

The Rest We Share

Sermon on Psalm 62 for LWML Sunday on September 30, 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.

Where do you find rest from the world? The world feels really unstable right now. It seems that everything is up for grabs, everything is under attack, and every is uncertain. The media doesn't help things, but we don't help things by being so attuned to the media!

Where do you find rest? How about unplugging the TV and computer? How about putting down the smart phone? How about doing the discipline of silence? Silence itself doesn't cut it, though. We need silence with an object, something else to fill the void. How about the Word of God?

How about Psalm 62? David wrote Psalm 62 in an uncertain, unstable situation. He had an enemy after him. He felt like "a leaning wall" or "a tottering fence." His enemy was doing everything he could to push him over and probably take him over as king.

David's enemy is probably his own son. Absalom stood by the city gate and told people how much better life would be if he were king. Politics are nothing new. Scripture says that Absalom "stole the hearts of the men of Israel." After four years, he decided he would declare himself king.

Psalm 62 is David's response. He's in danger but he isn't worried. He simply trusts God. He rests in God. He's confident in God. He's at peace in God. H.C. Leupold wrote, "There is scarcely another psalm that reveals such an absolute and undisturbed peace, in which confidence in God is so completely unshaken, and in which assurance is so strong that not even one single petition is voiced throughout the psalm."¹

So, Psalm 62 is not a prayer for help. It's David's declaration that God is the rock and fortress (62.2). In his problem, David simply asserts that God is for him. That was David's rest. This is our rest, as well.

The question isn't whether or not we, here today, trust in God. The question is whether we trust in God, *alone*. Six times, David asserts that it is God *alone* who is the object of His trust. Commentary James Montgomery Boice wrote, "To pretend to trust God but not to trust him only is like having one foot on a solid foundation and another on an object that is unstable and is moving away from the foundation."²

What are the unstable foundations that tempt you? How about these three: money, status and the opinion of people, and other people (even and maybe especially seemingly good and powerful ones). None of them can deliver what they seem to promise.

I was in the Boundary Waters on a camping/canoeing trip a few years ago. My sister was in the front of the canoe. I was in the back. It was evening and we were looking for a camp site. We brought the canoe along the shore of an island. I stepped out: one foot on land, the other in the canoe. The water was cold. David didn't make that mistake in Psalm 62. He didn't trust in God *and* something else unstable. He trusted in God *alone* as his "rock" and "fortress," the One in whom he could "never be shaken."

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms: Vol. 2, Psalms 42–106* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 509.

² *Ibid.*, 511.

In Christ, Psalm 62 is not just David's psalm, it's your psalm, as well. God hasn't protected you from *all* problems. He hasn't promised to *completely* insulate you from an evil world. He also hasn't promised that your heart will reject the idols of wealth, status, or powerful people.

God has promised, however, that you have eternal security in Christ. When everything else fails, you know that God loves you and has only good things in mind for you because He gave His own Son, His royal Son who did not rebel, but gave His life for you. If God has given you His Son, He will certainly give you all other good things (Romans 8.32). Even when our lives fall apart, our center and foundation hold firm: "*Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Romans 8.38–39). He says to you, "*Come to me . . . and I will give you rest*" (Matthew 11.28).

The author of our LWML Sunday materials is Rev. Ken Hennings. He's the District President of the Texas District of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. I haven't been using his sermon, but I will for a moment, now, because he makes a wonderful point.

Two times in Psalm 62, David uses the word "Selah." You've seen this word before at the end of a psalm verse. It's untranslatable from Hebrew, so translations just leave it in Hebrew. Part of the reason is that we don't know what it means. Our best guess is that it is musical notation, probably referring to the accompaniment of the harps during the psalm.³ This occurs twice in Psalm 62 after verse four and after verse 8, effectively creating three stanzas within the psalm.

In any case, Rev. Hennings suggests that when David sings, "*On God rests my salvation*" (Psalm 62.7), the two moments of Selah actually make that rest happen within the performance of the psalm. In other words, "Selah" give David and the congregation a chance to actually rest in God. While the music continues, while the harps play, the congregation has time to meditate on the Word and rest in God.

Rev. Hennings goes on to say, "This 'Selah' time helps us move from the physical to the spiritual. Our battle is not with flesh and blood, as Paul says. Our battle is the unseen, spiritual one. The devil wants us to fall down from our place of honor as children of God. He will challenge us to doubt God's forgiveness and love for us. We are in a spiritual battle against a mighty foe, but because of who God is, we say with David, "*God is a refuge for us. Selah*" (62.8).

Today, we're celebrating and thanking God for the ministry of the Lutheran Women's Missionary League. For 76 years the LWML has been supporting mission work nationally and internationally, not only by collecting pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters in their mite boxes, but also by resting in God alone. There have been major challenges in those 76 years, but God has been the rock and fortress and He continues to touch many lives through the LWML. I myself received an LWML grant every year I attended college and seminary, and that was ten years.

David, the LWML, and each one of us have faced uncertainty and instability. We are all tempted to step and stand on unstable foundations. All of us find our rest in God alone. The last two verses of Psalm 62 declare God's power and love. J.J. Stewart Perowne wrote, "Power is the strong foundation of love, and love is the beauty and the crown of power."⁴ God has both power and love, so we rest in God alone.

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

³ *The Lutheran Study Bible*, 993.

⁴ Boice, 514.

Receiving and Being Children

Sermon on Mark 9.30–37 for Pentecost 18B (Proper 20B) on September 23, 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.

In 1918, the German pediatrician Ernst Moro was the first to document what moms have known from the beginning of time. Newborn babies need to be held. If newborns are not held, their arms fly up and then come in tight together. It's called "the Moro clinch." They cannot stand to be floating out there on their own. They have a deep desire, a basic need, to be held.

When's the last time someone physically picked you up and held you in their arms? It's probably been a long time. St. Paul says, "*When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways*" (1 Corinthians 13.11). So, you too have learned to stand on your own two feet. You don't usually depend on someone else to carry you.

The followers of Jesus were adults, but when they were arguing about who is the greater one, they were reverting back to being children. Jesus might be The First, but how do we rank after that? It's hard to blame them. Jesus had taken Peter, James, and John away with Him to the mountain. The others didn't know it, but they had seen Jesus transfigured. They had seen Moses and Elijah. They probably felt pretty special, especially because the others, during that time, had been unable to drive out a demon. So, not only do these men stand on their own two feet. They are concerned about who is standing the tallest.

Jesus responds to them by sitting down and calling them to come and sit with Him. That sounds like a children's message to me. He even has an object lesson. "*If anyone would be first [in God's view of things, that is], he must be last of all and servant of all.*' And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "*Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me*" (Mark 9.35–37).

Jesus' object lesson is a child that He takes in His arms, a child young enough to still be held. And the lesson is this: Do not be so concerned about how tall you stand in this world of adults that you miss the children, that is, the people around you. In fact, start treating the people around you as dearly loved children of God and recognize that you also are a dearly loved child of God.

Those are the two parts of Jesus' word to you and me today: first, receive others as children and second, be children yourselves. In other words, receive your brothers and sisters in Christ as people who still need to be carried, and, second, and more fundamentally, be someone who is still willing to be carried.

Let's start with the first one. How do you receive someone else as a child? Well, while competition results in winners and losers, haves and have-nots, rich and poor, successful and not, children have no history of winning or losing. In fact, children have no hope of competing at all in the world.

How do you receive someone like that? How do you approach someone else and expect nothing except that they will act like a child? How do you have no qualifications for your love, no standards for your affection? How do you become willing to pick someone else up and hold them in your arms, just like Jesus picked up that child in our text, when that someone else shouldn't have to be picked up? The only way you can do that is if you first become a child yourself. Are you willing to be held by someone else?

Jesus became a child for us. Mary held Him in her arms. He left the height of heaven to take on the lowest, smallest, most vulnerable form possible. He humbled Himself as the obedient child of His Heavenly Father. At His Baptism in Mark one, the Father announced to Jesus, *"You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased"* (Mark 1.11). In this chapter, Mark nine, the Father says, *"This is my beloved Son; listen to him"* (Mark 9.7). Jesus is the Son, the child, the dependent one, who is willing to be carried by His Father. *"Not what I will, but what you will"* (Mark 14.36).

And not just by Him, but even by people who did not receive Him. We read it in our text. While the disciples compare themselves to each other, size one another up, receive each other as threats and competition, enemies to be conquered, rivals to be put down, Jesus talks about what He is going to do out of love. *"They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise'"* (Mark 9.30–31).

Notice what He said. He would *"be delivered into the hands of men."* We could say picked up and carried, not by His Father out of love, not by a neighbor who sees His need, but by His enemies who want to end Him. He was a rival, a threat, a problem for their pride. *"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"* (Isaiah 53.3–4).

