

Easter Triumph, Easter Joy

Luke 24.26–49 for the Third Sunday of Easter B on April 15, 2018
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Ev. Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wis.

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

What does it mean to be the Church in light of Easter? Last week, the theme of “children of God” gave us an answer. We have our identity in God, we depend on Him, we undergo God’s discipline, and we long for the future He has in store for us. In a word, God calls His Church to be faithful in light of Easter.

Today, we can answer that question, “What does it mean to the Church in light of Easter,” with some language from our Collect of the Day that asks God to give us “perpetual gladness” and “eternal joys”. The Church in light of Easter is filled with Easter joy. Luke twenty-four says that when the disciples saw the risen Lord, they “*disbelieved for joy.*” That disbelieving joy gave way to “*great joy*” later in the disciples, just after our text, and continued to fill them as they went out as apostles with the message of repentance and forgiveness in Jesus’ name and in the power of His Holy Spirit.

At that heart of both of these things, being a faithful Church and being a joyful Church, is one, very simple and profound truth: Jesus lives. If Jesus lives, then Jesus is active today. If Jesus lives, then Jesus is present today. And from this simple truth, that Jesus is alive, we have eternal joy.

Luke twenty-four sounds very similar to John twenty from last week. Jesus appears to His disciples after His resurrection. He proves that He is risen. He greets them with peace. And He gives them a mission to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins.

So, let’s get this right. Jesus’ resurrection is not an idea. It is not a metaphor. It is not an analogy. Jesus’ resurrection is an historical fact. It is proven. As Paul says, “*It did not happen in a corner.*” The world has witnessed it and it is a verifiable fact. Jesus was raised from the dead not as a ghost, but as a bodily person, with scarred hands and feet, with flesh and bones, and with a fully-functioning digestive system.

And no one should have been surprised. It’s all there in Scripture; in Moses, the prophets, and the psalms. All those Scriptures point to Jesus and Jesus fulfills all those Scriptures. He alone can open minds to understand the Scriptures. He alone makes sense of what they say. It’s all about Him.

And why did He suffer and rise from the dead on the third day? Look at our text. So that “*repentance and forgiveness of sins*” would be “*proclaimed in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.*”

Those apostles went out into a hostile world that hated God, hated Christ, and hated them. But they went out as eye-witnesses of the single event that has changed all of human history. They went out with power from on high, the presence of the Spirit of God, just as Jesus promised. And, they went out with great joy; a joy this world cannot understand and cannot overcome. We know that because of part two of this Gospel, the Book of Acts. And we’ll hear more from Acts in a minute.

Like the resurrection, the message of forgiveness is not an idea or metaphor or analogy. It is a reality grounded in the risen and living Lord Jesus. If He is not alive, forgiveness in His name means nothing. But if He is alive, forgiveness in His name means everything; resurrection life, eternal salvation, eternal joy.

But just as the resurrection was difficult to believe, even for the people who saw Jesus, disbelieving for joy, so the *message* of the resurrection and the *message* of forgiveness that flows from it is difficult to believe. In fact, it's *impossible* to believe. No one can believe in the Lord Jesus Christ or come to Him except by the power from on high, the power of the Spirit. And just as Jesus was so gentle and patient with His disciples after His resurrection, and taught them and taught them and taught them in patience, so he is patient with us and teaches us.

The disciples got to hear, see, and touch the risen Lord. We rely on their eye-witness account. But we do hear the Lord today through His Word. And we do touch the Lord today through His Supper. He is living and He is present here today with us no less than He was with them. And He is still working through the message of repentance and forgiveness of sins in His name.

You know, there are two kinds of people who need to hear the message of repentance and forgiveness. *Unbelieving* people need to hear that message. But *believing* people need to hear this message, too. In the other two lessons for today, we have examples of these two different kinds of people hearing the same message of repentance and forgiveness that flows from the living Lord Jesus present with us today. Peter addresses *unbelievers* in Acts 3 and John address *believers* in 1 John 3.

We could probably spend a weekend digesting Peter's sermon in Acts chapter three. The bottom line, though, is that Peter calls *unbelievers* to repent and believe in Jesus as their Savior. This is exactly what Jesus sent Him to do in Luke twenty-four. And Peter does it with confidence and boldness and joy, clothed with power from on high. In fact, five thousand men repented and believed.

And then John comes along, not to call *unbelievers* to faith, but to call *believers* to repentance and a life lived out in the reality that Jesus is risen and that God has made them His children. John calls believers back from sinful habits and sinful attitudes and unrepentance, and calls them to continually live out the identity God has given to them. And John does that with boldness and confidence and joy. In fact, his whole purpose is the certainty of salvation: "*And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming.*" In other words, if we believe that Jesus is with us now and always, our lives will begin to conform to the God's will, not perfectly, but in a repentant and joyful way that looks to God to complete what He has begun.

So, the Church is called to be *faithful* and *joyful*. Both of those things are grounded and rooted in the fact that Jesus is alive. And the message of the church, repentance and forgiveness of sins, goes out to both *unbelievers* and *believers*. And both of those kinds of people are confronted with the simple and profound truth that Jesus lives; He is with us and working for us today.

This is the message for you: Jesus is with you. He is present here for you. You have abandoned Him. You have lived as if He were dead. But Jesus lives and He comes today to you and invites to repent and believe yet again. He is so patient. And He invites you to receive Him in His Word and in His Meal and to be filled not with fear – whether that be fear of Him or of this world or of the future – but with joy, eternal joy, that comes from sins forgiven and the promise of resurrection in Him.

Here are a few points about joy. What is it? It is a gift, a fruit of the Spirit: "Love, joy, peace . . ." Beyond that, joy is something that only comes through struggle, sorrow, and suffering. You can't have the resurrection without the cross. You can't have Easter joy without the struggle. That's why there are often "tears of joy," because it comes through struggle and even in the middle of struggle. It is a joy that is unattached to circumstances and even exists in spite of them.

So, how do you get this Easter joy? Well, we've already said it's a gift. So, you have to *receive* it. You cannot get it by creating a perfect situation or by willing it into existence. It's not like "making a choice to be happy." You cannot choose joy. You have to ask for it. Jesus through His Word and by His Spirit gives it. Seek first His Kingdom and everything else will be added to you, including joy. We ask, we depend, we wait, and He listens and gives and delivers. The whole point is that He is alive!

Perhaps read Franzmann's example, "Pray for Joy."

We look for joy in the things we can see. We look for joy in temporal things. But visible, temporal joys distract you and pull you away from the eternal joys of faith in Christ. And they pull you away from the joys of living out the reality that He is with you wherever you go and through whatever you experience. But Christ is living and He is present here, today, for you. So, receive Him and rejoice.

