

## Small Seeds

Mark 4.26-34 for Pentecost 3B (Proper 6B) on June 17, 2018  
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Ev. Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

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

You all have expectations. You have expectations for yourselves, your families, your fathers, your friends, your sports teams, your neighborhood, and, yes, your church. Your expectations are often too high, though, and you are often disappointed. Once in a while, you're pleasantly surprised. Your natural reaction to life is to lower your expectations, even dropping them altogether. You find, over time, a safe place in the middle; not too high and not too low. You define for yourself realistic expectations.

I am being way too kind about this, though, painting you in the best possible light. There's a darker side to this. Behind your expectations is your desire, no, your need, your deep-seeded demand for control. When your expectations are not met, when you are either disappointed or surprised in people or products or possibly even yourself, you change your expectations because you do not like the feeling of being out of control. When your expectations are met, life is, in a sense, in your control.

This morning, your Lord addresses you and your expectations. He knows your cynicism that masquerades as realism. He knows your frequent disappointments, rare surprises, and need to feel in control. That is why He aims to shape your expectations of Him and His kingdom. He tells two parables that illustrate His kingdom, how it comes and how it works, so you can know what to expect from Him.

Jesus uses the phrase "kingdom of God" in the first verse of our text from Mark four. What is the Kingdom of God? In His Large Catechism, Martin Luther answers, "[God's kingdom is s]imply what we learn in the Creed, namely, that God sent His Son, Christ our Lord, into the world to redeem and deliver us from the power of the devil and to bring us to Himself and rule us as a king of righteousness, life, and salvation against sin, death, and an evil conscience. To this end He also gave his Holy Spirit to teach us this through His holy Word and to enlighten and strengthen us in faith by His power."

Let me highlight two things. First, the kingdom of God is not a place but a person. The presence of King Jesus defines the kingdom. Second, the kingdom of God is not a place but an action. The activity of King Jesus defines the kingdom. Wherever Jesus is present and active, the kingdom of God is happening. Jesus is present and active today by His Word. So, the kingdom of God is happening now and our prayer "Thy kingdom come," is fulfilled today, even as we wait for it to come and happen on the Last Day.

We can see this in Jesus' first parable. The kingdom of God is like a farmer who plants seeds, waits, and then harvests. We all know there's more to farming than that, but Jesus is aiming at the issue of control. The farmer doesn't have it. He is at the mercy of soil, wet weather, dry weather, warm weather, cold weather, lack of the right kinds of bugs, too many of the wrong kind, weeds, and the life cycle of the plant itself. Jesus teaches that God's kingdom is *God's* kingdom. It is out of our control.

What do you expect from God's kingdom, from His congregation here? "*Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord,*" James says. "*See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand*" (James 5.7-8). Jesus uses this parable to teach you to be faithful and patient and to shape your expectations of God to act when and where He wills.

Jesus' second parable compares God's Kingdom to a mustard seed. If the first parable teaches faithfulness and patience, dedication to sowing the seed and dependence on God to cause the growth, then this second parable teaches discernment. Don't judge God's kingdom to be weak on account of the small seeds. Small seeds grow into large plants. So, when God's kingdom is planted, it might look small, weak, and vulnerable, it might sound like an inconsequential promise of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name, but it will grow all the way to eternal life.

God's kingdom is *God's* kingdom. He does not operate like you might nor use the methods and means the world might expect. He uses His Word to work trust in His promises when and where He wills. So, we pray "Thy kingdom come," with an emphasis on whose it is and we keep on sowing the small seeds.

When you open up the Bible or Portals of Prayer or open a devotion in your inbox and read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest God's Word, God is sowing small seeds. Sometimes you just go through the motions with those devotions. Do they *do* anything? Well, Jesus forms your expectations today. You might expect little or nothing, but it is *God's* Word you are dealing under His kingdom and He uses those little words toward big ends; that you might "embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life." So, keep sowing those small seeds.

What about your prayers before meals, or bedtime, or big decisions? What about the prayers you throw out there in the car or in the grocery store? Sometimes at the people in other cars or in the grocery store. Sometimes it's habit. Sometimes its heartfelt. You pray "Thy kingdom come" and you don't feel a thing. Don't worry about it. Just keep sowing the small seeds.

What about worship? Sunday after Sunday, God goes to work. Ezekiel describes it well: "*I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it.*" He is in control, doing His thing in His time and His way. He calls the loud and proud to repentance and the repentant to forgiveness and life. He sows small seeds in a small church with a small group of people who expect the Lord to do great and awesome things.

What about teaching little people as their parents or grandparents? This is a reason to celebrate Father's Day. I don't even want to think about all the things I knowingly or unknowingly pass down to my kids. I know my own Dad gave me plenty to work through. But He trusted in, relied upon, and taught me to know Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. We are talking about small seeds of trust in, reliance upon, and faith in Jesus. God uses those small seeds in big ways, doesn't He?

We have a Vacation Bible School day coming up. It isn't a week. It's one, little day, not with hundreds, but with a handful of kids. But we expect God to use small seeds and make them grow to be great and mighty.

God's kingdom is the presence and activity of Jesus. He works by the power of His Spirit through the words of Holy Scripture. Those words sound weak, and vulnerable; easily ignored and quickly forgotten. But Jesus is teaching you to expect, anticipate, look for, trust in, and rely on *God* to do great and mighty things with small seeds. He is in control of His Church, of this church. So, we keep sowing those small seeds and we keep expecting Him to be present and active. He will not disappoint.

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# *The Spirit of Our Victorious Lord*

Mark 3.20–35 for Pentecost 3B (Proper 5B) on June 10, 2018

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

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## **Bulging Battle Lines**

Toward the end of World War II, Germany went on the offensive. They targeted their Western Front along Belgium, France, and Luxembourg. They threw 200,000 men, 340 tanks, and another 280 vehicles against that Allied Line in an attempt to split it and force the Allies to sign a treaty.

The Germans called this the “Operation Watch on the Rhine” after the river they crossed. The French called it the “Battle of the Ardennes” after the forest through which the Germans came. The Americans called it the “Battle of the Bulge.” 610,000 Americans were involved in what was for us the largest and bloodiest battle in World War II.

We called it the “Battle of the Bulge” because, while the Germans did not accomplish their mission, they did make a dent in the line. The military maps from December 1944 and January 1945 show a bulge narrow, north to south, but deep, east to west, that first emerges and is then erased. Of course, the Allied forces prevailed both in the battle and in the war.

Think about the image of that battle line. On a map, it seems so clear, doesn't it? But that's deceptive. War is never that clear. The battle lines are never that well defined on the ground.

## **Mark Chapter Three from the Scribes' Side**

There's a battle in Mark chapter three. The Jewish scribes that had come down from Jerusalem thought they had it all mapped out. They thought they knew who the enemy was and where the battle lines were. Their assessment went something like this: Ever since His Baptism, Jesus exercised authority over demons. They could not deny that. They had all heard about what happened in the Synagogue in Capernaum. Jesus had been teaching and everyone was amazed at His authority, but He was interrupted. A man stood up in the middle of the sermon and shouted, “*What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God*” (1.24). Jesus had been calm. He simply rebuked the man and said, “*Be silent, and come out of him!*” (1.25). Since then, Jesus had been going around Galilee preaching and casting out demons countless times. Now, demons are clearly the enemy. There is no doubt about that. But what about Jesus? They had all heard about His Baptism. He had received a spirit that day, people said. And ever since then He had seemed to be in tune with possessed people. He seemed to know how to handle them. They supposed that it was possible that He actually had authority over these demons, but Jesus is just a man and no man has that kind of power. It makes more sense to believe that His authority is twisted, underhanded, and disguised. It makes more sense to believe that an evil spirit descended on Him when He was baptized. So, here's the assessment: Jesus knows, understands, and can control possessed people and their demons because He is possessed by “*Beelzebul*” and “*by the prince of demons he casts out the demons*” (3.22). That makes Jesus the enemy to those who thought they had it all mapped out.

“Beelzebul” comes from Hebrew. It means “Lord or master of the house.” The whole passage turns on this question. Who is the Lord of the house? Who is the master of the domain? It's not what it seems.

### **Mark Chapter Three from Jesus' Side**

How did Jesus see this battle? Were the scribes His enemies because they opposed Him? No. His Enemy is Satan who wants control and destroy the very same people Jesus came to save. So, Jesus gets out the war map. If Jesus is from Satan and is casting out Satan's demons, Satan's house will fall. That will happen in the end, not because he has a mutiny on his ship, but because there is a Stronger Man who has entered his house to tie him up and throw him in the corner. Now, Jesus has free reign. He can plunder the goods; the people Satan has locked up and deceived and possessed.

Imagine the battle within the God-man. He has broken into this house to free people captivated by sin, death, and the devil, but those people have been behind enemy lines so deeply and for so long that they don't know who real enemy is anymore. So, when the Holy Spirit of God descends not like a dove but like a bomber, when He invades peoples' lives in order to free them through Jesus Christ, sinners see Him as a threat. They blaspheme Him. They reject the only One strong enough to save them.

Imagine Jesus' battle with you. You think you see so clearly. In reality, you cannot see anything at all.