When Jesus was picked up by those who killed Him, it was actually Him who picked us up in His arms and carried us, doing for us what we could never do for ourselves. He lived a perfect life obedient to the Father. He died as an atoning sacrifice once for all people and for all time. He conquered death by His resurrection. And we, baptized believers, have received Christ by faith as the Son of God, our Savior, and our Lord. We have received Christ who became a child and receiving Him we've received the Father.

But what does it mean to receive God the Father and Christ His Son? Let's return to those two points. First, receive others as children and second, be children yourselves. Receive your brothers and sisters in Christ as people who still need to be carried and, second, be someone who is willing to be carried.

This time, let's take the second point first, since it's more fundamental, and consider what it means. What does it mean to be a child of God, willing to be carried by Him? Let's look at Jeremiah.

God sent Jeremiah to preach judgment to Judah. It did not go well. It wasn't what Jeremiah expected when He took the Call. In fact, our reading today comes from chapter eleven which contains prayers against God's people. Jeremiah prays that God would protect him from the rebellious people of Judah. It might be God who is angry with them, but Jeremiah is taking the brunt of their fury against God who calls them out in their sin. So, in our text, Jeremiah says that he's like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter.

What does Jeremiah do? Does He get mad and try to win the fight? Does He fight at all? He says, *"Let me see your vengeance upon them, for to you have I committed my cause"* (11.20b). Jeremiah became a child of God who wasn't in it for himself, who didn't go in there and compete, but committed his cause to God, just as our Savior would do on the cross. We have opportunity daily to do to the same, to become children of God, committing our ways to Him. *"Not as I will, but as you will."*

Now let's take the second point and consider what it means. What does it mean to receive others as children? For this, let's look at James.

James preaches to the desires of our hearts. He calls out “*jealousy and selfish ambition*” (3.14). He points to peace, gentleness, and mercy (3.17). He calls out our sinful passions, our desires to be first, our need to win (4.1). He calls that attitude “*friendship with the world*” and “*enmity with God*” (4.4). We love to compete but God loves to negate our competitions, to mess up our scheme of winners and losers. He sent His Son as a suffering servant. He sent Jeremiah as a suffering servant. He sends you as His suffering servant. “*Humble yourselves,*” James says (4.10). Receive others as children, even as you yourselves are children of God.

Where do you see this teaching touch your life? Where do you feel the need to outperform and outdo? Where do you tend to see others as competition, as threats, as problems for your pride? Where is God giving you an opportunity to be nothing more than His child? It’s hard to recognize it in ourselves. It’s even harder to admit it. But being a child of God, losing it all in Christ and being won by Him, has left you with no more room for self-justification, self-advancement, self-fulfillment, or self-actualization. As Luther says, you now live your life not in yourself but in Christ and in your neighbor.

St. Paul says it this way: “*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*” (Philippians 2.3–11).

The teaching is simple. First, you have received Jesus who humbled Himself and served you. Second, He has called you to receive others as He has received you. Third, when you fail to be like Him, He invites you to come and receive Him again, to become a child of God so you can see others the same way.

So, when was the last time someone picked you up and held you? It might not have been the last time, but it happened at your Baptism, maybe literally, but certainly spiritually. God picked you up there, held you in His arms, brought you into His family, and He has carried you ever since. You have a basic need to be held. You might perform “the Moro clinch” from time to time, thinking it’s your game to win or lose. That just means that you’ve forgotten who holds you. God receives you and holds you as His own child. When you see that He holds onto you, you can begin receiving others as God has received you.

We’ve already prayed the Collect of the Day. May it actually be our prayer today. “O God, whose strength is made perfect in weakness, grant us humility and childlike faith that we may please You in both will and deed.”

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

Prayer

Sermon on Mark 9.14–29 for Pentecost 17B (Proper 19B) on September 16, 2016
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.

Lily Joy is entering a phase of independence. She was so sweet! She still is, of course, but she is starting to assert herself. Lately, after supper and bath and books and teeth brushing she knows what's next and she says, "No bed. No bed. Soon bed. Soon." In other words, "I'll decide when it's time for bed."

Is independence really just a phase, though? Have any of us grown out of it? The disciples asserted some independence in Mark chapter nine. "You have a son with a demon? Bring him here. Jesus has given us the authority over unclean spirits (Mark 6.7–13). *We have the power.*" These disciples were growing, maturing, getting stronger, and nearing that point when they would head out on their own. They were heading toward independence, until they weren't. They, like my daughter, like each of us, were *not* able to handle it on their own.

How different the attitude of the father in Mark chapter nine. His son was suffering so badly he was blessed to know, without a doubt, that there is *nothing* he could do for him. So, he went to Jesus. Jesus had just been up on a mountain with Peter, James, and John. That's the context of our passage. "*They came to the disciples,*" verse fourteen, from the mountain of transfiguration to find the disciples arguing with the scribes about authority. "Who is in charge around here, anyway?" The contrast between the disciples' false authority and the true, divine authority of Jesus could not be clearer. How *relieved* the father must have been to see Jesus. It was an awkward conversation, though. "*If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.*" Jesus responded, "*If you can! All things are possible for one who believes.*" The father cried out, "*I believe; help my unbelief*" (Mark 9.22–24). Then Jesus went to work. So, unlike the disciples, the father confessed his *dependence* on Jesus. Even his faith depended on Jesus.

The disciples didn't like being unable to accomplish the exorcism. So, they asked Jesus to explain. "*And he said to them, 'This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer'*" (Mark 9.29). This can be taken in one of two ways. Either the message is, "You guys didn't pray at all or at least not heard enough. Try harder next time," or, the message is, "No matter how mature, experienced, or knowledgeable you may think you are, you will never be able to go it alone without me." That difference is significant because it determines how we understand this passage and the rest of the Bible. It determines whether or not we are believers in Jesus at all. Has Jesus come to make us independent or has Jesus come to show us, "*apart from me you can do nothing*" (John 15.5)?

So, God gives us the Second Commandment that has to do with using God's name. Luther says, "We should . . . call upon it in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks." Not only that, but God gives us the prayer, "*Our Father who art in heaven.*" Luther says, "With these words God tenderly invites us to believe that He is our true Father and that we are His true children, so that with all boldness and confidence we may ask Him as dear children ask their dear father."

So, we pray, we ask, we confess dependence on the Father. The God on the other end of our prayer is so much more important than you or me or our praying, because prayer is nothing more than an expression of simple trust, reliance, and dependence on God. "*I believe. Help my unbelief.*" "Not my will, but Yours be done." "Apart from You I can do nothing."

Maybe God is graciously showing that to you in some way today. It is a gracious thing. He moves us even forces us to pray and trust in Him. "Oh, what peace we often forfeit; Oh, what needless pain we bear— All because we do not carry Ev'rything to God in prayer" (LSB 770.1).

Not even Jesus was so bold as to go it alone. There are only twelve instances of the noun "prayer" and the verb "to pray" in the Gospel of Mark and five of those twelve instances, almost half of them, have *Jesus* as their subject. The first two instances (Mark 1.35, 6.46) describe Jesus removing Himself from the disciples and the crowds to go somewhere all alone and pray, dependent on His Father. Jesus is not only true God but also true man and in His humanity He offers dependent, trusting prayer to God His Father as the foundation of His life and ministry.

This theme takes us to a critical moment in the Garden of Gethsemane. Four times in seven verses, prayer appears in Mark fourteen. Jesus prays, "*Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.*" Now, Jesus is in the place of that boy's father. Jesus is in the place of that boy. Jesus is in your place and my place when we pray and ask and know that we are unable to go it alone. "*I believe. Help my unbelief.*" "*Not my will, but Your will be done.*" And the will of God our Father is that Jesus would be our Savior. First that He would save us and second that we would believe in Him. So, Jesus was submissive, not only in prayer but on the cross; submissive to the Father in humble, trusting prayer, and submissive to you and me in saving love; dying our death, taking our sin and unbelief, and giving us forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Between what God has done for us in Christ and what He has yet to do for in on the Last Day, we ask, we depend, we believe, we *pray*, not to get everything we want or everything we ask or to understand why God does what He does, but to be humble, dependent, and trusting children of our Heavenly Father. He is God and we are not. How important that is when we do not understand why He does what He does, when we wrestle with Him, when we're not sure if He's going to take care of things or if He wants us to take care of things. Is it our responsibility or His? So, we wrestle with Him in prayer as we confess that He is God over all things, every last thing.