I'll close with the last two stanzas of the hymn "*At the Lamb's High Feast We Sing.*"

*Easter triumph, Easter joy! This alone can sin destroy;
From sin's pow'r, Lord, set us free, Newborn souls in You to be. Alleluia!*

*Father, who the crown shall give, Savior, by whose death we live,
Spirit, guide through all our days: Three in One, Your name we praise. Alleluia!*

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.

Welcome Home

Mark 16.1–8 for The Resurrection of Our Lord, Easter Sunday on April 1, 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.

So, you've sided with the "fools" on this first day of April. That's the way the unbelieving world sees you. But Psalm 14 and 53 say the exact opposite: "The fool says in his heart 'There is no God.'" So, St. Paul proudly calls himself a fool for Christ (1 Corinthians 4.10) because "*God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God*" (1 Corinthians 1.27–29). Jesus is alive today and He is our wisdom from God (1.30). Thanks be to God that His Spirit has brought us here and made us fools for Him.

Looking for Home Here

Well, now that we've cleared that up, I can ask you why you are *really* here today. Why are you here? What are you looking for? Why come to church today?

There might be all kinds of reasons. It's expected. It's tradition. Maybe it's a family rule; no church, no ham for you! Maybe this is just the Sunday routine; the only difference is the wonderful breakfast we had. There might be all kinds of factors. Why are you here?

Think back to your childhood. Remember how you couldn't wait to get away from your parents? Summer comes. You finally get your chance. Maybe it's camp for a week or your grandparents for a few days. Somehow, you get some freedom. You forget your parents. You do what you want. Then the time is over. Your parents reappear. You see faces. You hear their voices. You get a lump in your throat. You embrace them and the tears flow. You feel like a complete fool. You didn't realize how homesick you were.

I don't know if you feel homesick today, or not, but all of us are here because we're all looking for home. We're looking to finally arrive, to stop longing for better. To be where there is no worry, no fear, no need, only love and comfort and safety. Where everything's right in the world. We don't want to ask if we're there yet anymore. We just want to hear those words, "Welcome home."

Looking for Home Elsewhere

We try to find that sense of home in this world. It's what we know. It's where we have families, build homes, and pursue careers. We learn how to make it all work and we try to *make* it feel like home.

The women who went to the tomb early Easter morning were in that kind of worldly mindset. In this world, dead people stay dead. So, they went expecting a closed and occupied tomb. Mark tells us how they were wondering who would roll the stone away. They expected a dead Jesus. He had been buried in a hurry and they were coming back to finish the job, while the rest of the disciples were hiding behind locked doors. What were those women looking for? A dead body to bury.

The Reality of Death

We do this at funerals, you know. We say weird things when people die. We sound just like everyone else in the world. “Well, it was their time to go,” we say. “They had a long and full life.” “Well, I guess the Lord finally had their place ready. He decided it was time to call them home.” What are we saying? You’re saying you expect death, just like those women did. You’re saying that death is just a normal part of life, just the natural end, like going to sleep at the end of a long day. You normalize it. You expect it. But God does not see death that way. Death isn’t natural or normal to Him. To Him, death is the real and horrible result of sin, but it was not part of His original plan for your life.

Deep down, you know that. Usually it comes out when death comes too soon. We can sense its infringement on life at those times. So, even those we try to soften it and make it sound normal, we’re also not willing to just take it. Death isn’t really part of your plan, either. So, you join the world and try to avoid it at all costs, all the while knowing that it’s coming, no matter what you do.

And the death that comes as the wages of sin isn’t that end-of-a-long-life kind of death, a “natural” death. It is the death that means eternal separation from God. That kind of death means never going home. It means longing for things to be better and never arriving there. It means hell. That’s the eternal home for fools who believe there is no God.

Christ at Home with Us

But, God sent His one and only Son into *this* world, your world. Jesus came to rescue you, not from every problem, not from all your suffering or discomfort, not from your life in this world, but to rescue you from your death, from your eternal separation from the living God, and from an eternity of longing for home.

Jesus finished what we could not have even started. And He did it by dying willfully and intentionally. He didn’t go at the end of a long, full life, but in His prime, at the age of thirty-three. His death was His life’s work and He did it for you. He died your death, the one you deserve, so that He might rise again victoriously and give you the life you do *not* deserve.

Those women went to the tomb focused on death, thinking this world was their true home. But there was an angel there who said to them, “*You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; He is not here.*” They were surprised, but that angel reminds them that this is exactly what Jesus had told them.

Our True Home with Christ

Why do we live and work and worship as though this world is our true and only home when Jesus has told us the exact opposite? Why do we reflect the world better than we reflect His Word? If the tomb is not Christ’s home, then the tomb is not your home either! Christ defeated sin, death, and the devil, and has shared His victory with you so that you have your true Home with Him. Because He lives, we will live also.

St. Paul says, “*If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory*” (Colossians 3.1–4). As Jesus promises, “*I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also*” (John 14.3).

Your life, your work, and your worship have a heavenly direction and destination. No matter what you are doing or dealing with, Jesus gives you hope and joy. This world is not your home. Let them consider you a fool for Christ! You are simply passing through, focused not on death but on Jesus who lives, reigns, and is returning. He is the Author and Perfecter of your faith who has prepared a place for you. No, you're not there yet, but you will be one Day, and, by His grace, you will hear Him say, "Welcome home!"

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

Prisoners of Hope

Zechariah 9.9–12 for Palm and Passion Sunday on March 25, 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.

Daughters need fathers. Daughters need good fathers. Daughters need good fathers who care for them, provide for them, and protect them.

God's people at the time of Zechariah, in the sixth century BC, needed a king. They needed a king like daughters need fathers. They needed a good king to care for them, provide for them, and protect them.

They had been a people without a home, without their own land, and without a king. They were returning from exile in Babylon and the future was not bright. It looked like their God had abandoned them. But Zechariah the prophet declares some very good news to them: *"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you."*

You and I need a king. We need a king like daughters needs fathers. We need a king to care for us, provide for us, and protect us. Today, I declare to you some very good news: Rejoice greatly. Shout aloud. *Your king is coming to you.*

While daughters need fathers, they don't always want to admit it. It hasn't happened to me yet, but I know it's coming; that point when dad is just a little out of touch, unaware, and pretty goofy. "He just doesn't get it." So, there's distance, separation, even rebellion. They might even walk away. But daughters need fathers, good fathers, even if they don't always want to admit it.

There's a bit of that rebellious streak in the people of God. They needed a king, but they didn't want to admit it. God seemed out of touch and unaware. There was distance, separation, and rebellion.

You and I are right there with them. We know we need a God, a King, a Father, but that means a standard, obedience, oversight. We push back, thinking we know better. Even though we know our King cares for us, provides for us, and protects us, and even though we need Him, we don't always want Him.

You know, our God will not stop us from walking away. Our Father doesn't force us to obey. But He does not let us have the last word, either. Our God loves us too much to just let us leave Him. He felt the same about His people in the Old Testament. That's why he sent them a king, not a good king, but King Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. He took Jerusalem and He took all the daughters of Zion away. God made that happen because He didn't want to lose His people.