### **Christ the Victor and the Spirit of Our Victorious Lord**

At His Baptism, Jesus received not an evil spirit but the Spirit of God. Immediately, the Spirit threw Him into intense conflict with Satan that would not stop after forty days in the wilderness. This is the Spirit of War against God's enemies who sees the battle clearly. That is why He inspires Jesus, the promised head-crushing offspring of Eve, to give Himself over to His captors to be tried, beaten, and killed. Satan gets Jesus and crushes Him. There was not only a bulge, but a full-blown breach in the line. The enemy won. God would have to sign a treaty with Satan. But by the power of the Spirit, Jesus rose as our sin-forgiving, death-destroying, and Satan-stomping Lord. He's the Strongest Man.

The irony the scribes could not see is something we need to see today. The Spirit the scribes thought was evil is the Spirit of God the Father and it is the Spirit of our Victorious Lord. Jesus has given that Spirit to you and to His entire Church through Baptism. That Spirit is not floating around somewhere, unknown, waiting to be discovered. He is not a fuzzy feeling. He is not speaking to you in riddles through your dreams in the middle of the night. This Spirit is present here in the Church and working through God's Word for a very specific purpose: to bring you to Christ and to bring Christ to you. Apart from the Spirit, we would be like those scribes, confused about the battle lines and ready to fight against Jesus in league with Satan. But thank God the Spirit invades and declares war not only on us and our sin in order to save us, but on Satan and this world and all their influence on us and all their power over us.

Today, the Spirit of the victorious Lord is given to you for the battle. Yes, Jesus' victory was full and final. Yes, Jesus' victory will be ours on the Last Day. Yes, Jesus' victory is our victory even now by faith. But until then you battle and the Spirit is given to you for that purpose.

### **Our Battles in View of Final Victory**

Where are your battle lines? What is the conflict you face? Who is the enemy? What is his strategy?

Satan, the deceiver, is the enemy. He simply wants to destroy you by destroying your faith in Christ, your trust in His victory for you. His strategy is subtle. He tells you how strong you are. He wants you to believe in yourself to you battle him alone. We are alone when we refrain from receiving God's gifts of Word and Sacrament. We are alone when we do not come together as Church, as is the habit of some. We are alone when we do not depend on Christ and His Spirit to fight and win our battles for us.

When we are alone, we cannot see clearly. We start thinking the battle lines exist between us and other people. We forget the battle lines exist in our own hearts. We get caught up in self-preservation and self-defense. And that is when Satan has us. It all turns on that simple word, "Beelzebul," "master of the house." Who is the Lord? Who is the master of the house? The minute we put ourselves in that spot and draw the battle line around us is the minute Satan has us. There can only be one master and one Lord of your house and it isn't you.

While Satan has you fighting for yourself, the Spirit comes to attack you, to tie up your strong sense of self-reliance, and to destroy all the idols; the accomplishments, possessions, ideas, and relationships that makes you feel secure. It's on the crosshairs of the Spirit of God. Satan comes and says, "Don't let Him get away with that. You have to retain your dignity. You are the master. You are the lord." But Jesus keeps sending His Spirit through His Word to bring you to repentance. You and I are sinful and dying people. You and I are prideful beyond what we can ever see. You and I are God's enemies. But you and I are lost without Him. We cannot make it on our own.

And when the Spirit brings us to that point, He turns us to Christ. Christ alone makes the battle lines clear again. He alone gives victory. He alone is Lord and Master. That is why the Spirit has brought you here today. He confronts you with His Law and brings you to repentance. But He also comforts you with the Gospel and reminds you of your Baptism. He forgives you and strengthens you for the battle.

Sometimes the work of the Spirit looks more like the work of Satan. He seems to be bent on destroying you. But that is a merciful thing. Christ, the Strongest Man, leads you to eternal victory. Until then, there will be battles and there will be losses and bulges and breaches, and it will be difficult to see the battle lines. But we do not lose heart. *"For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal"* (2 Corinthians 4.17–18).

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## Our Sabbath Rest

Mark 2.23–28 for Pentecost 2B (Proper 4B) on June 3, 2018

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.*

### Rest

Memorial Day is past. School is wrapping up this week. People are outside walking and biking, mowing and grilling, making vacation plans, going up north. It's playtime. It's rest and relaxation time. But, in all the excitement, we somehow forget that our pursuit of rest leaves us even more exhausted than we already are. We need vacations from our vacations. We're ready to come back to work even before we leave it, ready to *accomplish* something for a change. Accomplishment addiction, of course, is the other extreme. We can ignore our need for rest and work because it makes us feel good. We're a mess, aren't we? We oscillate, like fans, between over-rested and overworked, unable to find the right balance.

Why? Because human sin has cursed creation, including our attempts at real rest. Our versions of rest are futile, (Romans 8.20), meaningless, a striving after wind (Ecclesiastes 1.14). We think rest is about us. There's the Law for you. And, as we seek it, we ignore our neighbors and reject Jesus as our Sabbath Rest. You know He is the only One who can satisfy your soul.

### Jesus and the Pharisees

The problem is, this text from Mark chapter two really isn't primarily about rest. I know there's the issue of the Sabbath, but Mark is making the point, early on in his Gospel, that Jesus brings something new, that Jesus is someone new. In the verses just prior to our text, Mark records Jesus' words, "*No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins*" (Mark 2.21–22). So, Jesus is incompatible with old ways of thinking and acting. Jesus is someone new who has come to tear, burst, and destroy old ways of thinking and acting. That's the point of our text.

So, what is the old thing, here? It's Pharisaic religiosity. Translation: self-centered, self-serving religion. The Pharisees were worried about being right and, in this case, getting the Sabbath right, so they built a fence, a bunch of little laws, around God's Law to avoid any possibility of breaking it. Reaping, and, by extension gleaning, was one of the 39 types of work forbidden on the Sabbath by Pharisaic regulations. And we thought Germans were nitpicky! So, when these Pharisees saw Jesus' disciples gleaning on the Sabbath, they confronted Jesus: "*Why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath*" (Mark 2.24)? But it wasn't the Law of God that was transgressed that day, it was Pharisaic tradition.

Jesus tears this garment and bursts this wineskin by recalling 1 Samuel 21. David, the golden king from the golden era, ate the priestly Bread of the Presence. He and his men were hungry. It's not gleaning on the Sabbath, but it's something that transgressed religious tradition without transgressing the Law of God. By pointing out the underlying principles of God's Law, Jesus burst Pharisaic religiosity.

So, what is the underlying principle behind the Sabbath? Jesus says, "*The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath*" (Mark 2.27–28). In other words, people weren't made for the Sabbath as if the Sabbath was the point. Instead, people are the point. The Sabbath was made for people. What is the purpose of the Sabbath? What does Deuteronomy 5 say? It

says that the Sabbath is observed to *remember* that God created people and the rest of this world and that God redeemed His people from slavery in Egypt. Sabbath is worship, that is, God's people resting in God's work for them. In a word, Sabbath is *faith* in God's work for us. So, when the Pharisees made the Sabbath about the Sabbath, and getting the Sabbath right, doing the right thing, they missed the point of what God does for them. So, Jesus flips their paradigm upside-down and gives them something new.

More than that, Jesus *accomplishes* the new thing, works the new thing. As the Lord of the Sabbath, He is the One who works while His people rest. As He worked in creation and in the Exodus from Egypt, so He went to work by becoming a man, by living the Law of God and fulfilling it by love. He did not use the Law for His own benefit, but for ours! In fact, in love He went way beyond what is lawful to work our salvation on the cross. Then He rested. For three days, even on the literal Sabbath, Jesus rested. The work was accomplished and, on the third day, He not only burst open the tomb, but all our sin, all our transgressions against the true Law of God and the death we deserve because of them, He destroyed.

### **Jesus and Us**

It's easier to be a Pharisee than a disciple of Jesus. We're right because of our right actions versus the world that's wrong because of their wrong actions. It's all neat and clean. We're in. They're out. That is self-centered and self-serving religion. But our Pharisaism goes even deeper than that. We assume, in our old, sinful nature, that our own morality is the basis for our relationship with God. That He looks on our behavior to determine how to deal with us. But Jesus is the basis for our relationship with God. Our morality isn't thrown out, even as Jesus didn't come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. But now, in Jesus, our morality is a response to Him. But it isn't for us so we can feel good about what we can accomplish, it's for our neighbor. So, Jesus comes to tear, burst, and destroy us in order to make us new.

### **Return to Rest in Jesus**

I think we can now come back to the topic of rest. Our rest has been corrupted. We think it's about us, about making up for what we've lost, getting back what we deserve, and helping us get back to accomplishing more for ourselves. But Jesus teaches us something new. Rest is received from Him, the Lord of the Sabbath, and He gives it to us so we can serve others. This is what Paul is getting at in 2 Corinthians 4. The Christian life looks like the life of Christ. It's defined by love and sacrifice, because this is the way Jesus lives for you. Jesus' rest was prayer. His prayer sent Him to work. His work was for you. And that's what this Lord's Day is all about. He, who neither slumbers nor sleeps, tirelessly works salvation for us, not only when a spear burst His side and He burst the tomb, but today when He bursts into our old world through His Word and Spirit. Today, He works on us and in us that we might rest in Him and His work for us by faith. Faith is our rest; trust in God's promises and His work to fulfill them in Jesus. And there is a promise about rest. Jesus says, "*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*" (Matthew 11.28–30). He's talking about faith in Him. He works for us. He pours Himself out, right here at this altar, for us in love. We receive Him through this Meal by faith. He satisfies the hungry soul. And now, we live and find our purpose in loving and serving the neighbor in Jesus' name.