I had some time on Friday in the car on the way to and from the committal service for Leroy Liebert in Big Falls, Wisconsin. It was just over two hours each way. Among other things, I listened to Bach's Cantata for the 21st Sunday after Trinity, *Whatever God Does is Well Done*. The first Aria goes like this: "*Whatever God does is well done. His will is always just. However He works my affairs, I will trust in Him still. He is my God, who in time of need well knows how to care for me. So, I shall let Him rule.*"

And so, on a day when we celebrate Joan Phillips and her years of service at Pilgrim, we can not only give thanks to God for her, but we can also follow her example of dependent faith in the Father. In fact, we can see those kids over there at PCDC, who have bene such a big part of Joan's life for so long, the oldest of which, now, are only three years old, we can see them as the example for us all, not in their independence, but in their dependence.

Let's pray.

Lord, give me faith to trust the One who prayed for me, who is praying for me, who lived, died, and rose for me, who reigns now in paradise, and who is coming soon. Keep me dependent and humble, relying on you for all things, for all things are possible only with You and only You are able to do all things. You did not spare Your own Son, but gave Him up for us all. So, how will You not also with Him graciously give us all things? Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Be Opened

Mark 7.31–37 for Pentecost 16B (Proper 18B) on September 9, 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.

Closed

We been listening Jesus' words recorded in the Gospel according to St. Mark the seventh chapter for the last two weeks. But the man Jesus meets in these last few verses of this chapter cannot hear. So, he hasn't heard what Jesus has been saying about the human heart that is defiled and far from God. He hasn't heard Jesus call Him to repentance and faith in Him (Mark 1.14–15). He hasn't heard the good news. He hasn't heard anything. His only knows silence.

Imagine watching the world in silence. Like a Charlie Chaplain movie in color. It's a world without words. No hearing. No talking. No interaction. No communication. No relationships. No one really understands. People keep their distance. They reinforce the silence. Imagine being closed off from the world.

Sometimes, we just need someone else to listen, and not just listen and hear what we are saying, but listen. Can you imagine being closed off from having that? Sure, there could be some attempts at writing it all out. But that isn't the same.

Sometimes, people just need someone to listen to them. We usually realize it mid-conversation. They're not looking for a response. They just want to be heard by someone. But what would it be like to never have anyone come to you? No one comes to talk or joke or confront or tell you anything. You can only see all that from a distance and know you'll never have it.

Sometimes, silence sounds pretty good. Silence can mean peace and quiet, a break from all the noise. But silence can also mean hurt feelings, misunderstanding, miscommunication, offense, maybe intentional or maybe not. Silence can mean a broken relationship. It can mean being totally alone and not in a good way. So, sometimes silence is freeing. Other times, it's like being locked up in a prison.

Opened

It's interesting, though, that this wordless man isn't alone. Mark says "they" brought the man to Jesus. "They" begged Jesus to lay His hand on him. Apparently, "they" loved this man, wanted him to hear him and speak with him and have a deeper relationship with him. Apparently, "they" knew Jesus could do something it.

And Jesus does. They brought the man to Jesus and Jesus took the man aside. Imagine that moment. Jesus actually knew this man long before this man knew him. He understood him in a way no other person could, just as Jesus understands you like no else can. This was no clinical, medical, purely physical problem to be fixed. This was a person who was about to be drawn into an eternal relationship with the God who created him.

Jesus touches his ears and his tongue. The man's heart had to be pounding. What is Jesus going to do? What can He do? Will it work? What will it be like if it does? But aside from all those questions, this man had to look into Jesus' eyes and see the love and compassion there.

And then, even if nothing else happened that day, this man saw Jesus look up to heaven and sigh. And that sigh was loaded with the pain and the frustration of all those years of silence and isolation. That sigh meant understanding. Because sighing was the only thing this man has ever been able to do, until that moment when Jesus healed him.

“*Ephphatha*” Jesus said. “*Be opened.*” And then, Mark records that the man spoke plainly. What did he say? Who did he say it to? The Holy Spirit left those details out. Maybe it should be obvious. This man was alone with Jesus, so he mostly likely directed his first word to Jesus. And I have to believe that his first word to Jesus somehow involved thanks. And this is huge. Jesus didn’t just open up ears and a mouth. He opened up a relationship there with this man based on grace. And with that kind of relationship open, the way was now open for this man to relate to everyone else in a similar way. In one moment, with one little word, Jesus changed this man’s life, his world of silence, and everyone he would ever meet and talk with.

Jesus

Our text is in the middle of the Gospel of Mark. Maybe we could say it’s at the heart of the Gospel. Jesus’ ministry is aimed at relationship. But since we’re only halfway, there is a lot more to Mark which is a good thing, because this man that Jesus healed will find himself in another silent prison one day. His ears will stop hearing and his mouth will stop speaking again when lands in the silent prison called death. Not only that, but Jesus has not done this miracle to you or me. And so, as good as the news was that day, there is more to *the Good News*.

And here it is: Jesus Christ was silenced. He groaned in the pain of that cross. He was cut off from the world. He was cut off from His Father. He sighed. No one was there for Him. No one understood. He died and was buried, shut up in a tomb.

And yet, Jesus opened the grave. He rose from the dead. He ascended into heaven. And He has sent His Spirit to open the hearts and minds of people with the Good News of the forgiveness of sins and an open relationship with God based on grace. The promise for those who hear His Word and believe in Him is that He will open their graves someday and they will never be closed again.

Opened

And that’s really where we come in. Jesus has come and opened up a way for you and me to have an eternal relationship with Him and with His Father in heaven based on grace. God does not condemn you for the things you have thought, said, and done against Him and His will. That sin would close us out, alienate us and isolate us from Him forever. But the blood of Jesus opens the way of forgiveness. And as we live in an eternal relationship with God that not even death can undo, Jesus has opened a way for us to live with one another in that same forgiveness; open relationships based on grace.

Closed

How often don’t we close our ears to God’s Word, close our mouths to His praise, and close ourselves off from Him and people around us? It’s a daily battle to live in the grace God gives, especially with each other. We keep receiving God’s endless grace for us and someone we find a way to close off the flow of grace to fellow sinners who need it. We close up what God in Christ opens up.

So, we keep coming back. Jesus is gracious. He opens what we close. And this points us to the Day when He will open up our graves, when we will hear the sound of the trumpet of God and the voice of our risen Lord. Christ will finally open what is closed and what is closed will be open forever.

Prayer

We prayed this morning that God's ears would be open to our prayers, the prayers of His humble servants. Everything depends on that. If God closes His ears to us, there is no more grace, no more life, no more hope. So, we pray that He would remain open to us.

At the same time, we pray that the Spirit of Christ would keep opening our ears to hear His promise of forgiveness and our mouths to sing His praise. And as we sing His praise, we also speak with each other and with everyone else that same forgiveness and grace. Because, the fact is, the relationships we have today within this household of faith, are relationships we will have forever in Christ.

"O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare Your praise."

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

New Hearts Now and Forever

Mark 7.14–23 for Pentecost 15B (Proper 17B) on September 2, 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.

“It’s about people.” I tried to find an advertising campaign that used that slogan. I found a hospital and an advertising agency and that was about it. Maybe you know of some company that’s used that.

I looked for that slogan because Mark chapter seven is about people. Last week, the religious leaders were concerned about ritually unclean hands while Jesus was concerned about hearts, hearts that are far from God, hearts that He and He alone can draw close to God through forgiveness. Today, in the verses right after that text, Jesus is still focused on the human heart. For God, it’s about people.

The sermon today has three parts. First, Who are we apart from God? Second, Who is God? Third, Who has God made us to be in relationship to Him?

Who We Are Apart from God

Who are we apart from God? Look at what comes out of us: “*evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness*” (Mark 7.21–22). It’s ugly. It’s us. It’s others. It’s every human heart.

The human heart is defiled. That’s a relational word. It means that the human heart is both naturally, that is, from birth, and eternally, that is, long after death, separated from God and without a capacity to ever approach God, change, or get better. That’s our text. “This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to You, O Christ.” Actually, this text isn’t the Gospel, but it does prepare the way.

I hear a lot of complaining about people. “Life would be pretty good if it weren’t for all those people.” It’s as if we are surprised, for some reason, when people are evil. I think we have unknowingly believed the lie that people are basically good. If people are basically good and there are problems with people, it must be some external thing that has entered the picture and messed up the person; some disease or circumstance or need. So, let’s start programs and pass laws and just give people a chance.

But Jesus says that there is nothing we can do to overcome the evil human heart or train it or transform it, not even through the Law of God. As Adam and Eve were barred from the Garden, our defiled hearts bar us from a relationship with God and from eternal life with Him. Not only that, but our defiled hearts bar us from ever being good in ourselves or on our own. This is the doctrine of original sin and it sets you Christians apart from the world. People are *not* basically good. People *are* basically evil, and that’s why all this evil comes out of them. On their own, people are in league with Satan and all His angels, enemies of God and others, simply self-absorbed like a millennial on their smart phone. That’s not just them, that’s all of us. And, so, people are lost forever without God, *unable* to relate to Him or to one another.

