He didn't want to stop it. Maybe He's not there at all. Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down! Rip the skies open and show Your face!

You know, when you approach someone, when you turn to face them, they have three options: they can turn away from you, against you, or toward you. They can do that with words, looks, and actions. Granted, there are some faces, you would rather not see at all. But, in general, you would hope they would turn toward you. If they turned against you, at least you would know that they're there. The worst thing they can do is turn away. Isaiah asks God to turn His face toward His people; not away, not against, but toward.

You've prayed this prayer, not in Babylonian exile, but in spiritual exile. You live in a world cursed by God, with sinful people and a sinful self. There are so many reasons for us to throw up our hands and look to the heavens from where our help comes. What about the global persecution of Christians? What about abuse or hunger or injustice? What about the broken relationships in our own homes? We've all wondered where God is. We've all prayed for Him to do something. We've all questioned why He doesn't show His face and take action. So, we can join Isaiah in His lament. Lord, let us and the whole world know that you are actually here. Let us see your face.

## **II. Reflection**

But as soon as this prayer leaves Isaiah's coal-burnt lips, he reflects on that plea and lament. In the very next breath, Isaiah turns to the past and sees that this God of all creation *has* been present with His people the whole time. And not only that, but He *has* done something for them. In fact, Isaiah confesses that the problem isn't God at all. *"When you did awesome things that we did not look for, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him."* In other words, our God has already come down, stepped in, and taken action. But where have we been?

Among other past actions of God, Isaiah is recalling the Exodus from Egypt. God's people had been slaves. Egypt had them by the throat. God seemed to turn away and ignore the entire situation for 430 years. But God had given His people a promise. Moses was born. After growing up as royalty, he fled to be shepherd where God called him from a burning bush to go back to Egypt and command Pharaoh to "let His people go." Then came the plagues, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the drowning of Pharaoh and his army. God heard the prayers of His people and He took action. He came down. Isaiah says to exiled Israel, "You know that there is no God like our God. Pray that He would take action again."

In the same way, our prayer that God would rend the heavens and come down has already been answered. In the fullness of time, He sent one greater than Moses. The mountains didn't quake. The nations didn't tremble. But the Lord God Himself rent the heavens and came down in humility, in a manger, later riding on a donkey. Where's the kingdom, power, and glory? Hidden. And for good reason.

### **III. Confession**

Isaiah goes on, "*Behold, You were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved? We have all become like one who is unclean and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls upon Your name who rouses himself to take hold of You; for You have hidden Your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of your iniquities.*"

If our Lord would rend the heavens and come down, what would He find? Righteous people? Holy people? People who deserve to be delivered from all the pain and suffering of this world? No.

But when Jesus enters Jerusalem, He enters as the Suffering Servant. God should have turned His face against us. But He turned His face toward us. He sent His Son, the face of the invisible God. And when that Son came, we killed Him because He put a spotlight on our sin. We wanted nothing to do with Him. But our heavenly Father still did not turn His face away from us. Instead, He turned His face away from His Son. "*My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?*"

You and I have been called by God to turn towards people. Some are easier to love than others. We can make all the excuses we want, but God is not pleased when we turn away from brothers and sisters in judgment or impatience or laziness. He has turned toward us, turned us out from our inward bent, and reoriented us in love to others. If we are to be God's people, He is going to have to turn us continually. He does this by the Gospel, the Good News about Jesus Christ for you.

### **IV. Reflection**

After His confession, Isaiah ponders things again. "*But now, O Lord, You are our Father; we are the clay, and You are our potter; we are all the work of Your hand.*"

We may feel that God has turned away from us, and we would deserve that and then some because of lives turned inward. But God has made us and redeemed us. We are the clay in His hand.

Paul says this in 2 Corinthians 4: "*For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.*" A little later, Paul says, "*So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.*"

In Jesus, God has turned toward us and in Jesus we are called to turn to God. God turns us away from anything and everything that offends Him. There is a change in us away from sin and toward righteousness and holiness, but it's hidden and incomplete. Until we see Jesus face to face, we will always see in ourselves the sin, rebellion, unfaithfulness, laziness, pride, greed, lust, sickness, and death for which Christ died. And, in those moments of silence and reflection, we turn not to ourselves for evidence of God's presence, but to the Father who molds us by His Word into the likeness of Christ.

#### **IV. Petition**

Isaiah concludes this passage with another prayer, *"Be not so terribly angry, O Lord, and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all Your people."*

Our God has looked and seen. He knows it all: personal struggle, family conflict, national unrest. He has acted on behalf of His people. Christ came. Christ is coming again. Christ comes today. That is why we celebrate Advent; we are praying and preparing for Him to rend the heavens and come down again.