In paradise, the Sabbath rest to come, work and rest will come together. No longing for work when over-rested and no longing for rest when overworked. Balance given, not balance achieved. But, for now, it's going to be off-balance. So, we wait and work, not to achieve worldly status or satisfaction, but to achieve the salvation of souls, so that many more might receive eternal rest in Jesus.

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

# *The Triune God for You*

Isaiah 6.1–8 for The Holy Trinity on May 27, 2018 (Memorial Day Weekend)

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 Doctrine**

St. Augustine said, “Anyone who denies the Trinity is in danger of losing her salvation, but anyone who tries to understand the Trinity is in danger of losing her mind.”<sup>1</sup> So, you cannot *deny* the Trinity and still be *Christian*. The writers of the Athanasian Creed make that pretty clear. But you cannot *understand* the Trinity and still be *human*. I think the writers of the Athanasian Creed make that pretty clear, as well.

A philosopher named Phillip Cary has summarized the doctrine of the Trinity in seven propositions. Here they are: (1) The Father is God. (2) The Son is God. (3) The Holy Spirit is God. So, there’s one God. (4) The Father is not the Son. (5) The Son is not the Spirit. (6) The Holy Spirit is not the Father. So, there are three distinct Persons. Then the clincher: (7) There is only one God.<sup>2</sup>

There are two basic ways to mess this up. You can either push too hard on the unity of God or you can push too hard on the three Persons. Both errors have been made in the history of the Church. Both errors are still made today. The real issue with trinitarian heresies is not just that they dissolve the three-in-one nature of Father, Son, and Spirit theoretically on paper, but, in so doing, they dissolve the salvation the Triune God delivers to sinners. Heresies aren’t just incorrect or inaccurate, they actual damn souls by destroying true faith in the true God. So, doctrine matters and we cannot get this point of doctrine *wrong* and still be Christian people, that is, people saved by the one God in three Persons.

## **The Texts**

So, let’s consider the texts for today in light of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

The Gospel Lesson from John 3 centers on Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus which focuses on Baptism. “*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*” (John 3.5). So, the Son refers to the Father’s kingdom and how the Spirit gives access to that kingdom through the rebirth of Baptism. In other words, the triune God loved the world and so the Father sent His Son to be lifted up and the Father and the Son send the Spirit so that people might believe in the Son and have eternal life (John 3.16). So, the Triune God acts to save the world from sin, death, and hell.

Peter’s sermon in Acts 2 is the same thing, but more specific. God the Father saved the world by sending His Son to die and rise again. Peter preaches the resurrection of Jesus and presses it toward His giving of the Holy Spirit. The risen Jesus poured out the promised Spirit from the Father and the Spirit, who was active on the Day of Pentecost, comes so that people might see, hear, and know Jesus Christ as Lord. Notice, too, that all of Peter’s trinitarian texts are from the Old Testament. The Trinity is nothing new.

Psalm 29 is a Psalm of creation. It refers to the Lord and His voice. When we go back to Genesis, we see the Word and the Spirit of God the Father active in creation. This Psalm praises the triune God for that creation. But, in the history of the Church, this Psalm is for Baptisms. Not only did God create when the

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Olson and Christopher Hall. *The Trinity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

voice hovered over the waters in the beginning. He *recreates* through water and the Word by the power of His Spirit. He gives us new birth and makes us new people. That's why we can know Him and praise Him. "*Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name [that is, Father, Son, and Spirit]; worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness*" (Psalm 29.2).

That brings us to Isaiah 6. The key theme in this text is *holiness*. God is holy, that is, sinless and separate. The triple "holy," the Trisagion, is both a reference to degrees of holiness and to the three Persons of the Trinity. He is completely sinless and separate forever. Isaiah refers to God as "the Holy One of Israel" 24 times in 66 chapters. It's who He is. But this text shows us what God does with His holiness. He shares it with sinners. The Holy God sends the angel to touch Isaiah's unclean lips and He shares His holiness with Isaiah. Sinful Isaiah is cleansed, separated, and then sent. Through Isaiah and His Word, the Holy One of Israel shares His holiness with all of Israel and makes them holy even as He is holy.

### **Holiness**

Grasp the irony. The most holy, that is, separate, God joins us sinners in order to make us holy. We see that in Isaiah 6, but we really see it in Jesus Christ. The Holy God became a man. He retained His purity. He was without sin. But He came to share divine and eternal life, divine holiness, with sinners. He touched sinners not with a burning coal, but with His hand of healing, His Word of rebuke, His Word of comfort and forgiveness. Most amazingly, He drove out the defiled darkness of the devil and brought the light of divine life when He touched the world with His body on the cross and died as a cursed and defiled sinner. We killed Him. God raised Him. He lives to share His holiness with this world.

### **Trinity Sunday**

So, the point, I am confident, is clear. The doctrine, the teaching of the Holy Trinity is not just an idea to be correctly understood. It is a relationship and a status to be received, believed, and lived. The nature of this Holy Trinity Sunday, then, is not only learning and teaching correct doctrine, it is that, but it also stepping back and getting a glimpse of the whole picture of God's salvation for sinners, all that He has done, will do, and continues to do for us, from beginning to end. It's a glimpse of the entire Bible and the entire Church Year. We're leaving the festival half of the Church Year where we celebrate the events of Christ's life, culminating in His giving of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, and we're entering the non-festival half of the Church Year where we celebrate the ongoing work of the Triune God to make sinners holy. That's the whole point. Every prayer, every worship service, every sermon, every Baptism all begin in the Holy name of the Holy God. This is the life of the Church and the life of the Christian. He touches us by His Word through the Means of Grace, and He makes us holy. That's what's happening today.

### **Baptism**

So, we not only confess the Trinity with our lips, we actually experience the Trinity concretely through Baptism in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It works like this: The Father sent His Son, who died, rose, ascended, and sent the Spirit who comes to sinners and touches them in Baptism. We cannot become holy apart from receiving the Spirit who is sent by the Father and the Son. The Son, who received the Holy Spirit in a unique way in His Baptism, in order to accomplish the holy human life the Father's holiness demanded, now gives us His Spirit for our salvation through Baptism. There is no forgiveness of sins, no resurrection of the body, and no life everlasting for you apart from the Son's gift of the Holy Spirit in Baptism. This is where the Triune God touches us and shares His holiness with us.

So, we confess the Trinity doctrinally, but we also confess the Trinity practically, in how we live. We can, in fact, confess the Trinity doctrinally but deny Him practically. It's also possible that we could get it right practically, without even knowing all the doctrinal formulations. Ideally, we'll do both.

## Holy Lives

How do we, then, confess the Trinity, not only doctrinally, that is “with our mouths,” but practically in our lives? In the Small Catechism, Martin Luther’s explanation of the First Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Hallowed be Thy Name,” goes like this: “God’s name [that is the Triune name – notice that he says ‘name’ and not ‘names’] is certainly holy [sinless and separate] in itself, but we pray in this petition that it may be kept holy among us also.” Here it is crucial to remember that God’s name was given to us in Baptism. So, the prayer “Hallowed by Thy Name” is not just that God would be holy in Himself, but that we, with whom God has shared His holiness through Baptism, would live holy lives in His name.

Luther goes on to ask, “How is God’s name kept holy?” He answers, “God’s name is kept holy when the Word of God is *taught* in its truth and purity, and we, as the children of God, also lead holy *lives* according to it. Help us to do this, dear Father in heaven! But anyone who teaches or lives contrary to God’s Word profanes the name of God among us. Protect us from this, heavenly Father!” Notice how Luther connects both things; confessing the Trinity doctrinally and confessing the Trinity practically.

The devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh, the unholy Trinity, challenge our holy lives every day. It’s simple. Satan tempts us to sin, to be like the world, to “sow to the flesh” and follow its desires. Once we sin, we feel defiled and distant from God. We see only the *unholiness* that God’s Word reveals. “*Woe is me,*” we say with Isaiah. We find it hard to believe the Word that touches our ears and cleanses our souls and makes us holy on account of the Holy One of Israel, Jesus Christ. We actually deny the Trinity when we only confess our sin but fail to believe that God has shared His holiness with us. St. Paul says that everything “*is made holy by the word of God and prayer*” (1 Timothy 4.5). So, God’s Word makes us holy and He calls us to trust that today, even though we do not see it.