And, yet, within the doctrine of original sin, there is an important distinction. While the human heart is evil from birth now, it wasn’t always that way. So, we draw a distinction between human nature and original sin. God created human nature but He did not create original sin. So, original sin is a spiritual disease that has infected human nature so deeply that we cannot tell a difference. There is a day, coming, though, when God will untangle the two.

Jesus takes us to the doctrine of original sin and shows us all the evil that flows out of the human heart not to leave us there, but to prepare us to hear more. He is not a Doctor who gives a diagnosis and then walks away. Instead, He walks to the cross. Thank God, this is not the last chapter in the Gospel of Mark.

Who Jesus Is

The Gospel Jesus prepares your heart to receive is that God does not let your defiled heart that is naturally and eternally separated from Him keep Him from you. God sees and knows the ugliness of your heart even better than you do, but He has had a change in heart Himself and has decided to love the unlovable. God has decided to send His Son.

Jesus, who is human and yet divine at the same time, that is human without an evil heart, the only one who is truly human the way God intended humans to be, reveals what true humanity looks like. He came not only to display but to demonstrate it, to enact it, so that He might be the Mediator through whom God relates to us.

As a direct result of His sinless, selfless heart, Jesus gave Himself for you on the cross. Out of His heart flows all the fruit of the Spirit in richest measure: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control all for you. Out of His heart flows the pure, sinless blood that washes your sin away and changes you from being defiled before God to being holy just as He is holy. Why? So that He might have an eternal relationship with you defined by His love for you.

Who God Has Made Us to Be in Jesus and by His Spirit

But not even this is the end of the Gospel or the end of God's heart. Out of God's heart also flows the Holy Spirit who gives us new hearts. This is God's promise in Ezekiel 36, *"I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you"* (Ezekiel 36.26–27a).

The Spirit gave you a new heart at Baptism. You died there and you rose to new life there. The Spirit gives you a new heart in the Word of Absolution. You confessed your sin and God took it away, as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103). The Spirit gives you a new heart through Jesus' Body and Blood at the Lord's Supper. Christ gave Himself for you and the forgiveness of your sins and now He gives you His Spirit so you might follow Him and give yourself for Him and for others; so that for you as for God, it would be about people.

So, what comes out of our new hearts? Well, there's something in relation to God and something in relation to other people.

In relation to God, our new hearts are filled with faith and obedience; not obedience of the code for fear of punishment or for hope of reward but obedience of the person out of love. Notice how the Old Testament Lesson from Deuteronomy chapter four highlights obedience to the Law as an indication of the presence of God. He wants our lives to be about our relationship to Him.

In relation to other people, our new hearts are filled with love and all the other fruits of the Spirit. Through His Son and His Spirit, God is turning us inside out, causing us to live for others. The devil and our own flesh constantly pull us back inward. So, Paul calls us to *"put on the whole armor of God"* (Ephesians 6) and fight those forces from without and those forces from within that would lead us to live for ourselves.

So, what comes out of our new hearts? It's simply faith toward God and love toward others. It's about people, first from God's heart to us and then from those hearts He has changed and made new to others.

Although I didn't find too many good examples of slogans, if the idea that "it's about people" might make sense in advertising campaigns, how much more should it be our focus in the Church? But church people like us can forget about that. We let it become about something else for some reason, probably because even our hearts are still evil until the Last Day. So, out of the hearts of us church people comes an attitude immersed in temporal rather than eternal things. Out of the hearts of us church people comes fear and anxiety over money and motions and minutes and we forget that it's about ministry, that is, people, service and love to people in Jesus' name. But we, of all people, ought to know that it's about people. We who are worse than we could possibly imagine have been loved by God more than we could possibly imagine. That changes us. It softens our hearts. It gives us new hearts, new eyes, new feet, new ears, new mouths. God makes us new people who live for Him and for others.

There is a Day when God will finally and fully remove original sin and restore us to true humanity in the image of Jesus Christ. What will it be like to no longer be diseased, to no longer live with diseased people in a diseased world? Jesus shows us. He begins it already now in His Church where He leads us to recognize our condition, continually receive a new heart from Him, and begin living to His glory and the benefit of other people as we look forward to the Day when He will make all things new.

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

Made Clean and Close by Christ

Mark 7.1–13 for Pentecost 14B (Proper 16B) on August 26, 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.

You have to wash your hands before you eat at our house. I don't care where you were or when you washed last, wash them again. Sometimes, life gets busy and we forget to wash. Sometimes, when Mom or Dad ask about that, certain someones get a certain look in their eye when they respond. Then you have to pass the smell-test. Mom must approve. If you didn't use soap, you didn't wash your hands.

When we are at the playground or a restaurant or on a road trip we use the hand sanitizer, or hand santa-tizer as our kids call it, that we keep in the car. Sometimes, after a public restroom, you want to bathe those kids in that stuff. Of course, you can over sanitize and actually hurt little immune systems.

So, if it's important to be clean on the outside, it's even more important to be clean on the inside.

"Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed, [dirty hands]. . . . And the Pharisees and the scribes asked [Jesus], 'Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?'" (7.1–2, 5).

We have traditions; religious ways handed down from generation to generation. There's a "right way" to light the candles on the altar before worship and a right way to extinguish them. There's a "right way" to pray with hands folded, eyes closed, and head bowed, and, of course, you should probably be thinking about the words, too, but that's a lot harder to manage. There are even discussions among some in our denomination concerning the right way to fold the hands in prayer, is it right thumb over left or left thumb over right? For some, there's a "right way" to prepare for the Lord's Supper by fasting either that morning before worship or even the whole day before. And what about the "right way" to have an outdoor service on the church lawn? What does God think of our traditions and our "right" ways?

For Jesus' opponents in our text, it probably wasn't that the disciples were *not* washing their hands at all. It was probably that they were not washing their hands *thoroughly enough*, not the right way. So, Jesus' opponents had lost sight of what matters to God and put their own concerns above His.

We might joke about our traditions and "right ways" but there are real and problematic ways we lose sight of what's important to God. We spend so much time and energy as a church with meetings and minutes and budgets and line items and dollars and cents and property and maintenance, and other things that are important but not ultimate, that we can very easily lose sight of what God says and what *He* considers important. Our hands might be clean in the sense that all our ducks are in a row, everything is in its place, and we've done it all the "right way," but what's going on in our hearts?

"This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Isaiah 7.6–7). It was true in Isaiah's time, in Jesus' time, and in our time. We lose sight of what's important to God and put our own, human concerns above His. Ironically, what is His main concern? It's you and your heart.

So, the Lord's words in Isaiah and Mark refer to lips that are close but hearts that are far. You know how this goes. You see someone you do not really want to see and instead of saying what you're really thinking about them, you smile and wave and act like you are best friends. It happens all the time. It happens in the Church. It happens in homes. It happened to Jesus when Judas kissed his cheek and betrayed Him in the Garden of Gethsemane.

There might be real issues going on there and it's easier just to hold it all at arms' length and not get into it. On the surface, it might be morality that makes you different than someone, your clean hands, as it were, but that's just the surface. God cares about even more about hearts. On the one hand, our hearts are so good at assuming the worst about people, judging people based on our criteria, believing rumors about people and spreading rumors about people. Many such things we do. On the other hand, our hearts find it next to impossible to defend people and speak well of them. We see people as enemies instead of sinners for whom Christ has died. Where are our hearts? They are far from God.

Jesus uses a difficult example in our text. He points to the Fourth Commandment: "Honor your father and your mother." Then He showed His opponents how they broke God's commandment by a human tradition that anything a son or daughter does for mom or dad should actually be given to God the Heavenly Father. In other words, mom and dad won't ever get the support God commands. They might act pious, but they care about themselves, not the parents, and God's command to care for them.

What about husband and wife? The picture Paul paints in Ephesians five is beautiful and ideal and it is so far from the reality of how the world understands marriage. Hands might be clean as courts of justice rule, but hearts are from one another and, first and foremost, far from God.

That's the basic problem. Our hearts care more about the *appearance* of being close to God than actually being close to God. So, our kids have to pass the smell-test because we love them. At the end of the day it really isn't about the hands, about who washed and who didn't. I hope someday they get that. Maybe they already do. Do we get it when it comes to God? We're still stuck on checking the right boxes and putting everything in order and then seeing who has or has not done the same. We're no different than the Pharisees, thinking about our own concerns rather than God's concern.

God, on the other hand, has a heart fixed on you. He always has been and always will be focused on you. He wants to make you clean on the inside. He wants to bring you close to Him. God's Commandments are the true smell-test. Guess what. We aren't clean. But God doesn't just point out the dirt. He doesn't tell us to go wash better, this time with soap. Instead, God sends His Son to handle all our filth for us, to take it on, and to take it away. He died with our sin and left it in the grave as He rose from it. He could have stayed far away, but He came close; close with His lips, and His heart, and His whole life. He now lives and comes near to us so He can simply say to you and me and all the dirty hearts in this world, "Come to me, and I will make you clean." From the inside out, He makes us clean so we can be close to God and close to one another. He is the only way for that to happen.