Isaiah prepares us to see God face to face by pointing us to repentance, by turning our hearts to Him. He began with prayer, he reflected, he confessed, he reflected again, and he returned to prayer. The heart of this passage is confession, surrounded by reflection and prayer. This is how we celebrate Advent.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, You have heard our prayer, stepped into our world, and turned Your face toward us in Your Son, Jesus. As you have turned toward us, turn us toward you. Make us ready for that Day when we will see you face to face. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## *For You and for Them*

Matthew 25.31–46 for Last Sunday of the Church Year (Proper 29A) on November 26, 2017  
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

This is now the third week we have heard Jesus' words from Matthew twenty-five. In week one, we heard the Parable of the Ten Virgins which taught us how the Lord makes His people aware of, prepared for, and desirous of His return. In week two, we heard the Parable of the Talents which taught us how the Lord gives His light to His servants that we might reflect Him. Today, we heard the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats which teaches us that Christ has made us to be His sheep already now and calls us to follow Him. All three parables point us to the Last Day and the way Jesus prepares us for it, but all three parables also point us to today and the way Jesus is living active among His people already now.

Julie and I recently painted our kitchen. We also added board and batten. The boards that I used were thin, 1/8 thick. I thought I would use a nail gun to install these boards to save some time. I talked with a guy at Home Depot, we decided to go with the gentlest nail gun I could find so I wouldn't split the wood. I went home to try the nail gun on a scrap piece of wood and I was amazed at how clean and fast that wood busted apart from just a little brad. So, I took the nail gun back and ended up drilling holes where I needed them and using a hammer to drive in some finishing nails. I did not split one piece.

I share that with you for this reason. If you don't use those nail guns correctly, they can be unhelpful and even deadly. It's the right tool, with many wrong applications. We should be even more careful with Jesus' words in this text. They are lethal if we do not hear them the right way. The words are right, but we have to be careful about how we hear them and use them.

There are two main actions of the Shepherd King in this parable. First, He separates the sheep and the goats. Second, He addresses the sheep and the goats. The separation of sheep and goats has to do with who we are. The address of the sheep and the goats has to do with how we live. In order to rightly hear and understand Jesus' words, we will distinguish these two actions of the Shepherd King.

First, the separation. *"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats"* (Matthew 25.31–32).

With these words, our Lord presses the question onto us: Which one will you be, a sheep or a goat?

Well, the sheep were sheep long before the judgment. The goats were goats long before the judgment. No one hops the fence or changes from one to the other at the last moment. When Jesus comes in all His glory, He simply confirms what has already been the case. So, *are* you a sheep or a goat?

If you actually believe in Christ and the Last Day and a final judgement, then you really do not want to be a goat. We all want to be sheep, at the end. That is why we are here today. None of us wants to be a goat, to be judged, to be condemned by Christ, to live for eternity in that place prepared for Satan and his angels, a place of eternal fire, and eternal punishment. Not one of us wants to be sent there by God, without hope, without relief, and without God Himself.

What can we do to be sure we will be with the sheep, to be sure we will hear, those words, *“Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world”* (25.34)?

The logical thing would be to take the list Jesus gives us here and get going. If you’re not already feeding the hungry, watering the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, then you better get at it. Do everything on that list and then do it again.

But that’s not the voice of the Shepherd and you know it. So, you don’t follow that voice. You follow the voice of your Shepherd, Jesus Christ, who loves you and gave Himself for you.

The voice of Jesus declares to you today not “earn it” but “inherit it.” He says not “prepare yourselves” but *“I have prepared it all for you.”* In fact, He has prepared it all *“from the foundation of the world”* (Matthew 25.34). Before God made the heavens and the earth, before waters were separated from land, God prepared His kingdom for you.

That is good news because you and I cannot hope to stand among the righteous ones on that Last Day on our own. We cannot hope to become sheep. We can only trust what God says, that we are sheep, that we are blessed by the Father, and that we are covered by Jesus as baptized people.

We already confessed our sins this morning. Our hope is not now nor ever will be in our performance of God’s Law. Our hope is in the fact that Christ has fulfilled that Law, completed it perfectly, and given Himself to us as a gift. In the end, the sheep, the righteous ones, don’t even know they’ve done what they’ve done. It’s all a gift from God. It’s all prepared by God for them. And you’re one of them by faith.

You know what’s very interesting, though? Even though this passage is one of the most important passages in Scripture when it comes to the existence of hell as a place of punishment for unbelievers, as opposed to paradise for believers, this passage also teaches us that hell was never part of God’s plan. The heavenly kingdom was prepared from the foundation of the world, but eternal punishment was not. And more importantly, God does not want any person to be there. In fact, God did not make hell for people at all, but for Satan and his demons, after they fell. Instead, our God *“desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”* (1 Timothy 2.4).

The truth is that Jesus took the punishment of hell itself when He died on the cross. *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* That is the cry of dereliction, the voice of someone abandoned by God, shunned, rejected, and shut out. Jesus heard that voice, *“Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels”* (25.41). Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree and He descended from there all the way into hell.

Our text today comes at the point in the Gospel when Jesus enters Jerusalem and hell breaks loose against Him. But it was all planned by God and what Jesus did there prepared a place for believers in paradise. He took the punishment we deserve and gives us His entire kingdom as a gift instead.

Now that you have Jesus and everything He has done, God does not judge you or your works on their own anymore. He judges them as covered by Jesus. That’s why unbelievers have no hope. That’s why the goats are goats. They stand before God alone, without Jesus and without hope. But not you. You have hope because the One who judges you most finally will be the One who loves you most fully.