In Zechariah's time, God's people are coming back from Babylon after about seventy years in exile. So, Zechariah addresses them as daughters, the daughters of Zion, the city of Jerusalem, but he goes on to call God's people something other than just daughters. He calls them prisoners. He says that they are prisoners of the waterless pit. Now that changes things. Daughters need fathers, but prisoners need someone to set them free. These are people that were spiritually trapped at the bottom of a waterless pit and that is not a place you want to be. How desperate would that feel?

You know, there are only two individuals in the Bible who find themselves at the bottom of a waterless pit. One of them is Joseph. His brothers didn't like him, so they threw him into a dried up well. What must have been going through Joseph's mind at that point? He was a prisoner. He needed someone to set him free. Some traders were traveling past and when the brothers saw them, they brought Joseph back out of that pit and sold him as a slave. So, God delivered Joseph from that hopeless situation at the bottom of a waterless pit.

Jeremiah the prophet is the other biblical figure who found himself a prisoner, trapped at the bottom of a waterless pit. Jeremiah had been telling the people of God that Babylon was coming, that Nebuchadnezzar was on his way to Jerusalem and was going to take their city, their land, and them away. They didn't want to hear it. They said, *"Let this man be put to death . . . for [he] is not seeking the welfare of this people, but their harm"* (Jeremiah 38.4). So, they threw him into a cistern, and the Scriptures say that *"there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud."* What must have been going through Jeremiah's mind at that point? He was a prisoner. He would die there, unless someone would set him free. Someone told the king what had happened and the king ordered him to be brought up and out. So, God delivered Jeremiah from that hopeless situation at the bottom of a waterless pit.

You and I are not just daughters in need of a father. We are not just people in need of a king. You and I are prisoners, spiritually trapped in a hopeless situation, sinking in the mud at the bottom of a waterless pit. We have rebelled against our Father and we have acted as though we'd rather not have the King we so desperately need. But the point is that God delivers people like that. He delivered Joseph and Jeremiah. So, God, through Zechariah today, says to us prisoners, *"Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double."*

So, while we might be prisoners, we are prisoners of hope, because there is someone coming who will set us free. We've rebelled, but our Father does not let us have the last word. We need Him and He knows it, so, He comes. He sends another King. Not a King to take us into exile, but a King who will be the One, the only One, who can and will set us free. *"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you."*

But who is this King who is approaching? Zechariah says He is righteous. That means that He is the rightful King and that He does right things. Most kings you and I know about are tyrannical and corrupt, but this King is righteous.

Jesus is the rightful King because He is God's Son. He does the right things all the time. He heals the blind and the lame. He has compassion on sinners and outcasts. He is falsely accused and tortured, but never opens His mouth with one word of rebuke. He simply says, *"Father forgive them for they know not what they are doing."* That is your King.

Zechariah also says that this King is *"saved."* Now, the translation we read a few minutes ago that's printed on your bulletin today says that He is *"having salvation."* But that's not really what the text says. It says He is *"saved."* It is passive. It's not that He is saving someone. Someone is saving Him. And that Someone who is saving and supporting and standing beside Him is God Almighty. And because this King is saved by God, the enemy cannot defeat Him. God is on His side.

Jesus is saved. The world rejected Him. They didn't throw Him in a waterless pit to die, they hung Him on a cross and buried Him. But He was raised. He defeated death. He rules over death. That is your King.

Zechariah says that this righteous, saved King is also humble. He comes *“not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many”* (Mark 10.45). Isaiah says that *“He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.”* That is your King.

And this King comes to Jerusalem knowing full well what they are going to do to Him there. He enters the city surrounded by shouts of praise. They knew He was a King, but they wanted Him to rule their way, with power and authority right then and there. But this King came to rule in His own way. This Lamb of God came to give His life for the lives of those people, and for you and me, not because He didn't have all power and authority, but because He is humble.

We don't like to admit it, but we are in desperate need of someone to set us free. Like people trapped at the bottom of a waterless pit, covered in the mud of our sin, and sentenced to death and eternal separation from God, we need someone to come along and pull us out. And that is the point. This King, with all the power and might in the world, sees us, sees every prisoner, every person in this world, sees that we've wandered, that we've walked away, that we've rebelled, but does not let us have the last word. He humbles Himself. He comes after us. He bleeds for us. That's the way His kingdom is going to be. He gives His life to save us. That is your King.

And only after He humbles Himself to stoop down and save our sorry selves He takes up His power and authority at the right hand of the throne of God, from whence He shall come again in all power and authority. He will come for you. He will come to gather His people and take them home forever. On that Day, we will do what Zechariah says: *“Rejoice!”*

In the meantime, the hope for prisoners like you and me is this: Our righteous, saved, humble King rules over all, and there is not a place on this earth where this King's peace cannot find you. There is no pit too deep for Him to reach you. And when He finds you, when He saves you, He washes you, feeds you, clothes you, and brings You back to the Father. He gives His peace, His wholeness, His restoration of our relationship with God our Father and with everyone else. All of that is yours today and, therefore, even today, we rejoice.

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

The New Covenant in Christ

Jeremiah 31.31–34 for Lent 5B on March 18, 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.

I was at the post office on Center Street last week. I wanted 240 postcard stamps, twelve sheets. We're sending out Easter postcards to new move-ins this week. My turn came. I told the clerk what I needed. He went back and looked in a file and said that he did not have that. I said what do you have? He said, "Nothing. We don't have any postcard stamps." I looked at him, considered a few choice words, but said, "I like your cross." He was wearing a gold crucifix. I didn't believe him. I didn't trust him. Cross or no cross. It's possible he was being straight with me, but I'm skeptical. So, what else is new?

You're skeptical. It's how we are. We don't trust people. Our guard is up. We don't want to get played.

The people who heard Jeremiah probably didn't trust him when he spoke the words recorded in our Old Testament Lesson. Their guard was up because they were a little remnant about to be annihilated. They had zero capacity for risk. The northern tribes of Israel were already gone. The southern tribes of Judah were preparing for the inevitable fall of Jerusalem. They were in survival mode, filled with fear and anxiety, knuckles white, bracing for catastrophe. In other words, God had them right where He wanted them. They were ready to hear some Good News, news almost too good to be true. God would speak it through Jeremiah. Would they believe it? Would they trust it? Or would they be skeptical?

There's really only one response: Run as fast as possible to the new covenant, the forgiveness of sins.

This new covenant was not like the old one. God made the old covenant at Sinai with two stone tablets. He had saved His people from slavery in Egypt and then called them to live as His people. If they were faithful to Him, He'd be faithful to them. They managed to wander away, though. No, they ran away. What was God going to do with that? "I was like a husband to them" and they left, they broke the covenant, they wanted to be with other gods, they wanted to be their own gods.