I'm glad we're outside today. It's something different. We're out of our comfort zone a little bit. We're using our beautiful lawn. But I think this helps us remember what God cares about and what we should care about. It's simple stuff: God's Word and God's people who are close to Him, close to one another, and called to be close to others who don't yet know just how much God loves them.

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

Wise in Christ

Proverbs 9.1–10 for Pentecost 13B (Proper 15B) on August 19, 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.

Would you rather be smart or wise? Yes, please. I'll take one of each.

On the one hand, I'd love to be able to retain more information for longer periods of time. I'd love to remember all those things I know I've learned somewhere along the line. Most of all, I'd love to be able to call up that information when I need it, especially to win that argument with my neighbor.

On the other hand, I'd love to be better at making a good decision and not wondering afterward, over and over again, if it was the right decision. I'd love to have the words to say in hard conversations. I'd love to be better at speaking the truth in love.

We might want to be both smart and wise, but Scripture is clear: It is better to be wise than to be smart. Scripture says that being smart can get in the way of humility before God and love for others. Scripture also says that God is wiser than we'll ever be, and, most importantly, on this side of heaven, our wisdom begins with the fear of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus.

Our text for today is Proverbs chapter nine. Proverbs nine contrasts being smart and being wise by saying, *"Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you"* (9.8). A scoffer is smart. He mocks other people and makes them feel stupid. The problem is, the scoffer thinks he knows everything already and has nothing else to learn. The scoffer will not let himself be corrected. A wise person, on the other hand, can take correction and criticism and even mocking and learn from it. *"Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser"* (9.9), our text says. The difference, then, between being wise and being smart has less to do with the brain and more to do with the disposition of the heart. The wise man is humble. The smart man is arrogant.

Our text is only half of Proverbs nine. If you turn to page 677 in the pew Bible, or take a look at this chapter later this week, you'll see that Proverbs nine contrasts two ways of life: the way of wisdom and the way of folly. We only read the way of wisdom today. These two ways are personified as two women with those same names: Wisdom and Folly. They sound very, very similar. In fact, at one point they say the exact same thing: *"Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!"* (9.41, 16a). So, each woman invites people to follow them but they lead to very different places.

Lady Wisdom serves prepared meat and mixed wine at her house. Lady Folly offers stolen water and food eaten in secret. Lady Wisdom says, *"Leave your simple ways and live"* (9.6). Those who follow Lady Folly find out that *"the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of the grave"* (9.18).

How do we know which house we're in and which way we've followed? Well, consider your life. Have you sinned? Yes. Would wisdom sin? No. Would wisdom do what is easy or pleasant simply because it is easy or pleasant, or would wisdom do what was right in God's eyes? Isn't it folly that is shallow and selfish? Every day, we hear and we follow Lady Folly. We do what we want to do without a real care about what God says or what it does to the neighbor. Then, when someone dares to point out our sin, we hate them for exposing us, and, in our intelligence, we seek to justify ourselves and explain it away.

How do you respond to the Law when it points the finger at you? “You’re a fool!” In fact, you’re no better than the person who says, “*There is no God*” (Psalm 14.1). You’re such a fool that you think you have all the answers. You think you’re in the right. You think you’ve done nothing wrong. You’re such a fool that you ignore the Law’s correction, justify yourself before men and before God with a million reasons why you are right, and then go right back to doing exactly what you want to do.

How does a wise person respond to the Law? “God, please forgive me. I’m a fool. I’m a sinner.”

We cannot make ourselves truly wise through knowledge or experience. We can only be made wise by God. “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom*” (9.10a).

“*The fear of the Lord*” is three things. First, it is real fear, terror, actually, that God in His holiness hates sin. He hates our selfish ways, our self-justifications, our inability to be corrected, our smarts, our pride. The fear of the Lord is the real fear in the face of God’s wrath against our sin and His ability to condemn us to eternal death and hell because of it.

“*If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared*” (Psalm 130.3–4). This, then, is the second thing. “*The fear of the Lord*” is the realization that even though you deserve nothing but God’s wrath and punishment for your arrogance and pride and ignorance of God, He loves you with an everlasting love that seeks you out and finds you huddled up, half-dead in some dark corner of Lady Folly’s house and He saves you by dying for you, rising for you, ascending for you, preparing a place for you, and promising to return for you because He has made you, redeemed you, and is, even now, sanctifying you in His way of wisdom.

So, “*the fear of the Lord*” is a real fear of the Lord because of His wrath, and a true love for Him because of His love for us in Christ. Finally, “*the fear of the Lord*” is the simple, humble acknowledgement that God is God. He does not operate our way and He causes offense, but He is God. “*Many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with [Jesus]*” (John 6.66) in the way of wisdom and the way of the cross. Given the option to go with them, Peter says, “*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life*” (John 6.68). So, St. Paul says, “*For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. . . . Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men*” (1 Corinthians 1.18, 22–25). So, God is God and the way of the cross is the way He wants to be known and the way He makes us wise.

Nikki Strege is being installed as Director of the Pilgrim Child Development Center today. She has been and will be a great blessing to the ministry there. What are we after there? Smart kids who know a lot of stuff and are ready for the next step? I suppose that’s part of it. But there’s got to be more. Psalm 34.11 says, “*Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD.*” St. Paul said to Timothy, “*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus*” (2 Timothy 3.14–16).

So, Jesus is the wisdom of God and Jesus is our wisdom. May we walk and invite others to walk not as unwise but as wise children of light in the way of wisdom, in “*the fear of the Lord,*” now and forever.

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

Dependent Faith Confirmed

1 Kings 19.1–8 for Pentecost 12B (Proper 14B) and Kathryn Swenson’s Confirmation on August 12, 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 the sermon today is the Old Testament Lesson from First Kings, especially the words of the angel, *“Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you”* (1 Kings 19.7).

The journey was too much for Elijah. It always had been, but it was especially too much now that Jezebel wanted him dead. *“It is enough! Take away my life!”* Elijah was alone and afraid, tired and empty. What a perfect place to be, right where the Lord wanted him, dependent on Him. Already at the beginning of Elijah’s journey as a prophet, the journey was too much for Elijah. It starts two chapters before our text, when the Lord sends Elijah to a brook where the Lord to feed him. *“The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook”* (1 Kings 17.6). The journey was too much for Elijah, but He was dependent on the Lord who sustained him. He always knew that, but the Lord wanted to confirm and strengthen Elijah’s dependent faith. So, the Lord let Elijah come to the end of himself under that broom tree so the Lord could sustain him with one miraculous meal for forty days and nights. That’s testing time and it confirmed Elijah’s dependent faith in the Lord.

“What does this mean for us,” the catechist asks the confirmand? The astute confirmand responds, *“It means that sinful human creatures are dependent on God to feed them in both body and soul. It means that God wants us to depend on Him. The journey is too much for us. When God brought us to the waters of Baptism, we were helpless. We were completely dependent on God there. So, He brings us to many other points along the way where the only thing we can do is confess that the journey is too much for us. Those times of testing confirm our dependent faith in the Lord.”* I told you she was astute.

“But how does God feed us,” the catechist asks as he leans in to hear her Christological answer? *“He feeds us with daily bread, with all that we need to support this body and life. But He also feeds us with His own Son, who calls Himself the Bread of Life from heaven. He feeds us with the miraculous meal of Christ’s body and blood that doesn’t just keep us going today or tomorrow or for forty days, but for eternity.”*

Now, that confirmand has been paying attention. But, if there is still time, the catechist might invite this budding theologian to dig just a bit deeper. *“Isn’t it amazing,”* he invites her to consider, *“that Jesus doesn’t only provide for us and sustain us, but that He Himself knows what it means to depend on His Heavenly Father?”* Himself the Provider and Sustainer also went without food for forty days and nights strengthened by the presence and Word of the Lord, not to climb Mount Horeb, but to climb Mount Calvary. He came not to do His own will, but the will of His Father, as He says in the Gospel Lesson (John 6.38). He was completely dependent on the Lord and He emptied Himself for us. He gave it all and spent it all for us. In fact, His precious, sinless blood still flows as an eternal fountain of forgiveness for you and me and every sinner in this world. *“I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. . . . Whoever comes to me I will never cast out”* (John 6.37). *“Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blesséd is the man who takes refuge in him!”* (Psalm 34.8).