In his book, *Grace upon Grace*, John Kleinig retells a story from his friend, Ruth. Ruth was on a trip to India with a tour group. At one point on the tour, the tour guide, who was an Indian Hindu, offered to tell everyone’s fortune. Everyone let him do it. He went down the aisle of the bus and read the palms of everyone’s hands, except for Ruth’s. He skipped her. Later on in the tour, she asked him about it. He said, “You’re a Christian, aren’t you? I can’t see you and your future.” She hadn’t said anything. She wasn’t wearing a cross or anything. But she had been praying for the spiritual protection of the people who were having their fortunes told. The Hindu perceived what not even Ruth could see about herself. She was separate, holy. So, everything is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

You cannot see it now, but you are covered with God’s holiness. He has shared it with you in Baptism. You have received it from Him through His Word and you borrow it from Him every time you listen to His Word and pray to Him. Isaiah borrowed God’s holiness. He would go on seeing himself as a man of unclean lips who had been cleansed by God. That’s how it is with us. But Isaiah was also sent to share the holiness God shared with him. That’s how it is with us, as well. The triune God calls you to confess Him by sharing His holiness. You can share it with how you live, that is according to His commandments, trusting in God above all things and loving your neighbor as yourself, but you can also share it like Ruth did, by praying for others who do not yet know the Triune God. Everything is made holy by the word of God and prayer. May we confess this faith with our lips and also with our lives.

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

## *Convicted by the Spirit*

John 15.26–27, 16.4b–15 for The Day of Pentecost on May 20, 2018

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.*

My introduction to Wisconsin came when we moved to Missouri. We came from Michigan to Missouri and moved next door to a family from Wisconsin. The mother was not bashful about anything, especially about the superiority of her State. Truth be told, she was loud and opinionated. I believe she was the one who first told me that they misnamed Lake Wisconsin. I think she believed that. You can thank her for forming my opinion about the rest of you from an early age. Isn't everyone from Wisconsin just like her? Maybe not, but it's not hard to find an opinionated Wisconsinite. We even have a travel book that says, "pick an issue and Wisconsinites will passionately be . . . involved."<sup>3</sup> Well, that's a nice way to say it.

That passion is a far cry from "Minnesota nice." I learned what that meant living there. It doesn't mean people aren't opinionated. It just means they'd rather not tell you about it. Don't rock the boat. Keep it to yourself. Leave it alone. So, they might be nice, but that's just to your face. Well, I probably pulled a little "Minnesota nice" on our Wisconsinite neighbor in Missouri. It wasn't worth the fight.

People are people and people have opinions. We are all convicted about lots of things. You can hear it in your own voice when it happens. I know my children have normal speaking, shouting, and then full-throated, conviction-screaming. They get passionate sometimes. You hear it from yourself, as well.

The mirror of God's Law, or, maybe better, the voice recorder of God's Law, would point out the ugly, dissonant truth that we are all way too convicted about all the wrong things. To simplify it, we are convicted about the temporal things when we ought to be convicted about the eternal things. Who cares what State you're from? Where do you stand in relation to Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords? Why aren't we full-throated about Him and His imminent return? And this word of Law is not just for the opinionated, unbelieving world. It's also for the opinionated, unbelieving Church.

Jesus draws two circles in our text: world and Church. We might picture two, separate circles opposed to one another. Jesus sees two circles circumscribed. A larger circle is the world, everyone everywhere. A smaller circle within that larger one is the Church, those called out of the world. Both are called to repentance by Jesus because both are filled with all the wrong convictions and both receive the Spirit.

The world is convicted about injustice and inequality but cannot seem to find a way to make things right. The world is convicted about the uncertainty of religiosity, that is, the Church, and, at the very same time, quite convinced about the benefits of their Spirit-less spirituality. The world is convicted about letting everyone have their own truth but remains unconvinced about the One who is the Truth.

The Church, on the other hand, is convinced that we are morally right and the world is wrong, but that often disintegrates into self-righteous self-justification rather than the message of the Righteous One. The Church is convicted that we are theologically right, but we are too nice and too afraid to make a scene. In fact, there's a hint of embarrassment about our mission, about the conversion of souls. What would happen if we were actually convicted that the world is lost and that Christ is its only hope?

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Huhti, *Moon Handbooks: Moon Wisconsin* (Avalon Publishing, 2011): 453.

The point is, Christ sends His Spirit to both Church and world, to both prideful Pharisees and hedonistic Prodigals, to both the moral and immoral, to both the religious and the spiritual. Jesus says, *“When he comes, he will convict the world”* (16.8a). This loud-mouthed, opinionated world can only be silenced by the Word of God that convicts it and declares it completely guilty in the court of God’s Law. *“When [the Spirit] comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer [that is to say, He is the only righteous one]; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged”* (16.8–11). On the one hand, this spells the end of the world. On the other hand, the cross of Christ changes how we hear “sin,” “righteousness,” and “judgment.”

While we might be convicted of everything except Christ, complete with our full-throated shouts about who knows what, Christ is convicted about us, and He shows it in His silence. Filled with the Spirit, Jesus, the only Righteous One, lets Himself be judged by this sinful world. How ironic. While Pilate convicted Him and the crowds screamed “Crucify,” He did not defend Himself, but took the world’s rejection and turned it into the world’s salvation. He did not come to condemn the world but to save the world.

But the world cannot hear that Good News until the Spirit convicts it of its own sin, lack of righteousness, and imminent judgment. The world can only see how good He is when it sees how lost it is. The world can only see how beautiful He is when it looks in the mirror and sees just how repulsive it is. We are citizens of that world confronted by the Word and convicted by the Spirit.

But the Spirit comes also to proclaim the Truth that Christ cancels sin, gives us His righteousness, and takes on Himself the judgment we deserve. And there are those from the world who hear the Spirit speaking Christ, become convicted of their need for Him, and believe in His Good News of salvation. They are called the Church. The Spirit continues to show us our own sin, unrighteousness, and judgement, in so far as we are still of the world, but the Spirit now also leads us into Truth, not as a philosophical concept, not as a set of ideas, not as personal opinion, and not as a lifestyle choice. The Spirit leads us to Truth as the person of Jesus Christ.

So, while the world is convicted about unrighteousness, and the Church is convicted about self-righteousness, no one seems to be convicted about Christ’s righteousness. No, not one. Except there is One. He Himself is our righteousness. He sends His Spirit of Truth to convict the world in their need for Him and to lead the Church to Him.

This is the ongoing Ministry of Christ by His Spirit through the Word in the Church. Christ sends Him among us again today. He calls us to repentance, to faith, and to life in His name. It might start with us as the Church. But it does not end with us because the ongoing Ministry of Christ has a worldwide scope. So, the Spirit comes to convict us, to fill us with Christ’s passion so that we might give full-throated, convicted witness not to our own truths, but to the Truth who is Jesus Christ.

*Give us lips to sing Thy glory, Tongues Thy mercy to proclaim, Throats that shout the hope that fills us, Mouths to speak Thy holy name. Alleluia, alleluia! May the light which Thou dost send Fill our songs with alleluias, Alleluias without end!*

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

# *Caught in the Middle but Confident in Christ*

John 17.11b–19 for Easter 7B on May 13, 2018

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.*

## **Caught in the Middle**

How does it feel to be caught in the middle? Somehow, somehow, you find yourself right in the middle of it. You didn't see it coming, but you're too deep to do much about it. It's not a pleasant place to be.

The Christian Church in the United States and the rest of the West is caught in the middle. We anticipate a changing world, but somehow it never ceases to amaze us. We knew the Church was far from popular, but, somehow, we've become, very quickly, much worse than that.

Pilgrim is caught in the middle between an illustrious history and an uncertain future. There are challenges of transition, decline, and survival. Maybe we saw it coming, maybe we didn't. Either way, here we are, caught in the middle of it.

Even this day, the Seventh Sunday of Easter is a Sunday caught in the middle. Last week, we celebrated the Ascension, the ascent of Christ as the almighty King of the universe. Next week, we will celebrate the Day of Pentecost, the descent of the Spirit who brings Christ's rule to people and to the Church. That leaves us caught in the middle today.

So, culturally, organizationally, and even liturgically, we mirror the disciples who were caught between Jesus' ascent and the Holy Spirit's descent. Theologically, it's not just a matter of being caught between Christ's exit from and reentrance into this world. It's a matter of standing between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, between what God says and what the world says, between the Spirit and the flesh. That is not an easy place to be.

## **John 17**

Jesus, our Great High Priest, the only Mediator between God and man, the One who came from heaven to this world in order to bridge the gap and work reconciliation, understands where the Church is. In fact, He stands there, puts us here with Him, and prays for us. Caught between a three-year earthly Ministry and a Holy Week of Passion, Jesus prays, *"I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth"* (John 17.15–17).

Let's not skip too far past the simple point that Jesus prayed and that Jesus continues to pray. Even now, He intercedes for us without ceasing. It's Good News because He doesn't need to pray for His benefit. He prays for our benefit. He stands between. He mediates. Our prayers flounder. His excel. He is perfect in prayer. He is the Righteous Man whose prayer is powerful and effective. He stands with His Church, with us, caught in the middle, and He prays.

What is the purpose of prayer? The purpose is asking and believing. Jesus does that perfectly and He invites us to trust Him and follow Him. What is the point of this prayer? Jesus asks His Father to hold on to, guard, and protect His Church. Caught in the middle of so much, it is God who holds it all together.