God responded not with divorce papers, but with a new covenant, a new arrangement based on a new promise of forgiveness. This covenant contains no conditional clauses, no "ifs," and no fine print. There is no reason to be skeptical. It's simple and it all turns on one word: "but." You have been unfaithful, but, in contrast, on the other hand, on the contrary, nevertheless, I will make a new covenant with you.

Do you think God cares about you? If you're asking that question, God has you right where He wants you. You're ready to hear some Good News. You cannot misread His commitment to you. What does He see in us? There really isn't anything. We've walked away, even ran away, so many times. But, in contrast, on the other hand, on the contrary, nevertheless, God loves you. Will you believe it?

Those days Jeremiah prophesied came. "*You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins*" (Matthew 1.21). And Jesus forgave. He saved people from the wrath of God by doing what only God can do (Mark 2.1–12). He forgave sin. Then, on the night He was betrayed, He took the cup and said, "*This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me*" (1 Corinthians 11.25). Jesus is our High Priest sacrificed Himself for the forgiveness of our sins. He is now your source of eternal salvation (Hebrews 5.9).

But Jeremiah's prophesy does not just point to forgiveness won, but forgiveness given. So, while his prophecy is certainly fulfilled in the days of Jesus, it's also fulfilled in the Day of Pentecost when the Spirit came and the Gospel was proclaimed. That's when the forgiveness Jesus won began to be given out. That's when access was granted to the source. So, Jeremiah's prophesy is fulfilled today in this Church, because, while Jesus won forgiveness on the cross, He didn't distribute it there. He distributes it to you today through His blood of the new covenant. He says, "*do this in remembrance of me,*" and we run to Him. The new covenant is here and it is ours when we believe it we receive it.

But, and here's the other side of that little word, nevertheless, we still walk away. We walk away from this beautiful, simple, covenant of God that centers on the forgiveness of our sins in Christ. We walk away from a God who loves us with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31.3). We go back to the old way. It comes easier. Old habits die hard. Old attitudes die even harder.

One way we go back to the old covenant is by sinning. That's a problem. The problem isn't that God can't forgive. The problem is that we forget who He has made us to be. God loves us while we are sinners but He does not want us to be sinners. He wants His Word to be written on our hearts and sin shows that it hasn't been written all the way yet. So, it's a daily battle between flesh and Spirit, old and new, living as a recovering sinner who fights sin because of our relationship with God.

God has an answer to our sin in His covenant with us. When we know our sin and feel it, He has prepared a place for us to receive His forgiveness. It's new every time. So, we run to where God is for us.

Another way we walk away from God and go back to the old is when we operate as if life is still based on merit. If it's based on merit, then I can deal with people the way they deserve. So, while God doesn't remember my sin, I record and catalogue all the sins of others, leaving out no fine print. How is it possible to receive and believe the new covenant with God and then act like nothing's changed with everybody else? It's not. One sin we continually fight is pride. James and John were there. They had sized up the competition and assumed they were on top. They wanted titles to prove it. We aren't much different. The new covenant has not been written on hearts all the way yet, like it will be in paradise.

Until then, how is it possible not to walk away from God? How is it possible to not only receive forgiveness but to give it and live in it? With man it is impossible. God the Holy Spirit makes it possible. He not only forgives, He shapes us. He makes us more like Jesus.

Jesus is the Suffering Servant. He "*came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many*" (Mark 10.45). That was a Good Friday for us, but then comes Easter, and then Pentecost, and then today when the Spirit descends and makes servants out of us. We go through Jesus' baptism and drink Jesus' cup not by dying on a cross but by dying to self. "*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me*" (Galatians 2.20). That's a new thing and God renews it in us by His Word. He writes it on our hearts and puts our feet into the footsteps of Jesus all the way home.

Let's not go back to the old but live in the new, renewed in our thinking, speaking, and acting. Let's run to where God is then stay there. Let's not just wear the crucifix, let's live it until He comes again. That will be the Day. On it, He will finally and fully make all things new, including us (Revelation 21.5). Until then, let's not be skeptics of God's Word, but believers and doers (Hebrews 10.19–25).

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

Healed and Healing

Number 21.4–9 for Lent 4B on March 11, 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.

Israel

Numbers twenty-one: *From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food."*

It's one thing to complain. It's another to accuse. Israel does both. In their impatience, they actually call God to account for why He brought them out into the wilderness to die. They would have rather lived in Egypt. They might have been slaves, but at least they were alive. At least they had food. Even though God provided for them in the wilderness, they say, "*there is no food*" and then they contradict themselves and call God's food "worthless." In rejecting the provision, they reject the Provider.

We have all complained to God along these very lines. We have thought about going back to when things were "better". We don't know how they were better, they just were. We'd rather go back than live now. But Israel didn't stop with that complaint, and neither do we. We not only long for the good old days, we actually doubt God's purposes for us today. "*It's pointless and God's gifts are worthless,*" Israel said, and isn't it amazing how Satan is able to get our minds in the same, faithless rut.

It's easy to point out problems. It doesn't take brains, skill, or virtue. But it does take faith to trust the Lord in the middle of problems. "*For we are [God's] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them*" (Ephesians 2.10). How does He prove good works but through bad times? How else can He prove who He is and who we are? So often, though, our complaints and accusations reveal exactly who we are.

Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

It's not that God has a sick sense of humor or enjoys the suffering and death of people who oppose Him. It's that He gives us over to our own, self-destructive ways (Romans 1). The people were confident they were there to die, so "*Many people of Israel died.*" But God used that to bring about repentance. "*Return to the Lord for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love*" (Joel 2.13). The downward spiral of complaining and accusing ended in dying, but God did not leave it there. He does not desire that anyone be condemned and die, but that all turn and live (Ezekiel 18.23).

It's easy to point out the problems. It takes faith to trust God in the problems and it takes faith to consider the problems as calls to repentance. But, God disciplines those He loves (Hebrews 12.6). And for those who turn to Him in repentant expectation, He acts graciously, giving the things that are not deserved, and, mercifully, not giving the things that are deserved. "*The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down*" (Psalm 146.8).

And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

So, through the mediator, Moses, God made a way for His people to live. They had brought about their own death. God rescued them from their self-destruction.

While we are tempted to follow Israel and look back, complain, accuse God, and get stuck in a downward spiral without hope or faith, we are called to look forward, confess, and praise God. We were dead in our trespasses and sins, but God made us alive in Christ. So, as St. Paul says in Philippians 3, *"Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."* Satan, the world, and our own sinful flesh pull us down in complaints and accusations against God. The Spirit, the Word, and our new nature pull us upward.

Jesus

You know, God could have told Israel to look at anything and it would have worked the same way. But God told them to look at a bronze serpent on a pole. By looking at it, they were healed.