Having dug deeper into the way this text points us to Christ, the catechist might push again on the way God calls us to be disciples of Jesus. “Amazingly, God calls us not only to receive Jesus as the Bread from Heaven, but also to follow Him as the pattern for life.” Paul says it in our Epistle Lesson, “*Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God*” (Ephesians 5.1–2). Jesus emptied Himself for us and God calls us to empty ourselves for others. It is impossible to do so, however, of our own means. We, like Elijah, are empty for that task. Only those who depend on the Lord completely can turn around and love the neighbor at all, let alone in a selfless, Christlike way. So, the crucial thing, the thing the catechist wants to drive home to the confirmand, is that Jesus Christ is Lord, not just out there somewhere, not just for my grandparents or parents or fellow church members, but that “Jesus Christ is MY Lord.”

In just a moment, we will review Luther’s explanation of the Second Article of the Apostles’ Creed from the Small Catechism. Listen to the way Luther describes the cross. Jesus didn’t only die to forgive my sins, as if my bank account has been balanced and I am free to go my happy way. No. “I believe that Jesus Christ . . . is MY Lord.” His death bought me back from sin, death, and the devil. He now owns me. He bought me, “not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, [*in order*] that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him.”

This is what the catechist is looking for from that confirmand. Is Jesus Christ *her* Lord? Have the Ten Commandments taught her that she is a sinful, human creature who is totally dependent on the Lord? Has the Creed taught her that she would be lost without God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who has acted on her behalf to make her, redeem her, and sanctify her? Has the Lord’s Prayer taught her that as she began her journey dependent on God in Baptism, so she will continue the journey to paradise, which is too great for her, dependent on the Lord? I believe Katie has learned these things and today the Lord will confirm His baptismal promises to her and strengthen her dependent faith in Him.

To be a confirmed member of Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church is more than having your name on some piece of paper. To be a confirmed member of Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church is about ownership, not ours but God’s. Confirmands stand up and confess that they don’t own themselves. Your life is not your own. To be a confirmed member of Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church is to live under the Lordship of Jesus. It is not about having your name on a piece of paper in the records or the archives. It is about living today under the Lordship, the ownership, of Jesus Christ. That means obedience and that means dependence, not just for material things, but for everything, for life itself, for strength to live today, for forgiveness of sins, for eternal life, for salvation.

A Confirmation is not so much about the confirmand declaring her faith as an independent young adult, but the confirmand responding to God’s promises dependent on Him, just like she was at her Baptism. *Dependence*, not independence is the mark of mature faith. So, the confirmand isn’t done at Confirmation. Instead, she declares her intent to remain in the Word, to keep hearing, to keep eating, to keep receiving Jesus Christ her Lord, and to keep living under Him in His kingdom. And yet, a Confirmation isn’t so much her confirmation of what she has done or intends to do, but God’s confirmation of all that He has done for her and just how dependent she is on Him.

Today, as we witness this Confirmation, all of us in this room have the opportunity to confess again that “Jesus Christ is MY Lord,” not just on paper, not just in the record books, but that Jesus is my Lord in reality, in my soul, in the way I live every day in obedience to Him and in dependence upon Him for everything. May God confirm that dependent faith in us today and every day until that Last Day comes

when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

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

Life in Christ: Lasting and Secure

John 6.22–35 for Pentecost 11B (Proper 13B) on Wednesday, August 8, 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.

The text for the sermon today is John chapter six, especially verse twenty-seven. The words of Jesus: *“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you.”*

A while back, I was listening to NPR and heard a very unique story about a town. The name of the town is Aglo. A-G-L-O. It’s a “paper town.” I had never heard of a paper town before. This town is paper because it only exists on a map. Two cartographers invented it. They rearranged their initials to spell “Aglo” and they placed their paper town at the corner of two dirt roads in the Catskill Mountains of New York. Why? They needed a way to test whether or not people were copying their map.

Not long after, Rand McNally published an atlas. It included Aglo. The two cartographers sued Rand McNally for copyright infringement, but Rand McNally won the suit because in the time between the initial map and the later atlas some people had built two houses and a General Store at the intersection of those two dirt roads and they called it Aglo. Years passed and that actual town faded away. There’s nothing there anymore. But people still go there because a man wrote a book about all of this and people are now going back there to find that paper town and to see it all for themselves.

There is a metaphor there. A paper town. It has no constancy, no permanence, and no security. It is here today and gone tomorrow or maybe not even there at all. Sometimes life feels that way. We live in a paper town, in a paper house, as paper people. Here today. Gone tomorrow. In that kind of world, in that kind of life, as those kinds of people, we need security. We long for something that lasts.

What does Jesus say? *“Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you.”*

Jesus has just feed five thousand men and their families. Now, they are running after Him and He points out that there are two kinds of food: There is food that perishes and there is food that endures to eternal life, there is food that is temporary and food that is lasting, there is food that is fleeting and food that is secure. It’s an odd metaphor. Jesus’ point is about things that last. Food, by nature, does *not* last. It spoils. It is consumed and then expelled. It is a fuel that is burned up. But food is more than fuel. It is a reflection of your identity; the kind food you eat reflects the kind of person you are. Food also does something to you; the food you eat shapes who you are. So, the point is that food is necessary for life and the kind of food you eat is the kind of life you will have. Here’s the logic: Perishable food leads to a perishable, temporary life and imperishable food leads to an imperishable, eternal life.

Like the people in John chapter six, you and I run after the consumables of the moment rather than the lasting, eternal, secure things. We are never satisfied with just enough. We always want more and better. And the reason we always want more and better is because none of it satisfies. Things wear out, go out of style, get lost, get stale, and break. They leave us hungry. And, as Paul says in 1 Timothy 6:7, *"We brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world."*

And yet our souls long for what is lasting. Jesus knows our hearts. He knows how we fixate on things that will not deliver life and only lead to death. He has come to save us from ourselves, from our addiction to the temporary. He has come to deliver to you not a temporary, fleeting, paper life, but a lasting and secure life in Him.

In the end, Jesus Himself is the true, eternal, lasting, and secure food. He is the Bread of Life. Everything else leaves people hungry at some point and leads to death. Only He lasts. He gave Himself once for all people and for all time in His death and resurrection. He felt the need of hunger and loneliness, pain and death. And yet He conquered these things by enduring them and outlasting them. Now, He is our only hope for a lasting and secure life.

And He comes to you and me today in His Body and Blood under the bread and wine to deliver Himself as food to you. This food not only reflects who you are, it shapes who you are. This is not just perishable food that will leave you perishable. This is imperishable food that will make you imperishable. It is food that we share with angels, and archangels, and all the company of heaven who are singing the praises of God continually and eternally. This is not a paper meal, as if it were only a remembrance or an idea. It is the real deal. Jesus is here for you as food for your body and food for your soul.

So, *"Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you."*

Jesus says elsewhere *"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal"* (Matthew 6.19–20).

A little later, He says, *"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? . . . But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you"* (Matthew 6.25–26, 33).

And finally, Paul writes, *"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).

So, your God knows what you need for this life and He has and will provide it. And your God knows what you need for life eternal, lasting and secure and He has and will provide it through Jesus Christ. So, trust Him. And, while He is providing for you for now and for forever, pursue the lasting stuff. Turn away from the constant need for more and better. Turn away from the love of this life and this world. For, as Jesus says, *"Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it"* (Matthew 10.39). So, receive and hold onto Jesus. He is the one thing needful now and forever, the one thing that lasts. He has gone to prepare a place for us, not a made-up dot on a map, but a real place. And He will return to take us to that place where we will feast forever on the Bread of Life He gives us.

A paper town, a paper house, a paper life? No. Not for you. In Christ, your life is lasting and secure. May we find our security in Christ and in Him alone, now and forever.

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

The Desert Feeding of Our Compassionate God

Mark 6.30–44 for Pentecost 9B (Proper 11B) on July 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.

Jesus' compassion for our bodies and souls is unlimited and inexhaustible.

Jesus' Compassion

Last Sunday, Herod had a birthday banquet. This Sunday, there's a meal much less sumptuous, but so much better. With simple bread and fish, Jesus feeds five thousand men in the desert. Unlike Herod's banquet that was driven by self-serving indulgence that puts John the Baptizer's head on a platter, Jesus' desert feast is driven by self-giving compassion that puts food in hungry stomachs and gives life. Ironically, the real celebration out there in the desert makes Herod's banquet look like a joke.

I wonder if Jesus' disciples understood what all went on there that day. I wonder if the crowds really perceived and received what was happening. I wonder if they grasped the breadth and length and height and depth of Jesus' compassion for needy sinners (Ephesians 3.18).

Jesus' compassion for needy sinners had sent those disciples out into Galilee to preach the kingdom of God and to cast out demons. In our text for today they come back to Jesus exhausted. Jesus invites them to get some rest. *"Come away by yourselves,"* said Jesus, *"to a desolate place and rest a while"* (6.31). He cares about their souls and about their bodies. So, they get into a boat to sail to a quiet, restful place on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

But here come the crowds. They somehow figured out where Jesus and His disciples were going and they ran there on foot ahead of them (6.33). Before the boat even gets to shore, the crowd is waiting. How did they disciples respond? How would we respond? How does Jesus respond? *"When He went ashore He saw a great crowd, and He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And He began to teach them many things"* (6.34).