Notice the three relationships Jesus prays for: communion with God, protection from the evil one, and unity within the Church. We are caught in the middle of all of those things, with the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh constantly attacking them. The prayer for God to hold it all together comes down to the work of the Word. God's Word gives us communion with the Father through the forgiveness of sins, it sets us apart from the world and makes us holy as He is holy. God's Word also protects us from the evil one, just like it protected Jesus when He was tempted in the wilderness. Finally, God's Word's gives us unity where opinions and preferences might otherwise rip the Church apart. So, Jesus asks His Father to hold on to, guard, and protect His Church through His Word and His Father answers.

## **Fear**

And yet, so often, the Church, caught in the middle of all this, has responded not with prayer, not with asking and believing, but instead with fear. Where did the disciples go after Jesus was buried? They went to the Upper Room for fear that both the Jews and the Romans would come for them next. Instead of asking and believing, they locked the doors and were filled with fear.

When we were baptized, all with the same Baptism, we were set apart from this world. God took hold of us and made us His own. We went from enemies of God to enemies of Satan and aliens in this world. Our home is with God. But, for a little while, we are caught in enemy territory, and Satan is using anything and everything to disrupt communion with God, protection from evil, and unity within the Church. He wants to destroy us. And just like those disciples, we are tempted to be afraid. That's what Satan wants; fear that keeps us from being Christ's church. There are two dangers for a fearful Church.

On the one hand, the fearful Church is in danger of getting too close to this world. Out of fear of being irrelevant and homeless, the Church looks to make a home in the world. This is not just about official doctrine. This is not just for those church bodies that have left the truth of Scripture in order to sound less offensive to the world. This is about you. You are tempted, every day, as one called out of the world, to live as though this world is your home. And, if you look at your life, it will be very clear that every thought, word, and deed looks way too much like this world, and not nearly enough like Jesus. You are continually molded and pressed and shaped by this culture rather than molded and pressed and shaped by God's Word. You are too close to this world.

On the other hand, the fearful Church is in danger of getting too far from this world. Out of fear of being contaminated, you remove yourselves from the people of the world, the people out there, and only spend time with people who look, think, and sound just like you. You are too far from this world.

It is fear that drives both of these things. On the one hand, we are afraid that the world will reject us and we will cease to exist. When we're afraid of that, we move closer to this world and try to find comfort in the fact that this world has embraced us. But when we sound like the rest of the world, why should the world listen? On the other hand, we are afraid that we will become too much like the world and forget the mission Jesus' gave us. When we're afraid of that, we move away from this world and find comfort in the fact that we are different than them. But how can this world hear us if we are too far away? So, our fear drives us to be both too close and too far from this world. We are close in the way we think and act, but far in the way we are too scared to let our faith be something that goes beyond these four walls.

"All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing." That's attributed to an eighteenth-century Irish philosopher named Edmund Burke. "All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing."

Adam was afraid, so he remained silent when Satan lied. Some of Joseph's brothers just went with the other brothers' plan to sell Joseph into slavery. Aaron just stood there and let Israel build that golden calf. So, when the fearful Church is pathetically silent and apathetically inactive, Satan wins.

### **Confidence**

But, Jesus asks His Father to hold on to, guard, and protect His Church through His Word and His Father answers. Where fear might paralyze the Church, God gives confidence. We can have confidence today because Jesus was caught between His Father and this world. Satan would tempt Him and try to make Him believe that this world was too far gone, that we weren't worth it. He would tempt Him to stay close to God and away from this world. And at the very same time, Satan would tempt Him to give up His name, the Son of God, and give in to this world.

Physically stretched out between God and you, Jesus is tempted by Satan to let go. But He doesn't. He holds on to you and me and this whole world, while at the very same time holding on to His Father and the mission God had given Him to do. Stretched out, He prayed, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*" (Luke 23.34). That's His sanctifying truth and that stretching killed Him. We killed Him. But God raised Him from the dead. His death brought a holy God and a sinful world back together. His resurrection solidified that communion for eternity. So, there's confidence in Christ.

Confident in Christ, the apostles chose a replacement for Judas. That's our First Lesson for today. They cast lots, but they confidently trusted that it was God's decision.

Confident in Christ, John writes a letter to the Church and says, "*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life. And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us*" (1 John 5.13-14).

Confident in Christ, we are caught in the middle, stretched thin not only by the demands of life in this world, but by the call to be God's Church. But we are confident in Baptism that calls us out of the world, makes us holy, and joins us to Jesus. We are confident in prayer because we pray in the name of Jesus, the Righteous One, the only Mediator between God and man. We are confident in Christ's return on the Last Day when He will rescue us from this world's destructive end and give us a place in paradise. And we are confident in God's Word of Truth that He speaks today to give us communion with the Father, protection from the evil one, and unity with one another.

In that light, we are in a very good place. We are caught in the middle, but that is for our benefit. Being stretched between God and this world keeps us dependent on the Lord and dependent on His Word. It keeps us in prayer and coming back to worship for strength and rest and renewal. It keeps our relationship with the Lord alive.

Being caught in the middle us also for the world's benefit. We have a Word from God to speak to them. It's the Word of forgiveness, life, and salvation in Jesus Christ. It's the message of reconciliation with a God who seems so distant from real people who have been caught up in the mess of this world. So, God has you caught up in this mess, caught right there in the middle of it, just like He had His Son Jesus, so that you, and His whole Church, might have a chance to speak Jesus to the world.

So, Church, do not be afraid. Be confident in Christ.

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

# *The Church under the Ascended Lord*

Ephesians 1.15–23 for The Ascension of Our Lord on May 6, 2018

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 Ascension of our Lord**

Today isn't Ascension Day. That's pretty clear from your bulletin cover based on John 15.12, which is the Gospel Lesson for Easter 6. Ascension is not until this coming Thursday, forty days after Easter, as Luke records in Acts chapter one. So, why celebrate Jesus' ascension today? Because we don't want to miss it and most of us would if we didn't celebrate it today. What would we miss? Five things: 1. Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit, 2. Jesus' promise of His own return, 3. Jesus' ongoing ministry in heaven, 4. Jesus' ongoing ministry on earth, and 5. the hope of our own ascension with Jesus.

## **The Texts**

1. Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit is there in Acts 1 where Jesus tells His apostles to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father. They would receive power to be His witnesses starting in Jerusalem, spreading to Judea and Samaria, and moving out to the ends of the earth. Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit is there in Luke 24 where Jesus sends His apostles to preach but says that their preaching will be energized by the power of the Holy Spirit. But first, Jesus must ascend.

2. Jesus' promise of His own return comes in Acts 1 through the angels: *"This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."* But first, Jesus must ascend.

3. Jesus' ongoing ministry in heaven is there in Ephesians 1 where Paul declares that He has not only been raised from the dead, but seated at God's right hand, that is, on God's throne, far above all rule, authority, power, and dominion. Everything is, right now, under His feet, and He rules everything for the sake of His Church. He rules everything for you. But first, Jesus must ascend.

4. Jesus' ongoing ministry on earth is there in Luke 24 where He says that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations. In other words, Jesus promises to *descend*, not only on that Last Day, but today, by His Word and Spirit, in order to be active in ongoing Ministry throughout this entire world and to all people. But first, Jesus must ascend.

5. Finally, the hope of our own ascension with Jesus is there in the Collect of the Day: *"as Your Son ascended into the heavens, so may we ascend and continually dwell there with Him"* and then comes the confession that Jesus *"lives and reigns."* But first, Jesus must ascend.

## **The Significance**

What does it mean, then, to be the Church under the Ascended Lord? What's the significance for us today? Well, Luke gives us the historical data of the Ascension in the Gospel and in Acts and then Paul gives us the significance of the Ascension in Ephesians chapter one. Notice Paul's prayer for the Church. He thanks God for the Church's faith in Jesus and for their love for all the saints. That's the vine, branches, and fruit Jesus told us about last week, by the way. Then Paul prays that the Church's knowledge of the crucified, risen, ascended, reigning, and returning Lord Jesus would result in what? He prays that the Church, *"might know what is the hope to which He has called you."*

Today, Paul's prayer for the Church is my prayer for you. Thank you, God, for this congregation's faith in the crucified, risen, ascended, reigning, and returning Lord Jesus. Thank you for their love in Jesus' name for one another and for Your whole Church. Heavenly Father, give this congregation knowledge of Jesus by Your Word and Spirit that they might know what is the hope to which You have called them.

Your hope is grounded in the fact that the Jesus who ascended, who promises His Spirit, who promises His return, who is engaged in ongoing, active ministry both in heaven and on earth, and who gives you the hope of your own ascension with Him, this Jesus is the same Jesus who died on the cross for you and rose from the dead for you to save you from your own sin, from death, from eternal punishment in hell, and from the devil. In other words, the one who now has all power over you is the same one who has all love for you. Therefore, the Church under the ascended Lord is a Church filled with hope.

### **The Church under the Ascended Lord**

Faith looks back to the past, where it hears the promises of God, sees His action, and believes in Him. Love lives in the present moment, loving others in the name of Jesus and in the way He has loved us. Hope is oriented toward the future and is the confidence that Jesus will set everything right in the end.