Jesus is the one God has told us to look at (Hebrews 3.1). Look at Him, not as He was on the Mount of Transfiguration in all His glory, but as He hangs on a cross, like a bronze snake on a pole. There's the Healer of Souls, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This is why He came into the world, to give His life, that whoever would look at Him through the eyes of faith would be healed and live, not just a full and peaceful life in this world, but a full and abundant life that wells up to eternity.

God met His people in the wilderness at the bottom of a downward spiral. It went from complaining, to accusing, to dying and that's where God got busy saving. So, Jesus descends from heaven, enters the world, and meets us at the bottom. He deals with death by dying and rising that people who are caught in a self-destructive spiral might be caught up by the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

The Church

So, where do we see Jesus today? It's an important question. Where are we supposed to be looking for Jesus? Where can we find Him? Well, most of us look for Him where He has not promised to be. We look for Him in how well things go for us. But that's not where He has promised to be. We look for Him in how well things go for our family. But that's not where He has promised to be. We look for Him in how well things are going for our city or our nation. But that's not where He has promised to be.

Jesus has promised to be in Baptism, in the Supper, and in His Word that we hear and receive and speak to one another. He could have used anything, but He chose to use these. If this is what He says to do, that's what we do, because faith is simple trust in God's Word. St. Paul says it: *"For by grace you have been saved, and this is not of yourself, but the gift of God, lest anyone should boast."* God has made Himself findable for us in Jesus, just as He did for those Israelites in that bronze serpent. Why would we look for Him anywhere else?

So, we come to Church to see Jesus, to repent of our sin and unbelief, our doubts and worries, and to look to Him to receive healing and life. But, unlike a bronze serpent, Jesus is a living person. In other words, when we look at Him, He looks back. One day, we will see Him face to face, but until we do where does Jesus look back at us? It certainly isn't the water of Baptism, the bread and wine of communion, or the pages of the Bible.

Do you think those Israelites, when they looked up to the bronze serpent, might have also noticed each other? Wouldn't those who were healed notice the others who were healed? They saw God's presence and activity in the healing they shared. So, the verse immediately after our text says that the people set out, all together, as one (Numbers 21.10).

The point is that we see God in His people and they do look back at us. There is a sharing we have here in this room that is greater and more significant than any other in this world. We are bound together in an eternal communion with Christ and with each other.

The processional cross at Concordia Seminary is glass and you can see reflections of people as it gets carried down the aisle. When you look up to that cross, you see not only a reflection of yourself, you also see all the others who are looking up to Him for healing. Yes, *my* help comes from the Lord, but *our* help comes from the Lord.

But it's even bigger than that. Jesus is very clear in John 3. It's the *world* God has in His sights when He sends His Son as Savior. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the *world*. So, when the cross is lifted, we should see the whole *world* reflected in it. We should see those neighbors who annoy us or hurt us or threaten us or steal from us or even the ones who oppose God the way the Israelites did, we should see all of them reflected in the cross.

But it goes even further than that. If God desires not the death of the wicked but rather that they turn from their evil ways and live, what do you think He wants us to be but reflections of Him. The people of the world know how to complain and accuse. They may even know how to complain to God and accuse Him. But our vocation as the Church, the Body of Christ, is not to act like them and complain like them and accuse like them, but to look to where God gives healing, and, even more than that, to be the place where the people of this world might look and find the healing of Christ. Paul called Christians living letters of recommendation (2 Corinthians 3.1–2). I'm calling you living bronze serpents, lifted up so that the people around you have somewhere to look for healing.

What is the healing? Answering all the questions? Why this, why that? No. Defending God and explaining away why He does what He does? No. Forgiveness. That's the healing we have. That's the healing that's needed. And everything Christ has done He has done in order to deliver that healing to us and through us to the world. Forgiven and forgiven. Healed and healing, even as we still struggle with the questions and even as we still return again and again to look upon our crucified Savior.

This is the good work God has prepared in advance for you to do. What a responsibility! What a privilege! You aren't the Healer, but you know Him, and He has sent you out to make Him known to this sin-sick, self-destructive, and dying world.

Psalm 107 says, "*Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever! Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, whom he has redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.*" In other words, God turns our complaints into confessions and our accusations into praise that he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us and this whole world in Christ Jesus.

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

These Are the Holy Ten Commands

Exodus 20.1–17 for Lent 3B on March 4, 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: The Grooves

I had not thought about cross-country skiing very much until the winter Olympics rolled around. I have only been cross-country skiing a couple times in my life, but when I've gone I've been very thankful for the grooves; two little treads, each the size of a ski that keep you on course. I didn't see too many grooves on the Olympics courses, but for amateurs out in the woods, they're pretty amazing. If you are on a straightaway, you can trust those grooves to keep you on the straightaway. If you come up to a little bend in the trail, you can trust those grooves to keep you on the trail through that bend.

Those two grooves that keep a skier on course might be a helpful picture for the two tables of the Ten Commandments: Fear, love, and trust in God above all things on the one hand, and, on the other hand, love your neighbor as yourself. You cannot have one without the other: faith and love go together in the Christian life. So, these commandments express God's design for human life, the grooves, and His desire that our skis would stay in the grooves, that our lives would benefit our neighbors and give glory to Him.

The Law as Curb

As helpful as those grooves can be in normal situations, there are places along the way where the grooves disappear. It's usually on an incline up a hill where you have to turn the skis outward a bit to walk upwards or at a turn that comes right at the bottom of a hill where you have to either do a little hop move to stay upright and on course or brace yourself for a fall. It's those times, where the grooves disappear, when I am especially thankful for them.

In a similar way, life can be chaotic. It's like skiing down a hill toward a turn you know you cannot make. The grooves are gone and all you can do is brace yourself. In other words, for people who truly live or have lived in chaos, order and structure feel safe. For people who truly live or have lived in chaos, Christianity's order and structure, like the grooves, is even more appealing than the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which gives freedom where some are not ready to receive it. So, this is one way to hear and receive the Ten Commandments. They bring order.

And our world definitely needs it. There is violence and greed and sensuality and selfishness. Who is going to get out there and clean up the mess? Some believe, if we just get the Ten Commandments back into public places, we'll at least restore some order and structure. But is ordering society the reason God gave the Ten Commandments? Ordering Israel's life was part of it, but it was only part of it.

When we consider the context of Exodus 20, we see that before God commands anything, God recalls His own redemption of His people. He acted. He claimed them. He bought them. He adopted them as He says in Exodus 4.22, "Israel is my firstborn son." So, within that relationship that God established on the basis of His covenantal action and promise, He also gives these commandments that yes, order life, but, more than that, shape the lives of His people according to His will. That is, through obedience to these commandments, God's people reflect Him and His relationship with them. What does that look like? It looks like loving your God above all things and loving your neighbors as yourself.