You are a sheep of Shepherd. That's a promise. You trust it by faith today. It's not based on what you've done, but on what God has done and on what He has prepared for you. So, are we looking forward to Christ's coming? Absolutely. Because the one who is coming is your Good Shepherd who loves you and laid His life down for you.

Now, in the meantime, how should you live?

Now that we have the right question in mind, we can rightly hear and understand Jesus' address to the sheep and the goats. Jesus does not direct us to earn our way to Him, He directs us to forget ourselves and work our way to people around us. There are hungry, thirsty, abandoned, naked, sick, and imprisoned people around us. God loves them. He has given you what they need. He has called you to serve, help, love, and care for them as He has for you. So, who is in your little sphere of influence? Whose need do you see?

Now you're not thinking about how to earn your way to God, you're just following your Shepherd and helping people who need help in His name. That's why it's all hidden to the sheep at the end. We don't need to keep track of any of it, because Jesus knows. Even the most insignificant thing to us is eternally valuable to Him. We just help, love, serve, and care for others, and let Christ sort out the rest of it.

And in that point there is something I want to be sure you hear. To you and me, our lives can seem very insignificant and small. They seem pointless, meaningless, and purposeless. Or at least they can. That's especially true when we start talking about the Last Day and the judgment of God. But hear the message for you. Not only has Jesus done all for you and prepared all for you from the foundation of the world. Not only does He love you with an everlasting, unconditional, and sacrificial love. Not only will He embrace you on that Day. He also gives meaning to every moment of this life today, even to the smallest task. We don't see that. But He does. And He helps us see it through the eyes of faith.

In the end, His judgment is the only one that matters because He is the One who will say, "*Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*"

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*



## *From Darkness to Light*

Matthew 25.14–30 for Pentecost 23A (Proper 28A) on November 19, 2017  
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Why is it that daylight savings time always bring on the darkness? It never ceases to amaze me how fast it all changes, the weather, the light, the darkness.

We are in week two of three that focus on End Times and the end of another Church Year. We're also in parable two of three in which Jesus addresses what we are to be thinking and doing in the meantime. Last week, the message had to do with being aware of Christ's return, being prepared by God for His return through faith, and desiring His coming, even praying for Him to come soon. Today, the message has to do with the way Jesus calls us to reflect His light in this dark world as we wait for that Day.

We heard Luke's version of this same parable just a few weeks ago during our Stewardship emphasis. Today, let's focus on the last verse: "*And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness*" (25.30). Why darkness? Why is that the punishment? Why not a fine? Why not prison time? Kids tend not to like darkness and adults certainly do not typically enjoy the unknown, either, but not everyone hates the darkness. In the words of one young woman, "The darkness is a place where . . . you are free from what you were and can be what you want. The darkness is bliss." Like a body-sized fig leaf, we think the darkness will effectively hide our deeds of darkness, but God's light exposes us completely.

The good-for-nothing, worthless servant is cast into outer darkness, that is, the darkness outside,<sup>1</sup> but he had already been living there long before his master returned. "*I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground*" (25.25). The judgment is that the master simply leaves this servant exactly where he is and does not lead him out of that darkness and into the joy of His light. The master confirms the servant's place in the outer darkness and leaves him totally removed from the light.

This is the destiny of humanity apart from Christ, who is the Light of the World. We are all born enemies of God, spiritually dead, and living in darkness. This world offers no way out. No man-made religion, spirituality, program, degree, legislation, or anything else within the sphere of our supposed control will transport anyone out of this darkness outside of God and into God's eternal light. God alone does this. He enlightens us by His Spirit who works through the Word which is a lamp and a light (Psalm 119).

Our problem is that God dwells in unapproachable light (1 Timothy 6.16) and is a consuming fire (Deuteronomy 4.24). His is not just a nice, warm, controlled glow. Apart from Christ, there is only eternal darkness, outside of God's presence. But Christ comes to show us the face of God (Colossians 1.15), as the face of a loving Father. In order that we might see God in Christ, the Spirit calls us to faith and from that faith flows a life lived in the light.

The good-for-nothing servant was careful. He played it safe. Why is he punished? It's not so much that he did something wrong. He just didn't do anything right, according to His master. His wickedness is his indifference. He knew what he should have done. He just didn't do it.

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<sup>1</sup> Theodore H. Robinson, *The Gospel of Matthew* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1927): 206.

All three servants receive different amounts of money. One talent was worth twenty years' wages. Five talents would be well over the amount two people would have received for the work of their entire lives, two careers worth of wages. Two talents is a solid wage for an entire life of work. One talent? Well, by comparison, you can maybe see why this servant would have been a little indifferent. But it's no excuse. The master wasn't comparing them to each other. The master just wanted them to do what anyone would do with a chunk of change like that.

The first two servants invested. The indifferent servant covered up the money. "This little Gospel light of mine . . . don't let Satan 'ffff' it out." There's no return on that money because the servant was indifferent, unmoved, and complacent. He didn't use it, so he lost it.

Zephaniah aims at waking us from indifference. He tells of the Last Day when God will "*search Jerusalem with lamps*" (1.12). Who's He looking for? Complacent people. "*Those who say in their hearts, 'The Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill'*" (1.12). In other words, they believe He's not really the Lord, at all. For them, the Last Day is "*a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness*" (1.15).