What gets in the way of our hope? Two things. Hope in not-Jesus and cynicism. They go together.

First, hope in not-Jesus. Paul doesn't pray for the Church to have hope in general. He prays that the Church would know what is *the* hope to which God has called them. *The* hope, the only hope in this life, is Jesus. So, why do we hold out hope for anything else? Take any problem we face as individuals, as families, as a Church, as a society, and think of everything that gives us hope for better. People are sinful and they will fail us. Money is limited and it will fail us. Health is a ticking-time-bomb and it will fail us. Jesus is the only hope for this world because only Jesus has dealt with our biggest problems called sin, death, and hell. The whole world is destined for destruction, destined for hell, eternal separation from God and eternal punishment and the only hope for this world is Jesus. He is the only one who can fix the problems we see and the problems we face. That's what Ascension means. Jesus is our hope. He's coming again and He'll make all things new for those who believe in Him. So, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, we do not bow down to any other Lord or put our hope in anyone or anything else.

Except we do, all the time. Lord, have mercy. That's why Paul prays for the Church. Because when all these other not-Jesus things fail us, we lose hope and we get cynical. I don't think that's a bad thing, actually. I think the Church that believes and celebrates the Ascension of our Lord is free to be the most cynical group of people in the world when it comes to all the world's messed up ways of trying to fix it's messed up self. We of all people know it's all destined for disappointment and destruction. If anyone can call it what it really is, we can. And yet, being the most cynical, we can also be the most hopeful, filled with true hope for a world that will be made right when Christ comes again. So, how might you live today in a way that shows that you don't want anyone else to miss that the only hope is in Jesus?

Jesus is Lord of all. Some knees have not bowed, some mouths have not confessed, but all will. Ours do today. Knowing Jesus as Lord results in faith that He has loved us in the past and even descends now to love us through Word and Meal. Knowing Jesus as Lord results in love that descends to others as He has descended to us. But knowing Jesus as Lord also results in the hope that holds onto His promises of His Spirit and His return when He will save us from the wrath to come and make us ascend with Him. Then, everything will be right. Then, all the puzzle pieces will be put together. God grant it for Jesus' sake.

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

# Connected to Christ

John 15.1–8 for Easter 5B on April 29, 2018

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

It's not that a connection to Christ has happened in the past or might happen in the future. It's that a connection to Christ is happening today by the power of the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacrament to bring Christ's own life to you that He might work through you to the glory of God the Father and the benefit of others. Very simply, the connection to Christ is called faith and the fruit is called love.

I tried to think about an illustration that used electricity, but that's too mechanical. I thought about an illustration that used the idea of trying to get into a high-profile place alone instead of with someone important who can grant you access, but that's too self-centered. So, I've concluded that I cannot improve on Jesus' image in John 15. Go figure.

*"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides [remains] in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."* Jesus' image is a living connection that is *happening* in the present tense. It also has an obvious opposite; there is *nothing* apart from Christ, in fact, there is destruction and death. It is also oriented toward a purpose outside of ourselves. So, today we'll take some time to explore this image, asking where our connection to Christ happens, where it falls apart, and what God's purpose is in our connection to Christ.

## First, where does our connection to Christ happen?

The most foundational connection between God and people is creation. He is the potter, we are His clay. We are all the work of His hand (Isaiah 64.8). He formed our inward beings. He knit us together in our mothers' wombs (Psalm 139.13). How can you be more connected than Creator and creature?

But creation is also the most foundational *disconnection* between God and people. We are all born disconnected from our Creator, born enemies of Him and destined to die apart from Him. We are all disconnected branches that should be picked up, piled up, and burned up.

And yet, already with Adam and Eve, God speaks the promise of recreation and reconnection. Isaiah expresses that promise like this, *"There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit"* (Isaiah 11.1). Even though we have no hope or life in us, God promises to supply it. He went beyond Creator/creature connections in the fullness of time when He sent forth His Son into creation, the true vine with true life, and fulfilled His promise to reconnect and recreate. Now, trust in Christ is our reconnection to the Creator, and, as we've said, it's called faith.

Catch the mystery. Jesus is eternal. He was there at the beginning as the Word through whom God created the world. He is *"of one substance with the Father."* He is Creator and not creature. But, in order to bridge the gap and reestablish a connection with creation, He put on skin and stepped in (1 John 4.2). Why? Because He loves people and does not want to see His creation picked up, piled up, and burned up. So, He takes what we deserve. He gets stretched between God and humanity, between perfect Creator and sinful creation, and He dies disconnected from both. His resurrection reestablishes a living, vibrant connection between God and man. Again, we've called it faith, saving faith.

Many Christians stop right there. They stop with our connection to God in Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection. But God does not stop there. Remember Jesus' image is present tense, it is *happening* today, but where, now that Jesus is ascended and, as our Introit says, "*we see Him no longer*"?

Look at Acts chapter 8 and the Ethiopian eunuch. God made the first move and connected that man to Himself through a message from the Prophet Isaiah. But that text would not have made sense unless someone, like Philip, had come along not just to explain it, but to *preach* it, to say to that Ethiopian eunuch, "This Jesus came into the world to live, die, and rise *for you*." And somewhere along the line, Philip must have taught the fourth chief part of the Catechism on Holy Baptism because when the Eunuch saw water, He wanted to get in it and be *connected* to Christ in *that* way.

So, God's connection to us in Christ through faith is an invisible, spiritual thing, but it is also a *physical* thing. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are not man-made instruments of religion, but Christ-established means of grace, that is, points of connection. He became incarnate, physically, and He continues to break into this world today in the same way. As John says in the Epistle Lesson, "*Jesus Christ has come in the flesh*" (1 John 4.2). So, our connection to Him is also *in the flesh*. "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you*" (John 6.53). And, in fact, Jesus speaks the image of the vine and the branches in the context of the first Lord's Supper (John 13.1).

It's not that a connection to Christ has happened in the past or might happen in the future. It's that a connection to Christ is happening today by the power of the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacrament to bring Christ's own life to you.

### **Second, where does our connection to Christ fall apart?**

Where does a *disconnection* result in dead branches getting picked up, piled up, and burned up? It's easy to say that the disconnection is sin and unbelief. It's another to experience these things.

Let's deal with the disconnection of sin. Everyone has a conscience. When it gets pricked, you can ignore it or you can try to justify yourself. Ignoring your conscience leads to searing your conscience, making you callous. Justifying yourself, on the other hand, is a never-ending pattern of guilt, defensiveness, and fear. You are only concerned with being right. If you succeed in justifying yourself, it leads to pride. If you fail in justifying yourself, it leads to despair. So, sin and conscience lead us to a disconnection from God because we're not relying on Him to do something but operate as if it's up to us.

Sin can only be dealt with in one way; forgiveness, God's forgiveness in Christ. Being connected to Christ by hearing His promises and receiving His Supper does not ignore sin or seek to justify it, but recognizes it, forgives it, and delivers a clean conscience. Everything that you have done that would separate you from God and leave you disconnected from Him for eternity, He has dealt with and forgiven. If you doubt that, come and receive His forgiveness again right here in this connection to Christ today.

Let's deal with the other disconnection of unbelief. Unbelief happens in at least three ways. One extreme is the outright rejection of God. Some people have simply made up their minds that they do not and will not believe or trust in a God they cannot see or scientifically verify. That's listening to the world rather than God, and we pray that the Spirit would work the miracle of faith in people by His Word.

Some people fall away slowly. It might begin innocently enough at first, but the longer they go without the Word and Sacrament connection to Christ, the more the apathy turns into complete rejection. A coal out of the fire won't last long.

Some people, though, wrestle with unbelief because of the realities that God has imposed on their lives. He brings crisis or tragedy, and sometimes those things can cloud the connection to Him or cause it to completely evaporate. God puts His promises in direct opposition to our experiences and He calls us to question and struggle. The only answer to those questions is the cross. You cannot explain God away, or make it seem like suffering is good. You can only look at the fact that the true vine, filled with divine life, was cut off from God, picked up, piled up, and burned on our behalf and in our place so that we might know that no matter what God asks us to go through, He will not disconnect Himself from us. That's already happened once for all in Christ, so that it will never happen to you.

### **Finally, then, what is God's purpose in our connection to Christ?**

Just as Jesus is stretched between God and man on the cross, you and I are stretched between Christ and this world in our vocations. As we've said, it's called love. Listen to John's way of describing it in our Epistle, *"In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another"* (1 John 4.7–11). That is the purpose of our connection to Christ; to love as we have been loved.

Today, Christ will pour Himself into you again. He will connect you to Himself through the fruit of the vine. He will fill you with Himself so you are forgiven and prepared to bear fruit. He will fill you with His love so that you are able to love those around you. When we recognize what actually, physically happens at the Lord's Supper, that He is in us and with us wherever we go, then we will bear fruit and our lives will demonstrate His presence. The invisible connection of faith is made visible in love.