As simple as it that sounds, we all know how impossible it is to perfectly reflect God, to be holy as the Lord our God is holy (Leviticus 11.44, 1 Peter 1.16). Within each commandment is not just something to do or not to do, but, as Jesus makes clear in the Sermon on the Mount, there is the disposition of the heart and the thoughts of the mind behind the action. In that light, our hearts and minds are never pure, even when we seem to be following God's laws closely enough to seem holy.

So, we're back to those times when the grooves disappear; when life is chaotic and when sin sends us off course. If we only rely on the Law alone at those times and boil the Christian faith down to order and structure for life, we rip these commandments out of their context and miss our relationship with the Redeemer God who speaks today. In other words, the Law shows us our problem, but it cannot fix it.

I heard it once put like this: relying on the Law is like using a wolf as a guide dog. That wolf will probably get you where you need to go most of the time. He will be good at showing the right way. But you never know when he's going to turn on you. So, the Law gives the order and structure that our chaotic and sinful souls and world desire, but you cannot control it or tame it or take its teeth out. In the end, the Law will show you your sin.

The Law as Mirror

So, while God uses the Law to express His design for creation and His desire that we live in it, He also uses it for the sake of repentance and faith.

Someone recently shared the thought that while they're thankful for God's forgiveness, they're really not sure the last time they sinned. So, beginning every worship service with Confession and Absolution can leave us in a similar place. Until God uses the Law on us.

Let's take just the First Commandment and consider a few questions. In what or whom do I trust above all else? In what or whom do I trust most for financial security, physical safety, or emotional support? Do I fear God's wrath, avoiding every sin? Is my love for and trust in God evident in my daily living? Do I expect only good from God in every situation, or do I worry, doubt, complain, or feel unfairly treated when things go wrong? Do I withhold from God what is rightfully His?

These questions are not designed to be platforms upon which to build our self-justifications and establish the pillars of our virtues, or, worse, to be used as a self-help program to fix our own sin problem but are rather designed to be daggers that prick the heart and bring out of our mouths a confession of the truth. But a confession of the truth that we are sinners is not the only truth to confess. If we leave it there, we're hopeless. That's why repentance has two parts: sorrow over sin but also faith in the promise of God to forgive our sins in His Son Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ has completely fulfilled the Law's demands, not just because He has acted in all the right ways, but because He is the right way; the Way, Truth, and Life. He embodies, incarnates, the commandments of God, the design and desire of God for human life. He is the obedient Son, obedient unto death. In every place we fail, He succeeds.

The folly of the cross is that all human success is failure and that only Christ's failure, so to speak, is true success. How amazing that He simply gives His success to us. So, God's glory, as we heard in the Collect of the Day, is that He has mercy. So, Jesus embodies the Law and will of God for human life, but Jesus also embodies mercy, extending His mercy to this entire lawless, sinful, merciless, world. Ironically, all the carefully constructed laws and rules that are designed to support justice end up facilitating the

redemption of the world through the cross, the exodus of sinners out of slavery to sin and death. This is the wisdom of God. The world cannot approach it. It must be given. And it can only be received when we repent and believe that Jesus is the Righteous One who gives His righteousness to us.

*When I survey the wondrous cross On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss And pour contempt on all my pride.*

Jesus gives His righteousness to us. Why? On the one hand, it is for our forgiveness, life, and salvation. Period. He gives, we receive, end of story. But if we leave it there, that would, again, negate the original context of Exodus 20. Why did God give those commands to Israel? It was to shape the lives of His people in accordance with His will. God did not only use them to show sin and lead His people to repentance. He actually wanted them to follow and obey His commandments.

*You have this Law to see therein That you have not been free from sin
But also that you clearly see How pure toward God life should be.
Have mercy, Lord! (LSB 581.11)*

The Law as Guide

So, for us, God actually expects us to follow these commandments, to be His lawful people in a lawless world. But this is not primarily for Him or for us. Remember, He is the one who has redeemed us in His Son, Jesus Christ. He's been righteous for us. Now, these commandments aim us toward our neighbors. They are the living and active words of God (Hebrews 4) that shape our lives after the pattern of Christ's own life: faith toward God and love toward people.

So, where can you follow God's commandments for the benefit of your neighbor today? Where does this rubber of the Word hit the road of your life? Where do you have the opportunity to obey God's Word? Where do you have the opportunity to love and serve your neighbor? These are the questions the Lord would lead you to ask through His commandments. As we said before, they are like grooves that points us directly to faith in God and love for the neighbor. That's where the trail leads.

Conclusion

In the end, God uses these Ten Commandments as a curb, a mirror, and a guide as I have tried to outline today. It is very possible to abuse and misuse the Ten Commandments in a way that resembles the abuse of the Temple Jesus cleansed in John chapter 2. People wanted to use God's Temple for their own personal success and people often want to use these Ten Commandments for their own personal success; intellectual, moral, economic, cultural, or even spiritual. Against it all, Christ was filled with passion; passion that cleansed that abused Temple and passion that endured the cross out of love.

So, we need more than order and structure, more than grooves on the trail. We need more than a mirror that shows us we're sinful, revealing a problem we cannot fix on our own. We need a merciful God who loves us, forgives us, and shapes us as His very own people, not unlike a loving Father shapes His beloved children. Thanks be to God that we have a God like that today through Jesus Christ. May He send His Spirit and use His Word to shape us as His people who represent Him after the pattern of Jesus Christ, certainly in obedience and lawfulness, but especially in mercy. That's who He is and that's who we are, by His grace.

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

New Name, New Identity in Christ

Genesis 17,1–7, 15–16 for Lent 2B on February 25, 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: Names

My dad's mom's name was Rosemarie. Her parents named her Rose. For some reason, I don't know why, she went through the process, which isn't an easy one from what I hear, to have her name legally changed from Rose to Rosemarie. She chose her own name. Name change is identity change. An identity was given, but this is identity chosen and taken.

Abram to Abraham is name change, identity change but it isn't made, chosen, or taken by old Abram or new Abraham. It's given by God. Sarai to Sarah is the same thing. Then there's their son, Isaac. God gave him that name, meaning laughter. Ismael, on the other hand, was Abram's attempt to be an Abraham, a father of many, all on his own. God had other plans. Then there's Isaac's son, Jacob, whom God renamed Israel because he wrestled with God. All of them were called by God to let go of a self-made identity and receive a God-made one. That's what faith is. As Jesus said, *"For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it"* (Mark 8.35).

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were the patriarchs of Israel and their whole purpose was Jesus Christ. *"You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins"* (Matthew 1.21). And, as Peter confessed, Jesus is the Christ, the anointed One of God, anointed to be the Savior of His people.

Peter is an interesting case. In Matthew's account of Peter's confession, which is what we heard from Mark 8 in our Gospel Lesson, Jesus said, *"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it"* (Matthew 16.18). Jesus plays with Peter's name. He's the pebble. His confession of Jesus is the rock. There's a losing and a gaining of identity there, too.