Jesus is never too busy, never too distracted by other things, to take care of us. The Lord feels compassion for us in His gut, as the Greek indicates. But it isn't just a feeling. Compassion is sympathy moved to *action* in order to help a person in their problem or suffering.

What compassion does Jesus give? He shepherds. Why? Because people wander. They think they're doing what they want and what's best for them but they're led by Satan, the world, and the sinful flesh. They're slaves to sin and under the dominion of the devil. God is moved by that. Look at how He responds in Jeremiah 23. He cannot stand the so-called "shepherds of Israel" who do not feed His people with His Word so that they can know and trust His help and compassion.

So, Jesus, moved by compassion, “*began to teach them many things*” (6.34). The Word-made-flesh spoke peace and deliverance, help and healing into people’s lives. He Himself got right down there with His flock and shepherded them as the Best Shepherd, the only Good Shepherd. He does the same with us. He comes right down with His grace and mercy through Word, water, bread, wine, and the simple, life-giving promise of absolution. In these ways, Jesus has compassion on us through these means. He shepherds us and begins to teach us many things.

“That’s all well and good, Jesus, but we’ve got a problem.” The disciples are checking their watches and their own stomachs. “*This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late. Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.*” (6.35–36). It’s not like Jesus didn’t know. It’s more like He wanted to see what His disciples would do with this. Where would they turn in the middle of a problem when they simply did not have what it would take to address it?

The disciples become the teachers and tell Jesus to send the crowds away so that the crowds can take care of “*themselves*” (6.36). “It’s not our problem, Jesus.” Jesus counters, “Oh yes, it is our problem. *You take care of it!*” (6.37). You can hear the sarcasm the comes back, “*Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?*” (6.37). That would have been about six or seven months of an average salary at the time. They clearly don’t have what it takes. They clearly have no more compassion for needy sinners. And that’s the whole point.

“*How many loaves do you have?*” Jesus asks (6.38). Five loaves and two fish. Jesus’ compassion finds its way to the crowd through that meal. All five thousand men are satisfied. The loaves and fish never ran out. In the middle of nowhere, when no one else had what it would take, Jesus provided abundantly.

Jesus’ Compassion for Our Bodies and Souls is Unlimited and Inexhaustible

This miracle teaches us that, although Jesus’ mission was salvation for sinners through the cross, He did not ignore the basic needs of those people and He does not ignore our basic needs, either. How often don’t we leave Jesus with the spiritual things, though? He forgives sins. He comforts us. He gives us peace. But the rest is on us. This text teaches us that Jesus’ compassion is for all of us, body and soul.

When Jesus takes, blesses, breaks, and gives bread and fish to the crowds, He points to what happens here at this altar. The Lord’s Supper is a body *and* soul thing. Not only that, but this banquet, this feast that we receive regularly as we wander through the desert of this world, is a foretaste of the feast to come on the Last Day. It is proof that our Lord’s compassion for us will never run out and will never end.

Without the Lord’s Supper today, we have time to think about it and hunger for it. Think of all the times you’ve received His overabundant provision, His overabundant compassion. Do we let it change us? Do we let His compassion *for us* work compassion *in us* for other bodies and souls of other needy sinners? But there’s no question before He gives again. How have you used my gifts? He simply gives again. He’s patiently teaching us His compassion even as He patiently continues to provide for our bodies and souls.

You might be tempted to think you’re too small, too unimportant in the grand scheme of things for God to care. You might be tempted to think that what you’re dealing with isn’t significant enough for Him to notice. Jesus’ compassion overrules all of that. His compassion is unlimited and inexhaustible. He gives Himself to us so we might not only receive Him for ourselves but share Him and His compassion with the needy sinners we meet every day. We don’t have what it takes to address every body and soul problem we encounter, but He does, both for us and for this needy, sinful world.

Our prayer today echoes what Paul said in the same letter as our Epistle Lesson, Ephesians, but a chapter later, where he prays that with Christ dwelling in our hearts through faith, we “*may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God*” (Ephesians 3.17–19). God grant it for Jesus’ sake both now and forever.

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

The Test of Faithfulness

Mark 6.14–29 for Pentecost 8B (Proper 10B) on July 15, 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.

When the request came back to Herod from Herodias through the dancing daughter, “*I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter*” (Mark 6.25), it was, among other things, a loyalty test. It was also a twisted dish for a birthday party. But the real issue on the table, so to speak, was whether Herod would do what was honorable in the eyes of people or what was honorable in the eyes of God.

It’s never that simple, though, is it? With Herod, we like to convince ourselves it’s more complicated than that. It really is that simple, though: obey God or obey men? Or, in this case, obey God or obey a woman. This was Herodias’ loyalty test to Herod. Her grudge against John the Baptizer and her desire to kill him forced Herod to protect him in prison. Herod hadn’t bought into John’s message completely, but he respected John and wanted to hear what he had to say. For Herodias, that tacit support and protection of John, that willingness to hear him, was a betrayal. John had dishonored them both and now Herodias forced Herod’s hand. “What’ll it be, Herod? Me or John?”

There’s more to the story, though. Mark calls Herod a “king” in our text, but that’s sarcastic. He wasn’t a king. This is not Herod the Great, but Herod Antipas. He was just a tetrarch, one of four rulers over Israel; Herod over Galilee, Pontius Pilate over Judea, Philipp, Herod’s brother, over Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias over Abilene (Luke 3.1). Herod didn’t even have a kingdom to split with the dancing girl. It was all about appearances. Herod would later be convinced by Herodias to go to Caesar and apply for royal titles. They didn’t get them. They did get exiled, though.

The point is, Herod and Herodias lived their lives hoping for honor and recognition from people. John the Baptizer threatened that. So, though it bothered him, to save a shred of dignity in the eyes of his guests and to prove his loyalty to his evil wife, Herod gave the order to behead John and he silenced the voice that had cried out in the wilderness; the voice that had called him to repentance, forgiveness, and honor in the sight of God rather than men and women. That’s how it is with people when push comes to shove. People do what is right in their own eyes. People do what is honorable in the eyes of others they respect. And, truth be told, we aren’t so different than these evil people.

It’s likely that Mark sarcastically calls Herod a “king” in order to contrast him with King Jesus. What a contrast that is. Herod associates with the powerful but Jesus associates with sinners and outcasts. Herod is “*perplexed*” and “*exceedingly sorry*” in his problems but Jesus deals with His problems with the clarity of “*not what I will but what you will*” (14.36). Herod caves to the pressures of people but Jesus remains faithful to God and uncontrolled by people. Herod oversees the death of an innocent man to

save his own skin but innocent Jesus willingly offers Himself to death for others (10.45). Jesus is the true King and in His loyalty test, He proved faithful to God and faithful to you.

If Herod is a contrast of Jesus in this text, notice how John is paralleled comparison. His death comes at an opportune time. He is arrested and bound. His words get him in trouble. He is innocent. There is a moment when the one with authority over his life might actually save him, but the pressures from people prove too strong for those rulers of men. He is hated. He is killed and buried. The point? John and Jesus passed God's loyalty tests. They remained faithful to Him.

So, with both the account of Herodias loyalty test and John the Baptizer's death, Mark points us to the death of Jesus on the cross. But Mark's narrative does not let us escape. It presents God's loyalty test to us. What will it be? Will we prove faithful like John or will we fail like Herod? Will we do what is honorable in our own eyes and in the eyes of other people or what is honorable in the eyes of God? It's not an issue of understanding. We know the right answer. It's an issue of the will. When push comes to shove, where does our true loyalty lie? We might not experience the choice between confessing Christ or saving our skin, but every thought, every word, every deed, is, really, a test of faithfulness. *"Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts"* (Psalm 139.23). Who is your Lord at any given moment and will you be loyal to Him in everything?

When it comes to what we think, Jesus is clear that hateful thoughts are the same as murder and lustful thoughts the same as adultery and he thereby cuts past our sin to our sinful unwillingness to recognize it. How can we so easily and frequently excuse ourselves from His call to repentance? How can we so easily be controlled by our desire to be significant in the eyes of others? Paul said, *"But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. . . . It is the Lord who judges me"* (1 Corinthians 4.3-4). The loyalty tests in thought are constant and we constantly fail.

When it comes to what we say, the issue is not so much our ability to be polite but our ability to speak the truth. Those two are often at odds. Why do we let our mouths be controlled by the ears of others? Paul says, *"Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor"* (Ephesians 4.25). Amaziah didn't reject Amos because he said the wrong thing. He rejected him, and the God who sent him, because he spoke the truth. Herodias hated John because he spoke the truth. Mark doesn't tell us what John said when he was martyred. There's no confession of faith or final prophecy, but he did record the truth he spoke to Herod that got him killed, *"It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife"* (Mark 6.18). We are disciples of Truth incarnate, and yet, when push comes to shove, though we know we are called to always speak the truth, we fail to be faithful.