So, get busy, right? Shape up. Start using your talents. Start investing. Start growing the kingdom. Is that the message of Zephaniah? Is that the message of Jesus?

Zephaniah's prophecy and Jesus' parable are not designed to get you to shape up and change your life our fear. That was the *wicked* servant: "I was afraid" (25.25). No. Jesus wants us to be moved by His love and to be mindful of His glory.

Jesus said, "*You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven*" (Matthew 5.14–16). But the only way we can be the light is if we reflect Him. "*I am the light of the world,*" Jesus said. "*Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life*" (John 8:12). Picking up on that theme, St. Paul writes, "*For what we proclaim is not ourselves [this isn't about us], but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ'*" (2 Corinthians 4.5–6).

When, where, and how has that light shone on you? When you received Christ through Baptism. Maybe you received a candle at that time, and maybe you heard these words: "Receive this burning light to show that you have received Christ who is the Light of the world. Live always in the light of Christ, and be ever watchful for His coming, that you may meet Him with joy and enter with Him into the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom, which shall have no end."

God brought us from darkness to light by bringing Jesus to us. Jesus stepped into the darkness of a world without God and let that darkness surround Him. In chapter twenty-seven, Matthew gives the account: "*Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'*" Jesus experienced that outer darkness, outside the presence of God, until the light of Easter morning. Out of love, He enters your darkness to bring light to you.

The point of the prophecy and the parable is that God does not want indifference from you. He does not want only fear from you, either, although He is a consuming fire. What God desires to work in us by His Word and Spirit is faith that receives the love of Christ and responds to His *Passion* for you with love that reflects the light of Christ.

The first two servants in the parable had an investment and a return that were exactly the same. They did nothing to get the initial gift. They really did nothing to grow the investment. They simply reflect back, like a mirror, exactly what the master gave.

This parable is not so much a call to *shape up*, but a call to *look up* and see Jesus, and to stay fixed on Him. That's when our reflection of Him will happen. It's hard to see our reflection of Him sometimes. It's hidden to our eyes. What we can see, quite clearly, are the things that keep us from reflecting Him. So, if there's a call to action today it's to look for those things in your life and work on removing them, bit by bit, so that you can be a better reflector of Christ's light. The motivation is love for Christ and for others, not fear and not indifference.

This, then, is the message of St. Paul in the Epistle Lesson for today: *"But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing"* (1 Thessalonians 5.8–11).

May God give you faith in His Son that You might reflect Him and the light of His love in this dark world until He comes and says to you, His baptized child, *"Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master."*

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

# *The Bridegroom Comes, Awake!*

Matthew 25.1–13 for Pentecost 23A (Proper 27A) on November 12, 2017

Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## **Introduction**

*“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise”* (Matthew 25.1–2). So, which one are you? Will the Bridegroom know you or not when He comes? Which side of the door will you finally and forever find yourself? There will only be two kinds of people on that Day, and it all comes down to where you stand in relation to the Bridegroom.

## **The Parable of the Coming Bridegroom**

Jesus’ parable in our Gospel Lesson for today comes in the middle of His final sermon in Matthew. That sermon begins like this: *“As [Jesus] sat on the Mount of Olives,”* which overlooks Jerusalem where He would soon go to give His life, *“the disciples came to him privately saying, ‘Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?’”* (Matthew 24.3). Jesus’ answer to their question takes up two chapters of Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus tells the disciples about persecution, about an increasingly lawless world, and about the fact that, though the end is certain, no one except the Heavenly Father knows when Christ will come again.

A little later in the sermon, but still before our text for today, Jesus said, *“But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man”* (24.36–39). In other words, everyone in the world, believers and unbelievers alike, will simply be doing what they do, and then *wham*, He’ll return with the trumpet call of God, like alarm that sounds unexpectedly. His certain but unexpected return is the point of Jesus’ sermon and He tells three parables to illustrate it. The first we heard today. We’ll hear the next two parables over the course of the next two Sundays.

So, we come to our text, a parable, and the main point is that Jesus is returning, no one knows when, so, watch and wait. While most English translations insert a title here along the lines of “The Parable of the Ten Virgins,” it might be better to insert a title along the lines of “The Parable of the Coming Bridegroom.” That’s the main point. He is returning. We simply do not know when.

As I’ve pondered this parable for myself, I would like to suggest that it confronts us baptized believers in at least three ways, at least, in three ways that I would like to explore with you today. First, Jesus wants us to be aware of His return. Second, Jesus wants us to be prepared for His return. Third, Jesus wants us to desire His return. So, be aware of, prepared for, and desirous of Christ’s return.

## **1. Awareness: The Bridegroom is Coming**

*“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour”* (Matthew 25.13).

On the most basic level, Jesus confronts our unbelief. We would never admit it, but the way we live tells the story. We often live life unaware of Christ’s return, even in rejection of it, as if it will never happen.