Paul, who had been called Saul, the author of our Epistle, knew a little bit about name change. So, in Romans 5, he proclaims the Gospel with a name change at the center. In other words, the Gospel comes to people with a name change from God: from "sinner" to "justified" and from "enemy of God" to "reconciled to God." Therefore, Paul says, *"we rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation"* (5.11).

So, the name changes make it clear that this isn't about Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Peter, Paul, you, or me. This is about God and what He is doing through Jesus. He is claiming people for Himself. He is rescuing people from their own fabricated identities and giving them new identities in Him. The whole point is that God is the actor, as our Psalm says: *"It shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation; they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it"* (22.30–31).

The Christian faith leads us to confess that Jesus is the Christ, not me or anyone else, and that following Him is a matter of denying myself, even my own identity, taking up the cross He gives, and following Him. Our name change is identity change. No more identity made, but identity given by God and received in faith. As the Collect of the Day has it, *"of ourselves we have no strength."* God has the strength and we receive our true identity from Him and in Him.

Abraham

Let's go back to Genesis 17 and ponder Abraham's story for a moment. This is really God's story. God makes the covenant. He bespeaks Abraham righteous. He gives him a new name. He gives him circumcision as the sign of the covenant (those are the verses that the lectionary skipped). God then gives Sarah a new name; "princess" because "*kings of peoples shall come from her*" (17.16). God gives them a son and names that son after Abraham and Sarah's laughter. It's hard to fathom God doing all of these things to anyone, but especially to a 99 year-old-man and a 90 year-old-woman. As Paul says, "*they were as good as dead*" (Romans 4.19). It was God who got to laugh at that one.

Can you imagine living a lifetime, 99 years, only to have God call you to give it all up. My grandma changed her name as young adult. Most people don't bother when they're 99. It's a little late. What's done is done, that's that, and I am who I am at that point. But God is the Almighty One and He doesn't look at the outward things but at the heart.

What do we see from Abraham's heart. Well, all the verbs in this text belong to God, except for two. Abraham *was* ninety-nine years old, the verb "to be," and Abraham *fell* on his face when God Almighty spoke to him. That's his heart. After the angel told Mary she would be the mother of Jesus, she responded, "*let it be to me as you have said.*" Both simply receive the action of God. In older English, we might say they "suffered" the action of God. In a sense, at 99, this is a death and resurrection, a rebirth. But this text isn't first about Abraham or about us. It's about God and what He does through Abraham and, more importantly, what He does through Abraham's seed, Jesus Christ.

Jesus the Christ

Jesus means "Savior." Christ means "anointed one." What God does, He does through His Son, Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. His identity was given, His purpose was given, and He accomplished it all for us.

But receiving Jesus as Lord and Savior, being a passive object like Abraham with his face to the ground, does not leave us without a new identity as Christians. And out of that new identity comes a new way of thinking, setting the mind on the things of God rather than the things of man (Mark 8.33), and a new way of living, "*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me*" (8.34). In other words, God names Christians and conforms them to Christ. He is our identity.

Christian Identity and Life in Christ

At the end of the day, at the end of 99 years, what's your story? If you're a Christian, your story is about God and what He has done. But what does this really mean? What does it really mean to bow the face to the ground, hear God's promises, be baptized, and receive a new identity in Jesus the Christ? As we've said, it means denying self, taking up the cross, and following Christ. We could maybe say it a little differently, though. It means receiving identity from God, fighting sin, loving and serving others, telling others what God has done for you, and rejoicing in what God does for us.

Receiving Identity

First, being a Christian means receiving identity. Romans 5, where Paul gives us that language of "sinner" to "justified" and "enemy" to "reconciled," comes right before, obviously, Romans 6 which speaks of Baptism into Christ. "*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?*" In other words, Baptism kills all our attempts to be our own people. We die with Him. Paul says, "*our old self was crucified with him*" (Romans 6.6). In Galatians, Paul says, "*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me*" (Galatians 2.20).

So, our lives are not our own and, in fact, they begin to be extensions of Christ's own life. *"We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life"* (Romans 6.4).

Newness there means newness. You are a "child of God," no more and no less. You're no longer "enemy of God." You're also not the accomplishments. You're not the failures. You're not the sin. It's not where you rank in the hierarchy. It's not the people you know or the people that know you. It's not what you've done or not done or how well you've don't it. It's not your family. It's Baptism. It's being a child of God, suffering yourself to be a little child, coming to the Father, and being what He says you are.

Fighting Sin

Second, being a Christian means fighting sin. There's a very interesting distinction in our Lutheran Confessions between human nature and original sin (FC SD I.33–49). It says, "As with physical leprosy, the body that is leprous and the leprosy on or in the body are not one and the same thing. To describe the matter accurately: the distinction must be maintained between our nature, as it was created and preserved by God and in which sin resides, and original sin, which resides in our nature" (1.33). The point is that human nature and original sin are not the same thing. Original sin is like spiritual leprosy. It infects us so deeply that we will not completely get rid of it until Christ raises us on the Last Day. But He will raise us, and when He does, we will be fully human without being sinful. The Confessions say it this way, "Sin, therefore, cannot be a person himself [identity]. For God receives a person into grace for Christ's sake. But God remains hostile to sin eternally" (I.45).

Why does this matter? It matters because in Christ, and only in Christ, we can be human without being sinners. Apart from Christ, people cannot have an identity apart from their sins. So, at times, in the New Testament, Paul lists sins as substantive participles. That is, he takes sinful actions and he actually labels and identifies people as those who do those sins. In other words, sinners embody sin. Listen to how he does this in 1 Corinthians 6: *"Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God"* (1 Corinthians 6.9–11). Apart from Christ, sin is our identity. In Christ "sinners" are new people, "washed, sanctified, justified, forgiven, and reconciled" daily emerges and arises "to live before God in righteousness and purity forever" (SC IV.4).

So, fighting sin is simply an extension of who we are. We won't conquer it until God raises us on the last day, but we fight it. If I am a child of God, then I find my identity in obeying the Father.

Loving and Serving Others

Third, being Christian means loving and serving others as God has loved and served me in Christ. This is taking up the cross. This is about losing our lives for ourselves and finding our lives by living for others. It isn't easy, as you know, but it's a beautiful thing. There is no greater life than the life devoted to loving other people in the name of Jesus.

Telling Others What God Has Done

Fourth, being a Christians means telling others what God has done for you. I've already mentioned Psalm 22: *"It shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation; they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it"* (22.30–31).

Do you remember what happened when Jesus met the man named “Legion?” Legion was living among the tombs. He was so strong, no one could tie him up. He lived alone, cutting himself with stones. “Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” He replied, “My name is Legion, for we are many” (Mark 5.9). After Jesus sent Legion’s demons into the pigs and down the cliff, Mark says “the man who had been possessed with demons begged him that he might be with him. And Jesus did not permit him but said to him, ‘Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.’ And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone marveled” (Mark 5.18–20). That man became someone new that day and telling others about it was inevitable. It ought to be the same with us.