### **Conclusion**

If we live disconnected from Christ, we will be connected to some other source of identity and purpose. It's the way the Creator made us. We're designed to be dependent, to be plugged into something, to be grafted into something. It's just a question of what. We're like appliances that are useless without electricity. Apart from Jesus, there is nothing but death. And, in the meantime, there is a long, slow process of emptiness and nothingness. If we live connected to Christ by faith, on the other hand, we have everything. There is life, forgiveness, peace, and purpose both now and forever.

It's not that a connection to Christ has happened in the past or might happen in the future. It's that a connection to Christ is happening today by the power of the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacrament to bring Christ's own life to you that He might work through you to the glory of God the Father and the benefit of others. Very simply, the connection to Christ is called faith and the fruit is called love. Thanks be to God for making the connection happen among us again today.

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

# *He Is the Good Shepherd*

John 10.11–18 for Easter 4B on April 22, 2018

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 Metaphor**

I've been reading The Brothers Grimm to the kids lately. I've been doing that at night, before bed. That's a rookie mistake. These fairy tales aren't exactly G-rated. It hasn't seemed to impact sleeping, though. Recently, we read the story of *The Wolf and the Seven Little Goats*. Let me summarize it.

Before a mother goat leaves her little ones for the day, she warns them about the wolf. "Be on your guard. If he comes here, he will eat you all up. You will know him by his rough voice and his black feet." "Dear mother," the goats reply, "we will pay great attention to what you say; you may go away without any anxiety." Sure enough, the wolf comes knocking at the door, pretending to be the mother goat back from her trip. He wants in. The goats recognize his rough voice and tell him to go away. So, the wolf goes and swallows a piece of chalk to make his voice gentler. The wolf comes back a second time, knocks on the door, and says he's the mother goat, but the goats look out the window and see his black feet and tell him to go away. So, the wolf goes to a baker who puts dough and flour on his feet to make them white. Carefully and thoroughly disguised, the wolf returns, knocks on the door, tells the goats he's their mother, and since the voice and the feet check out, they open the door. The wolf swallows six of the seven kids whole. The youngest one got away because he hid in the best spot. Full and satisfied, the wolf falls asleep. Then mother goat returns, finds her home ripped apart and all but one of her kids gone. But then she finds the wolf sound asleep. She gets a pair of scissors and cuts him open. Out pop six little goats who had been swallowed whole. She then fills the wolf's stomach with stones and sews him back up. When the wolf wakes up, he goes to the stream to drink, falls in, and sinks to the bottom. The goats celebrate singing, "The wolf is dead." Like I said, it isn't exactly G-rated.

The issue at hand is vulnerability and protection. There is a massive hole in the middle of the story. Why did that mother leave her goats unprotected? Or, as we hear so often, where's the father? Maybe the mother is alone with her kids. Maybe she has no choice but to leave them completely vulnerable to the wolf. In any case, when that wolf comes, where is their protector?

## **The Shepherd**

*"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep"* (John 10.11). There is no gaping hole in *this* story. Jesus stays with His sheep, protects His sheep, and dies for His sheep. He puts His life down, gives it, with intentionality and purpose, in order to satisfy the wolf and protect His sheep.

In the context of Scripture, and especially the Old Testament. There are two other aspects of the Shepherd image to add to the Shepherd as Protector. Jesus is God and Jesus is King.

First, Jesus is God. Seven times in John's Gospel, Jesus says, "I Am." That's the name God used for Himself with Moses in Exodus 3. In John's Gospel, Jesus says that He is things that the Old Testament said God would be. Jesus says, "I am the bread of life" (6.48–51), "the light of the world" (8.12), "the door" (10.7), "the Good Shepherd" (10.11), "the resurrection and the life" (11.25), "the way, and the truth, and the life" (14.6), and "the true vine" (15.1). When Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd," He is saying I am not only a protector, I am the God who created the heavens and the earth who protects you.

Second, Jesus is King. In the Old Testament, Shepherd and King come together. Israel's greatest king, David, was a shepherd boy. God "*chose David his servant and took him from the sheepfolds; from following the nursing ewes he brought him to shepherd Jacob his people*" (Psalm 78.70-71). But, there were also bad kings of Israel who "*acted as shepherds who treated their sheep like prey.*" So, God declares, "*I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep*" (Ezekiel 34.15). John's Gospel proclaims that Jesus fulfills this promise. In John chapter one, Nathanael says, "*You are the king of Israel.*" In chapter six, after having fed the 5000, the people try to make Jesus their king. In His entry into Jerusalem, the crowds celebrate Him as the "*King of Israel.*" But it all comes together in chapters eighteen, nineteen, and twenty. Pilate questions Him about being the King of the Jews. The people refuse Him as their king. Just before he sends Him to be crucified, Pilate says, "*Behold your king.*" Finally, the inscription on the cross read, "*Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.*" This King reigns from the cross. The Good Shepherd has authority to lay down His life and He has authority to take it up again (John 10.18).

We recently watched the Winston Churchill movie, *Darkest Hour*. It's worth watching. There's a scene showing King George. He had been encouraged to leave Britain and take his family to Canada in the event that the Nazis destroyed London. King George refuses. He stays in his country and with his countrymen. The difference, the gaping hole, if you will, is that King George's presence or absence really didn't make a difference other than the message that he cared. King Jesus did not abandon us in the battle. In fact, He sacrificed His life for our protection. When Jesus says, "*I Am the Good Shepherd,*" He says that He is the best King, the divine King, the eternal King who has and always will protect you.

### **The Pastor**

The contrasting image in our text is the hired hand. The hired hand doesn't care about the sheep or stay with the sheep. He's *hired* which means he's only worried about the paycheck. It also means he saves his own skin when the wolf comes. In Jesus day, the religious leaders were the hired hands who had left the people unprotected. They didn't care about the sheep. They cared about themselves.

Today, pastors are called pastors because they are supposed to be shepherds. In fact, when St. Paul describes the Office of Ministry, he calls it a "good, noble, and beautiful, task" (1 Timothy 3.1), the same word Jesus uses to call Himself a good, noble, and beautiful Shepherd. What does it mean for a pastor to be a shepherd? Well, it doesn't mean that they're kings. Although, many try to be. That isn't the Call, though, because we already have the best King. And, while the pastor is called to care for the Church and protect the people spiritually through prayer and preaching, the pastor cannot protect the sheep the way the Good Shepherd does. In the end, he's just one of the sheep. He has not laid down his life for you and it really wouldn't help much if he did. What does matter is that your pastor has cared enough to do the feeding function of a shepherd and has fed you the truth, the Good News you're hungry to hear; that you have a Good Shepherd, a good, noble, beautiful Shepherd named Jesus, who has not left you for a moment, but has stayed with you, protected you, died for you, risen for you, and will continue to stay with you forever. "*How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news,*" Isaiah says. And though my shoes are black this morning, like the wolf's in the story, it's no disguise. I bring the good news Jesus commands me to bring, just as He commanded Peter at the end of John's Gospel, when He restored Him three times and said, "*Feed my sheep*" (John 21.17).

### **The Wolf**

It's possible, though, that this message doesn't have the profound weight that it should for us. The Enemy is good at what he does. He makes his voice sound sweet and puts on a careful and thorough disguise. He gets us to open the door, let down our guard, and think we really don't need the Protector at all. We can be like overconfident little goats who are really just sitting ducks.

So, as your pastor, I am also called to warn you about the wolf. The wolf is also the snake from the Garden and the lion prowling around looking for someone to devour, but he makes himself look like an angel of light. What's his goal? He wants you concerned about yourself. He wants you doing what you believe is best for yourself first and foremost. That's the disguise. He wants you to think you can go it alone so he can get you alone, trusting yourself and living for yourself. Alone, you don't stand a chance, like a little goat who will get swallowed in one gulp.

When you forget God and disobey Him, when you hate or ignore the people around you, your heart and mind is actually aligned with the Enemy's, and your inevitable self-centered sin will lead to your own death and destruction, unless someone steps in to protect you. When you're focused on you, you're actually aligned with the wolf. If we only knew what Satan had designed for us, if we caught just a glimpse of what God has kept from us, we would not yawn through this message.

But you're not alone. You're here. You're hearing your Protector's promises, trusting in Him, together with your brothers and sisters, and praying that His protection continues. And your Jesus, who lives and reigns, hears and answers. He doesn't run away. He stands in to fight for you because He cares for you. He is your good, noble, and beautiful Shepherd. The Father sent Him to protect you, so He laid down His life to do just that. The wolf's problem is that he only thought he was satisfied. Jesus didn't digest well, a little like those stones the mother goat put in the wolf's stomach. Jesus exercised His authority and rolled away *the* stone. He didn't need someone to cut him out, He burst out of the wolf's gut and destroyed sin, death, and devil forever. Christ is risen. Alleluia!

### **The Sheep**

Finally, what about our lives as sheep of the Good Shepherd? What about living like people who are Protected by the Almighty God? It's not just about our comfort. The purpose of our protected lives is right there in this text. Jesus says, "*And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd*" (John 10.16). Who do you know who needs to hear this Good Shepherd's voice?