What did you think when you heard of the events at that church in Texas? If that can happen there . . . That was my first thought. Headlines pointed out desensitization. More headlines were aimed, again, at gun control. But no law or regulation can control the evil that exists within every human being. Only repentance, faith, and the regeneration wrought by the Holy Spirit can put a lid on our capacity for evil.

But it happened in a church. How's that Christianity working for you, now? Awareness of Christ's return? What Christ? What return? Where was He then? It's so outlandish to so many that they cannot fathom anyone believing in the return of a man who lived 2,000 years ago and who has seemingly disappeared, conveniently, for that entire time. But when we live as if Jesus will not return, we live like the rest of the unbelieving world. So, Jesus' words bring an awareness back to us, and I believe we should see that event in that church as just that. We shouldn't need something like this, but we do. Our time could be anytime. Christ's return could be anytime.

Why are we not aware of that all the time? Our lips are in the habit of saying all the right things. Every Sunday we say either, "He will come to judge the living and the dead" (Apostles' Creed) or "He will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead" (Nicene Creed). But our hearts are far from Him (Isaiah 29.13). He despises and does not delight in our solemn assemblies that lack true repentance and faith (Amos 5.21). So, He wakes us up.

What is convicting for me as a preacher is that God intends preaching to be a wake-up call to His people. St. Paul wrote, "*And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?*" (1 Corinthians 14.8). In other words, the clear and bold preaching of Christ's cross, resurrection, and return is, just as Jesus' preaching in this text, God's wake-up call, designed to make us very, very aware of His return.

Why are we not aware? It isn't just forgetfulness. It isn't just desensitization. Jesus said earlier in Matthew, "*where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*" (Matthew 6.21), and that's our real problem. We love this world. We love our lives in this world. Evie is no longer in this phase, but there was a time, not long after we moved here, not long after she had gone through her first major upheaval in life, that she cried when we talked about the Last Day and about heaven because of all of the *stuff* she would have to leave behind. So, where is your treasure and your heart? We confess that we often love self and world more than God. And, in that sense, Christ's return is a threat. So, we must prepare.

## **2. Preparation: He Makes Us Ready**

*"For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps (Matthew 25.3–4).*

Jesus' return actually is a threat to many. They are the foolish ones. For them, Amos' words ring true. "*Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! Why would you have the day of the LORD? It is darkness, and not light, as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him. Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?" (Amos 5.18–20).*

How do we avoid this? How does the Day become something we are prepared for and look forward to? How do we become wise? Where do we go to get the oil we need?

Our Psalm for today has the answer. "*Make haste, O God, to deliver me! O LORD, make haste to help me*" (Psalm 70.1). And again, "*But I am poor and needy; hasten to me, O God! You are my help and my deliverer; O LORD, do not delay*" (Psalm 70.5).

The answer to our preparation is not so much our purchasing or acquiring or getting, but God's giving. He gives us His promises, but then He seems to go and hide, like a God who seemed to ignore a bunch of people praying in a Texan church. Closer to home, God leads you through days and times that challenge your faith in His presence and power in your life. In other words, He gives you promises but then seems to leave you hanging. We are poor and needy. In other words, He forces us to go to Him for the oil.

This process of God speaking His Word, us hearing it and believing it, and then us experiencing some problem or need which forces us to go back to God and His Word and His promises, is the process by which He makes us wise, gives to us the oil of faith, and makes us ready for His return.

I do not want to instrumentalize what happened at that church, or explain it away, or ignore the pain of the people involved, but I do not want us to miss the opportunity to let the Lord prepare each one of us for His return. I should also say that the whole event raises the problem of evil and really the problem of God in relation to evil, and I would like to simply invite you to attend the Bible study this next Tuesday night where we will discuss event this in the context of our larger discussion on prayer. What I hope we see today is that this event is not just a wake-up call to the awareness of what really matters in life, but actually a call to repentance, just one more example of life bringing us to our knees, squeezing out of us the confession that we're poor and needy, and sending us back to God and His Word in faith, trusting that He hears our prayers and will answer them in His time and His way. This is the way God prepares us for Christ's return.

At the end of the Day, our faith is real. It isn't just some self-help program to get you through life. This is life and death. This is eternity. Grounded in the real death, resurrection, and return of Jesus, everyone must believe for themselves. The virgins all had to go and get their own oil. No one can believe for you. So, let the Lord prepare you for Christ's return by His Word and Spirit and His gift of faith in Jesus.

### **3. Desire: His Wisdom and Timing**

*"As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps" (Matthew 25.5-7).*

They all slept, even the wise ones. They all rejoiced at the coming of the Bridegroom, too. And this is the third thing that I want to consider with you. Yes, we should be aware of Christ's return and neither consider it a fiction nor get so wrapped up in this world that we forget about the world to come. Yes, we should be prepared for Christ's coming, and that is something that God does to us through His Word, our faith, and our experience. But, if that were it, why did Jesus tell us about a *marriage* celebration? The real goal for us as Christians is to long for, desire, and even pray for Christ's return. This is the one who loved you and gave Himself for you on the cross. Jesus didn't tell us about the Bride because the Bride is you, Church! This is your Bridegroom and therefore we desire His return.