Rejoicing Always

Finally, being a Christian means rejoicing. Paul talks this way in Romans 5. There is rejoicing because we have been reconciled to God (5.11) but there is also rejoicing because God brings us through suffering (5.3). “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice” (Philippians 4.4). So, we suffer the things God gives us in this life. We bow the face to the ground and let Him be God who names us in Baptism and then, through the things we suffer, makes us to be the people He wants us to be.

Conclusion

In the end, it isn’t about Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Peter, Paul, you, or me. This is about God and what He is doing through Jesus. As John the Baptizer, “I must decrease. He must increase” (John 3.30). He is claiming people for Himself. He is rescuing people from their own fabricated identities and giving them new identities in Him. We don’t exist as individuals for ourselves. We don’t exist as a congregation for ourselves. We exist for Him. This is an attitude, a disposition of the heart, that’s called faith, and from this faith we receive identity, fight sin, love others, tell others, and rejoice at all times and in all things because of who He is and what He has done for us.

Chief of sinners though I be [old identity], Jesus shed His blood for me, [new identity]
Died that I might live on high, Lives that I might never die.
As the branch is to the vine, I am His, and He is mine (LSB 611.1).

In the end, that’s all that matters.

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

God Speaks in the Silence

Genesis for Lent 1B on February 18, 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 text for today is the Old Testament Lesson from Genesis 22.

There are two major themes for us to consider in this text on this First Sunday in Lent. The first theme is the theme of sacrifice. God told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, his only son whom he loved, but God provided a ram instead. This points us to Jesus, who is both the ram God provides as well as the only Son of God about whom God says in the Gospel Lesson, *"You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased"* (Mark 1.11). Jesus is the sacrifice God gave for the sins of all people and Lent is receiving Jesus as God's sacrifice for you and the forgiveness of your sins.

There other theme is the theme of faithfulness in temptation, trial, and testing. Genesis says that *"God tested Abraham"* (22.1). God was aiming at faith not sin. James says that God *"tempts no one"* (1.13). Instead, *"each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire"* (1.14). The devil also tests and tempts and he is aimed at sin and unbelief. Therefore, *"blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life"* (1.12). Like the first theme of sacrifice, this theme of testing also points us to Jesus. Blessed is He. He was faithful in the wilderness, under all other temptations, and was obedient to the point of death (Philippians 2.8).

Today, in the rest of this sermon, we are going to focus our attention on the second theme, the theme of trial and testing, but not so much with an eye toward our faithfulness but *God's* faithfulness. God does call us to faithfulness in times of testing, but *God's* faithfulness to us in those times is the more important thing, for it is His faithfulness to us that gives us the ability to remain faithful to Him. To get at *God's* faithfulness, let's go back to Genesis 22.

There are a number of things that are not said in this text. It is a very matter-of-fact account. God told Abraham to sacrifice his son, so Abraham got up the next morning, saddled his donkey, and set out. Really? Where is the wrestling? Where is the prayer? Abraham is silent. Similarly, there's an awkward silence all the way up the mountain. After Abraham and Isaac leave the two young men, Isaac asks about the lamb for the sacrifice. Abraham, says *"God will provide,"* and *"they went both of them together."* Not another word! That was it? Of course, Isaac's silence at the top of the mountain is palpable. Abraham is busy building the altar and it's almost as if Isaac is just standing there waiting for him to bind him and lay him on the altar. No questions. No prayers. Nothing. Thank God the angel of the Lord said something! *"Stop, Abraham!"* Finally, there is absolutely nothing said about the return trip. Isaac doesn't ask and Abraham doesn't answer. The verse right after our text, verse nineteen, simply says, *"So Abraham returned to his young men."* That's it.

There is a danger with this text, I think, to wrongly interpret Abraham as inhuman. He simply obeys without question, like a robot. But when we make Abraham a robot, we turn faith into a cold, dead thing instead of a living trust in a living God from a living, human person. The text doesn't say Abraham didn't question. The text just doesn't give us Abraham's questions. I do not want to speculate about Abraham's prayers before, during, and after this divine test, but I do want to point out the silence.

You know the silence. If someone were to write down an account of some of the things God has asked you to go through, some of the tests He has put in your path, observers might not see the wrestling, and the prayers, and the questions. They might just see your actions, like Genesis 22. But you know that it's never that easy. You've been tested and you've questioned and you've wrestled with the Lord. You've asked Him many things over the years. Has He answered you satisfactorily? Maybe. But more often than not, it would seem to us that God is silent.

That's what strikes me most about Genesis 22. God is silent when it comes to explanations and answers. While Abraham, and Isaac for that matter, undoubtedly had many questions, God does not answer any of them. Why would God call Abraham at the age of 75 (Genesis 12.4), promise to bless all the families of the earth through him (12.3), wait to give Abraham a son until Abraham was 100 and barren Sarah was 90 (17.17 and 21.5), promise to make that son a great nation (17.16), and then take that son away? Why would God seem to mimic the false gods of Canaan and ask for a child sacrifice?

God is silent on those topics. Instead, God simply provides. He proves faithful. He had made promises to Abraham and He fulfilled them. So, at the end of the story, there is precious little on the lips of Abraham. He simply repeats the promise of God, *"God will provide. The LORD will provide;."* Even in the middle of the trial, God will provide. *"I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you"* (22.5). That's faith in God's promise to provide life in death. Hebrews chapter eleven says that Abraham, *"considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead"* (11.19). God will provide. *"So Abraham called the name of that place, 'The Lord will provide;' as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.'"* (22.14). "To this day" we have come and "to this day" it is true.

Jesus is silent out there in the wilderness. Mark doesn't record a word, *"He was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by the devil. He was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him"* (1.13). We know from the other Gospel accounts that there was much more to it than that. Including the fact that this was not an isolated trial out in the wilderness, but His life and especially His death on the cross. God provided for Him, but God has also provided Him. *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3.16).

If God has given us His Son, will He not also provide us with everything else? *"He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"* (Romans 8.32). God provided for Abraham, not only in this instance at Moriah, but throughout his life. God has provided Jesus for us and this whole world. He is the blessing for all the families of the earth. May God move all the families of the earth to turn to Him and live! But for us, today, the promise is that God will continue to provide for us.

On the way up the mountain, the silence was anxious and heavy. It had to be. What was the silence on the way down? Peace and joy beyond words. You and I have these moments, as well, don't we? We speak to God in the silence. The questions arise but answers do not descend. Instead, God breaks the silence with His promises in Christ. He provides. He replaces our anxieties with a dependence and our fears with quiet confidence. In His Word and promises He gives us everything we will ever need.

Today, God provides again. His Son, His only Son, given for you. The One who was faithful in all the testing now comes to us and provides for us forgiveness, life, and salvation. As we receive Him today, we believe that God will, with Him, graciously give us all things.

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