If we actually have a Good Shepherd, then we will be bold in proclaiming His salvation since "*There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved*" (Acts 4.12). What good is God's protection if we never use it or rely on it? Who cares what the world thinks of us? The apostles "greatly annoyed" the rulers with their preaching (Acts 4.2). But this proclamation doesn't stop with words. Sheep follow their Shepherd. So, if our Good Shepherd has laid down His life for us, then we, by the power of His Holy Spirit, follow His example. "*By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers*" (1 John 3.16). We might not literally die, but we very well may die to ourselves through the various vocations God calls us to fulfill. Who has God called you to love, serve, and protect? Who has God brought into your life so you won't be stuck on yourself? Who are those who are hardest to serve? Jesus came not to be served but to serve and that's how His sheep live, too, that many more may know that there is an Enemy who wants to destroy them and that many more may know the Good Shepherd who has and will protect them, now and forever.

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

# *Sons and Daughters of the King*

John 20.21–23 and 1 John 2.1 for Easter 2B on April 8, 2018

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.*

## **Children of God**

There are two texts for the sermon today. First, John 20.21–22: *Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”* Second, 1 John 2.1: *My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.*

As the Father sent His Son, so the Son sends the apostles, and so He sends you, that is, as a child of the heavenly Father, just as Jesus is His Son. And so St. Paul calls you *“little children,”* children of Paul through discipleship, but, more importantly, children of God through Baptism into Christ. You have an advocate with your Father in heaven, through the Son, Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the unique Son of God, the only begotten One, but He has given His Spirit to His Church and His Spirit makes you sons and daughters of God. *“I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty”* (2 Corinthians 6.18). The Spirit even gives us God’s own authority to forgive sin. So, Jesus is the unique Son of God, but He is also the One through whom we enter the family and become, ourselves, children of the Heavenly Father in His likeness.

You can actually consider the entire Christian life this way. You had your beginning in the faith through Baptism, which is a rebirth into the family of God, an adoption by God through which you become His very own. You will have our ending in the faith through resurrection like Christ’s and your homecoming to the mansions of your Father’s house. And in the middle, along the way, you receive identity, security, and meaning through this designation of sons and daughters of the King.

In other words, God has made you sons and daughters of the king, by grace, together with others, with an eternal hope and future, and you now live as His very own children who reflect your identity in Him and bear His name in all you say and do. That’s the Easter season. It’s also the prayer we’ve already prayed in the Collect of the Day, that *“we who have celebrated the Lord’s resurrection may by God’s grace confess in our life and conversation that Jesus is Lord and God”* In other words, our prayer today is that we, whom God has brought into His family, would be the children He calls us to be.

But we’re funny with this identity as children of God. On the one hand, we run and hide in this identity when we know we’re in over our heads with God. When life is too much or too complicated or we cannot find the answers. At those time, we like to simply rely on *“childlike faith.”* We like being children when it means we can just leave everything in God’s hands. On the other hand, we run away from this identity as children of God when we want to be and do our own thing. We’re alright if Jesus meant simple trust when He said *“whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it”* (Mark 10.15), but we’re not necessarily alright if that means submission and obedience.

So, as I asked the children this morning, and now I will also ask you. What challenges come from being children of God? What joys come from being children of God?

## **Challenges and Joys of Being Children of God**

As I've pondered those two questions, I've come to think of them as one question, because all of my answers cut both ways. So, here's my list: identity, discipline, dependence, and a longing for the future. There are challenges to each of those and joys to each of those.

### **Identity**

Let's consider identity. In our younger years, family and identity were very close, for better or worse. Family simply dominated the landscape of your life. But then there came a time when you wanted to do your own thing. You committed yourself to never parent your children like your parents parented you. You would not think like them, talk like them, or live like them. They were the worst. Some of that is legitimate, to be sure. Perhaps some of it not. But, many of us have walked the road of the lost son in Luke 15 who chose to consider his father dead and take the inheritance rather than remain under his father's roof. At the same time, many of us have also done the walk back home, as well. Perhaps our parents even ran out to meet us and welcomed us back with open arms. We matured and realized how good we had it as children. I realize, that's not everyone's experience. But the point is, regardless of your human family, as a child of the Heavenly Father, your identity is not earned or self-made, but given. You receive who you are by your relationship to the Father through the Son and in the Spirit.

All of this is reflected in this Easter season. It is possible to enter Easter focused on ourselves. After all, Lent was a time of self-reflection and self-examination. We can get stuck there sometimes, like kids. But Good Friday and Easter teach us the very important truth that we are not the hero of the story. Jesus is. He's the big deal, the one that matters, and we have, in Him, a loss of our own identity. In His death and resurrection, there is a real death and resurrection for us, as well; death to self and new life to God.

Of course, not everyone is willing to let go of their own, self-made identities. They would rather be this or that, whether it is achievement or skin color or gender. We find all kinds of ways to be our own people rather than receive an identity from God. St. John says it like this in chapter one of his Gospel, *"the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him"* (John 1.10b–11). Why? Because He came to dethrone us and take away our self-made identities. He has a better one for us. So, that passage continues, *"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God"* (John 1.11–13). Your identity as God's child is a gift from Him and therefore no one can take it away or even challenge it. You have been baptized into Christ. You are a child of God and you have security from Him you can find nowhere else.

So, being a child of God and losing your own adult, self-made identities is a wonderful thing. You could never become children of God with royal status and standing on your own, but you have it in Christ. Not only that, but we share it with each other. Psalm 148, that we read a little bit ago, paints a beautiful picture, all kinds of people from the greatest to the least: *"Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! Young men and maidens together, old men and children! Let them praise the name of the LORD"* (Psalm 148.11–13a). So, in receiving an identity as a child of God, you also receive a community, grounded in our relationship to the Father, oriented to Him in praise, and destined for eternity.

### **Dependence**

Let's consider dependence. The challenge is our desire to be independent. The joy, however, comes in knowing that the road of dependence upon God leads to a much more peaceful place than independence from Him.

Thomas gets so much grief for doubting, but we doubt, as well. Jesus is gentle with Thomas and He is gentle with you. He gave Thomas opportunity to trust Him and He gives you opportunity to trust Him. He gives you opportunity to come to Him with a confession of sin and trust Him for forgiveness. He gives you opportunity to go through a time of need and to depend on Him to provide. He gives you opportunity to experience the attacks of Satan who will rub your nose in your sin and get you to consider yourself less than a child of God and then call you to depend on Him for protection and victory.

So, you have a dependable Heavenly Father. *“The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him”* (Psalm 103.8–13). So, depending on Him is synonymous with believing in Him and that is both a challenge and a joy.

### **Discipline**

Let’s consider discipline. None of us like limitations, rules, boundaries that keep us from doing what we really want to do, but all of us recognize, especially with a few years behind us, that obedience to godly authority and to God Himself is a good thing. We wish more people would realize that. It is good for us, it is good for others, and it is good for our witness to the world. So, St. John says, *“By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments”* (1 John 5.2).

Obedience is part of discipline, but discipline goes beyond that. God’s discipline is spiritual struggle. *“The Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives”* (Hebrews 12.6). When God disciplines, when He causes struggle, when He sends Satan into action against us with a spiritual attack, it doesn’t feel good. There is injustice. Simple obedience is easier. But, we know from our experience as children turned adults that struggle, hard things, even failure, are good for us. God *“disciplines us for our good”* (Hebrews 12.10). *“For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it”* (Hebrews 12.11).

So, there is a real challenge when God asks us to undergo some discipline and learn some lesson or grow in some virtue like faith, hope, and love, but the joy comes in knowing that we cannot grow up and mature in any other way. You know, sometimes I hear people pray to God that “everything goes smoothly.” When was the last time that happened? I also question how God-pleasing that prayer is. What if our prayer, rather than asking God to remove every obstacle and make life easy was to ask God to give us an increase of faith, hope, and love through the things He causes us to experience? I think we might then appreciate both the challenge and the joy of discipline as children of God.

### **Longing for the Future**

Finally, let’s consider our longing for the future. When we’re young, we can’t wait to grow up. We think the longing will finally stop. It’s doesn’t. We long for different and better just as much as we did then. The truth is that your life as a child of God is marked by a longing for the future God has in store for you when you will have a fully mature, sinless, glorified, resurrected body in the likeness of the risen Lord Jesus. Paradise awaits you; no more tears, sadness, or death, only life in the presence of the Father. That makes whatever we experience today a whole lot lighter. As St. Paul says, *“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us . . . [which later he calls] the freedom of the glory of the children of God”* (Romans 8.18, 21).

So, if we are children of God now, what will we be in paradise? St. John says, *“Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is”* (1 John 3.2). In other words, you will be conformed to the image of God’s Son, Jesus (Romans 8.29). St. Paul says, *“my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you”* (Galatians 4.19). We are growing up into Christ. He is our goal. Therefore, we live today in His name, by His grace, and in His footsteps.

### **Conclusion**

So, children of God, the Father has given you an identity, He invites you to depend on Him, He disciplines you for your eternal good, and He has promised you a future in His house forever. You are a child of God, no more and no less, and that can be a challenge, but it will be an eternal joy. As Psalm 149 says, *“let the children of Zion rejoice in their King”* (Psalm 149.2).

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