Again, we go to Psalm 70. Under pressure and persecution, the psalmist asks God to protect him from the people who would delight in His hurt. Under pressure and persecution, the psalmist says, *"O God! You are my help and my deliverer; O LORD, do not delay"* (Psalm 70.5). This isn't just the psalmist, it's Christ on the cross. It's you and me in this life. So, the Bride becomes like the Bridegroom. It is cross for us now and glory later, just like Jesus. And this makes us desire Christ's return when He will finally and fully put an end to this evil world and take us to be with Him in the new creation. Only the Father knows the time, but He sent Christ at just the right time the first time (Romans 5.6). He will certainly send Him at the right time, again. In the meantime, we can look forward to it and even pray for it.

The Lutheran theologian, Martin Chemnitz, wrote this about the Lord's Prayer, "We pray that God would put into us a concern and desire to prepare ourselves in advance for those things that are necessary to be properly prepared for death. This is done so that we may be prepared for death, because we do not want to be like those who do not have oil in their lamps when the bridegroom comes and calls us (Matthew 25.3). We ask that in the last hour of this life we may have true repentance, the Word, the Sacraments, faith, hope, and the spirit of grace and prayer. These things we ask so that when we are to die, we may be found in Christ."<sup>2</sup>

So, which one are you? Will the Bridegroom know you or not when He comes? Which side of the door will you finally and forever find yourself? There will only be two kinds of people on that Day, and it all comes down to where you stand in relation to the Bridegroom.

Today, in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I announce to you that you are the Bride of Christ. He's aware of you, He's preparing a place for you, and He desires that Day when He will come to meet you "*with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God*" (1 Thessalonians 4.16).

*Come soon, Lord Jesus! Amen.*

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Chemnitz, *The Lord's Prayer*, trans. Georg Williams (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999, 2007): 76–77.

## *Knit Together, Rejoicing*

Revelation 7.9–17 for All Saints' Day on November 5, 2017

Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Ev. Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wis.

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Halloween. Our kids enjoy it. Getting dressed up and eating candy is fun. But this year, there were questions. Why are we getting dressed up? Why are we getting candy from the neighbors? I think our culture actually gets something right, here. Halloween is a time to laugh at evil. The problem is, our culture does not know *why*. In fact, our culture is confused about what evil even is. Both issues are answered by Christ. He defines evil and it is only because of the One who has conquered sin, death, and the devil that we can laugh at evil. He is the Light no darkness can overcome.

But then, Halloween, or Hallowed Eve, All Hallows' Eve, All Holy Ones' Eve gives way to All Hallows' Day, All Holies' Day, All Saints' Day. So, why All Saints' Day? Well, if All Saints' Eve is about pointing a finger at God's enemies and making fun of them because Christ has rendered them powerless for saints, then All Saints' Day is about pointing to and celebrating the joyful future of His saints.

Saints are "holy people." How do sinful people become holy people, that is, sinless and set apart for God? Can people make themselves holy? Slap on a little makeup? Cover up the sin somehow? Can people ever get to a point where they have mastered their own sin and are sinless? *"Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin,"* Jesus said in the Gospel Lesson from last week (John 8.34). "Whoever" might be misdirection that gets us thinking about everyone else but this one. But we're included. Everywhere we go, everything we think, say, and do, no matter how "good" it feels or seems or sounds, is full of sin because we are sinners. The greatest proof of our sin is death.

If we are to be saints, that is, truly holy, sinless, and set apart for God, then we need not a pretender in a costume and makeup, but a real holy person, outside of ourselves, to come and make us holy. *"For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ"* (Galatians 3.27). And again, *"You are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord'"* (1 Corinthians 30–31).

So, we celebrate saints, both militant here and triumphant there. We should thank God for them, we should follow their example, and we should receive encouragement from them. But in celebrating all the saints, we're really celebrating the Holy One who has made them holy. And when we do that, we also celebrate our own sainthood in Him. When we acknowledge our sin and believe in Jesus as the Holy One who makes us holy, we join that *"great multitude that no one [can] number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in [our] hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb'"* (Revelation 7.9–10).

The Collect of the Day has some beautiful language. It says that God has *"knit together [His] faithful people of all times and places into one holy communion, the mystical body of [His] Son, Jesus Christ."* Though our eyes do not yet see this, John's Revelation reveals that we are "knit together" with all the saints by the fact that we are all wearing the same thing, we are all waiting for the same thing, we are all in the presence of the same Person, the Holy One, Jesus Christ, and, in the end, we are all rejoicing in Him.



Last week was game seven of the World Series; Astros vs. Dodgers. Astros were away. The crowd was almost entirely blue and white. But peppered throughout were some orange, Astro jerseys. Those little pockets of orange in a sea of blue and white were joined together by their common team, and, I suppose, their deep pockets, since they were attending a World Series game seven in Los Angeles. It was probably worth it for them, though, since Houston won that game and the series. This is not a bad image of us. We are in enemy territory, rooting for the “wrong” team, and yet, bound together in what we are wearing, and, best of all, coming out victorious in the End.

John looked and saw that multitude, all clothed in white robes, all wearing the same thing. Who are these? *“These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”* (Revelation 7.14). This God’s gift to you in Baptism by which He knits, as in clothing, us together in Christ with the militant here and the triumphant there.

The triumphant who have gone before us are, scripturally speaking, “with the Lord” and that’s about all we can say. We could ask a lot of questions about that, but we really don’t have answers. What we have is the promise that those who have died and are with the Lord are waiting. “O Lord, how long?” (Revelation 6.10). What are they waiting for? Scripturally speaking, the dead have had their souls and bodies separated contrary to God’s creation. So, they are waiting for the Day of Resurrection, the Day when death will finally be swallowed up in victory (1 Corinthians 15.54). We await the same thing. And, as we wait, we are knit together in Christ and in hope of that final victory.

These two things, wearing the same thing and waiting for the same thing that both happen in the presence of that same person Jesus Christ, correspond to Baptism and the Lord’s Supper where all saints are joined together. In Baptism, we receive the robe of Christ’s righteousness. In the Lord’s Supper, we receive the foretaste of the feast to come. Both take place in the real presence of Jesus.

In both cases, you and I can only come up here to be “with the Lord” as sinners, but we leave from this place forgiven again, sainted again, made holy by the Holy One once again, confident and sure of where we stand with our Lord, that we are His saints, and rejoicing in where we stand with one another, that we are knit together with one another and with all the saints who have gone before us. So, right here, heaven and earth are joined together, rejoicing. *“Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb”* (Revelation 7.10). *“Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen”* (Revelation 7.12).

So, we are knit together with all the saints. We are all wearing the same thing, all waiting for the same thing, and all in the presence of the same Person. But there is one more thread in the garment. The Collect of the Day asks God to “grant us to follow [His] blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living that, together with them, we may come to the unspeakable joys [He] has prepared for those who love [Him].”

Sometimes joys leave us speechless. Often times, it seems to me, where words fail, tears begin. But tears flow in this life for all kinds of reasons. We live in a valley of sorrow. Sin and death are at the root of that. But Jesus said, *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted”* (Matthew 5.4). And John saw that *“God will wipe away every tear from their eyes”* (Revelation 7.17b). Until then, we have hope in the Holy One who has made us saints and knit us together with all His saints. Rejoice and be glad! Blessed are you, holy are you. Rejoice and be glad! Yours is the kingdom of God.

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## *From “In A Corner” to “On A Corner”*

Revelation 14.6–7 for The 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation on October 29, 2017  
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

St. John writes, “*Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people. And he said with a loud voice, ‘Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water’*” (Revelation 14.6–7).

Martin was a man marked by humility with regard to himself, but a bold, daring confidence with regard to God in Christ. It was not uncommon for Luther to refer to himself as a stinking, maggot sack. In 1522, he wrote, “I beg you not to call yourselves Lutherans, but Christians. What is Luther? The teaching is not mine. Neither was I crucified for anyone. . . . How then should I, a poor stinking bag of maggots, live to see the day when they label the children of Christ, who alone is our master, with my wicked name? . . . I am master of none. I trust only the common, the simple and common teachings of Christ, who alone is our master.”<sup>3</sup> No wonder we love him so much and continue to use his name.

He was, no doubt, a weak sinner, but God’s power was made perfect in Him. He was nothing less than an angel, that is, a messenger of God, sent by God to declare that God’s judgment has come and that all people must fear Him, give Him glory, and worship Him. His judgment is that there is nothing we can do to earn God’s favor. We cannot justify ourselves as Christians, much less as humans, not to mention creatures. Instead, we can only receive God’s favor, that is, His grace, as a gift, in the form of a promise, that issues forth from the person and work of Jesus Christ and His merit, and is received by us sinners through faith, that is, the trust of the heart that clings to God’s promises in Christ and receives His justification of us. He “bespeaks us righteous.” Since that is the judgement of God, what else can we do but fear Him, give Him glory, and worship Him just as we are doing today?<sup>4</sup>

And how is it that we are here, worshipping in this way today? Is it not, at least in part, a result of what God accomplished through His humble servant, Martin Luther? It all started 500 years ago this coming Tuesday, October 31, 1517. On that “Eve of all Hallows” a thirty-four-year-old Augustinian friar, preacher, university lecturer, and professor of the Old Testament, took the short walk from his monastery home on one end of the little town of Wittenberg to the Castle Church on the other end of town, and there he posted 95 theses. By those statements, he did what scholars did at the time; he called for a debate. In the spirit of the printing press and the way these 95 theses flew around Europe in Luther’s Day, we have printed them for you, in their entirety, translated from their original Latin into English, along with a brief historical introduction.

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<sup>3</sup> WA 8.685.

<sup>4</sup> Bugenhagen’s funeral sermon for Luther: “He was without doubt the angel of God of which the Apocalypse speaks in chapter fourteen—flying in mid heaven with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth. . . . This angel said, ‘Fear God and give him glory!’ Those are the two parts of Dr. Martin Luther’s teaching, the law and the gospel, through which all of Scriptures are opened up and Christ is known as our righteousness and eternal life” (Lewis W. Spitz, “Images of Luther,” *Concordia Journal*, March 1985, page 50).

What we do not have today is the problem as the Church did at that time. A scholarly debate was Luther's goal with these theses, but it came from a pastoral concern for the souls of the people in the Church; people who, themselves, were stinking, maggot bags, that is, people who were under the curse of death which comes as the wages of sin. These were people just like us, people covered in the filth of their own sin and destined for damnation because there was nothing that *they* could do about it.

But Luther was not yet at the point, in 1517, where he thought that there was *nothing* they could do about it. He did not yet fully grasp the meaning of the verse in Romans chapter three verse twenty-eight, "*We hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.*" In fact, his primary problem with indulgences was not that they bought forgiveness and eliminated the need for faith in the promise of forgiveness. His primary problem was that the purchase of an indulgence by a sinner with a guilty conscience would circumvent the actual process of repentance for that guilty conscience and leave them in a worse place than before, spiritual speaking, thinking to themselves that they could easily get out of sin again as long as they had enough money. That sort of transaction cannot change the heart, and that changed heart, sincere before God, was Luther's primary concern at this point. Thesis 1: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." Later, Luther would come to the clear understanding that the sinner cannot by his or her own reason or strength do anything to deal with the problem of sin and the death that sin deserves.

Later on, by going through his own process, his own reformation by means of God's Word and His declaration that the sinner is justified by faith, Luther would see and then believe and then preach and then proclaim to the world that while sinners can do nothing about their sin and death, God has done everything to deal with both. He forgives sin and defeats death by the person and work of His Son, Jesus. He is the Righteous One, the only Righteous One. He is the only one to have died and risen to never die again. He alone is the Savior of sinners. Maybe I should just let the man speak for himself.

"Christ is God and man in one person. He has neither sinned nor died, and is not condemned, and he cannot sin, die, or be condemned; his righteousness, life, and salvation are unconquerable, eternal, omnipotent. By the wedding ring of faith he shares in the sins, death, and pains of hell which are his bride's. As a matter of fact, he makes them his own and acts as if they were his own and as if he himself had sinned; he suffered, died, and descended into hell that he might overcome them all. Now since it was such a one who did all this, and death and hell could not swallow him up, these were necessarily swallowed up by him in a mighty duel; for his righteousness is greater than the sins of all men, his life stronger than death, his salvation more invincible than hell. Thus the believing soul by means of the pledge of its faith is free in Christ, its bridegroom, free from all sins, secure against death and hell, and is endowed with the eternal righteousness, life, and salvation of Christ its bridegroom. . . . Who can understand the riches of the glory of this grace? Here this rich and divine bridegroom Christ marries this poor, wicked harlot, redeems her from all her evil, and adorns her with all his goodness. Her sins cannot now destroy her, since they are laid upon Christ and swallowed up by him. And she has that righteousness in Christ, her husband, of which she may boast as of her own and which she can confidently display alongside her sins in the face of death and hell and say, "If I have sinned, yet my Christ, in whom I believe, has not sinned, and all his is mine and all mine is his," as the bride in the Song of Solomon [2:16] says, "My beloved is mine and I am his." This is what Paul means when he says in 1 Cor. 15[:57], "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ," that is, the victory over sin and death."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> LW 31.351–352.

There is the boldness and confidence of Luther in Christ. But with regard to Himself, it was an entirely different story. In a letter that Luther wrote to the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Charles V, in 1520, he said this: "First, I came out into the public eye against my will. Whatever I have written, I have written after being provoked by the violence and plots of others. I desired nothing more ardently than that I could stay hidden in my corner. Second, I strove for nothing other than spreading the truth of the gospel against superstitious opinions stemming from human tradition. My own conscience as well as the judgment of excellent men bear witness to this. For this, then, I am now for the third year enduring limitless provocations, insults, perils, and whatever evil the wicked can devise. In the meantime, I vainly offer silence, I vainly suggest conditions for peace, I vainly request to be informed of teachings more correct than mine. There is only one thing prepared for me: to be annihilated, together with the whole gospel"<sup>6</sup>

Luther was weak, but God was strong. He wanted to stay hidden in his corner, but God sent him out and had him proclaim the truth of the Gospel with a boldness in Christ on the street corners of Wittenberg and throughout the world of his day.

You and I are not so different than this Luther. We like our little corners. We're perfectly content to hide their, escaping notice and attention. Most people do not like to be put on display. But we are not so different than Luther with regard to the truth of the Gospel, either, or faith in Christ the Savior, or God's power that is made perfect in weakness. The same risen Lord Jesus that sent Luther as an angel, His messenger, sends you and me. You are angels, messengers of Christ, as well. "Who is Luther?" Luther asked. He then responded, "God can raise up many Dr. Luthers." Well, He has. You're here. Not in your own little corner, but on the corner of those two streets out there.

So, angels of Christ, the Spirit sends you anew today to share the truth of the Gospel. Yes, Satan, the world, and our own sinful flesh are against us, "But for us fights the valiant One, Whom God Himself elected." We, too, are humble with regard to ourselves, but bold and confident with regard to Christ. "He's by our side upon the plain With His good gifts and Spirit," today and forever. So, whatever may come, "Our vict'ry has been won; The Kingdom ours remaineth."<sup>7</sup>

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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<sup>6</sup> LW 48.175.

<sup>7</sup> LSB 656.