When it comes to what we do, there is, of course, the clear passage, *"We must obey God rather than men"* (Acts 5.29). That means all Ten Commandments. Christ redeemed us and brought us into His kingdom, not with gold or silver, but His own precious blood, and because He is our Lord, we have the opportunity to prove that we belong to Him and His kingdom in what we do. But, as Luther says, we daily sin much in what we do and do not do.

Sometimes, it isn't so much what we do or don't do in obedience to the Ten Commandments, but rather what God does to us, that is, what we suffer. John suffers martyrdom in our text. Jesus gives His life as a ransom for many. How we handle what God does to us, how we think about, talk about, and what we do with what God does to us proves or disproves our loyalty to Jesus. So, we cannot escape the Lord's test of our loyalty nor do we prove faithful.

Recall your Confirmation vow: “Do you intend to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even to death? *I do, by the grace of God.*” Even with God’s grace, you haven’t done that. Every thought, word, and deed carried out according to the Word of God? No way! Jesus says, “*One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much*” (Luke 16.10). But you have not been faithful in a little. God demands complete obedience; a failure in one thing is complete failure. “*For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. You brought us into the net; you laid a crushing burden on our backs*” (Psalm 66.10–11).

By the grace of God, your faithfulness in the midst of every little loyalty test from God is not the measure of your salvation, but a response to your salvation brought about by the faithfulness of Jesus (Galatians 2.16). He was faithful in every thought, word, and deed, living in perfect obedience to His Father, even to the point of death on a cross. He is your salvation. As Paul proclaims, “*In him we have obtained an inheritance.*” (Ephesians 1.11). It’s yours by grace.

Today, there is another loyalty test. This time, it’s a test of God. It might appear to be a little thing, but God has instituted it and He will not fail. He proves Himself to you through word, bread, and wine. The fruit of His faithfulness on the cross is given to you and for you so that you may have His life in you now and forever. This is the fruit of the salvation God won through the messed-up rule of man, men who were preoccupied with status and honor and how things looked, people doing the right thing in their own eyes. But it is ultimately God’s kingship at work.

Here and now, King Jesus provides a royal banquet for you. It isn’t only a celebration of His birth, but also of His death and resurrection. He is the King who rules and reigns in you through His body and blood, forgiving your sin, your unfaithfulness to Him, the countless times you’ve failed His tests, but, through His faithfulness to you, He here gives you the power to be faithful to Him, even unto death, in order that you may receive the crown of life (Revelation 2.10). God grant it for the sake of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

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

An Abundantly Gracious God

Psalm 123 for Pentecost 7B (Proper 9B) on July 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.

My parents were in town about three weeks ago, right when we got all that rain. We were out running errands and found ourselves at 92nd and Center. The intersection was underwater. Cars were stalled on Center. A man was pulling debris out of a storm drain. My dad was driving his car, I was in the passenger seat, Luke was in the back. We stopped at the light and marveled. The light turned green, and we could have kept going north to Burleigh, but my dad said, "Jon, you've got to get a picture of this."

So, with a green light and the car stopped, I got out my phone and took a picture, and, just as I did, a big pickup truck, all jacked up, came flying past us on the right. His front tire sent a massive wave of water into my dad's car. His back tire sent another massive wave of water into my dad's car. We were soaked. We were stunned. It was unbelievable. "You've got to be kidding me," we said.

Then my dad followed the truck. It was stopped at the next light at 92nd and Burleigh, waiting to go north. We were turning right to come east, but before we did, my dad pulled up next to him, rolled down *his* window, looked at the guy in the eye and said, "Wow." I will let you imagine how that guy responded, but as we drove away, my dad said, "Welcome to Milwaukee."

"Wow. Unbelievable. Unreal. You've got to be kidding me." We kept saying those kinds of things until we got home and told the story.

You've had those experiences. You've marveled at people. They never cease to amaze us.

Jesus marveled at people. Jesus is rejected in His hometown. They took offense at Him. He *marveled* because of their unbelief. Jesus might have been unbelievable to them, but their unbelief was unbelievable to the Lord. And yet, He kept on going. He kept teaching. He kept healing.

When the Lord addressed Ezekiel and gave Him His Spirit He sent him as a prophet to Israel whom He called "*nations of rebels, who have rebelled.*" By calling them "*nations,*" the Lord is actually saying that His own nation is no different than all the other unbelieving Gentile nations in the world. He goes on to say that they are "impudent" and "stubborn" in English, but it's better in Hebrew: "hard headed" and "hard hearted." Ezekiel went with "*Thus says the Lord*" on his lips but would they listen? Ezekiel would marvel, as well. And yet, he kept on going. He kept on prophesying.

So, we come to Psalm 123, our text for today, and, again, there is marveling happening because of people: "*To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens! Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maidservant to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God, till he has mercy upon us. Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy*"

upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt. Our soul has had more than enough of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud."

Who is marveling here? It's God's pilgrim people. What are they marveling at? The contempt and rejection of the world; the same rejection that Ezekiel, Paul, and Jesus experienced. It's called unbelief. Psalm 123 is one of the fifteen Psalms of Ascents, which means it was prayed and sung by the people as they ascended up to Jerusalem and to the Temple to worship. As they go, we get this picture of the world pointing the finger, laughing at them, and mocking them, not unlike the way the people would mock Jesus on His way to the cross. The world mocks them because they don't belong in the world. Instead, God has called them out of the world and they belong to Him.

You know this feeling, Pilgrim Lutheran Church. God has called you out of the world, and you belong to Him. Because of that, the world does not have regard for you. I recently heard that two U.S. Senators declared that if you are a Christian, you should not be allowed to hold a public office. Wow. That's unreal. The world is bent on rejecting the very people who represent their only hope, Jesus Christ.

In response to the world's rejection, Psalm 123 leads God's people to turn their eyes from outward at the world to upward toward God. He is enthroned in the heavens. He is omnipotent and omniscient. He is Creator without beginning or end. He is in control.

Because of that, the Psalm goes on to lead God's people into the position of servants. Ezekiel, Paul, the disciples whom Jesus sent out, and Jesus Himself, the Suffering Servant, all do the same thing. Because God is God, God's people approach Him as servants.

And what is their request? *"Our eyes look to the LORD our God, till he has mercy upon us. Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us"* (Psalm 123.2b–3a). Three prayers for mercy, trinitarian perhaps. But it is probably better translated *"be gracious, O LORD, be gracious."* "Mercy" suggests that they have done something wrong and are asking God not to punish them, but the Hebrew word goes more to God's character as gracious, as in, *"The LORD [is] a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness"* (Exodus 34.6). So, the basis of this psalm and of all the prayers of God's people is not God's omnipotence alone, but His character as a gracious God.

Because God is gracious, His people lament to Him. They don't just complain about the world and their lives in it, they complain about the world and their lives in it *to God*. That's the definition of lament. It's prayed in faith to God. So, God's people seek from God what they don't get anywhere else in the world, graciousness, favor, and acceptance.

Before we apply these things to our own lives, let's consider how this Psalm points us to the life of Christ. I've already noted how Jesus is the Pilgrim (capital "p"), who did that pilgrimage trek to Jerusalem where He would lament from the cross, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Psalm 22.1, Matthew 27.46). That is the world's rejection of God. He must have marveled at their unbelief. And yet, He did not summon His almighty power, but rather kept going, true to His character. He forgave those who crucified Him. He won forgiveness of sins for all people by being rejected by God. God is, in Christ, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding, *abounding*, in steadfast love and faithfulness.

This is what ought to cause us to marvel, today, not the world and its people, but God and His grace. He should not be so gracious to us. We know our transgressions and our sin is always before us. We live as if the Lord is *not* enthroned in the heavens. We doubt that He is in control, or don't even give it a

thought. We neglect to pray or lament, but we constantly complain. Worse still, we are at home and comfortable in this world. We find ourselves siding with them when it comes to the offense of Jesus. We try to soften Him and make Him palatable to the world. It is not possible. Only the Holy Spirit can work faith in the heart. As Jesus Himself said, *“Blessed is the one who is not offended by me”* (Matthew 11.6). And yet, we *are*, at times. We are ashamed and timid and we ought to lament *that* reality. But God’s power is made known chiefly in showing mercy. God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Jesus loves you more than His own life and has given His life so that God will not reject you. Instead, He forgives you, and calls you again to follow Him into the world. Listen to His words in John chapter twelve, *“Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him”* (John 12.23–26).

So, how might we apply Psalm 123 to our lives as servants of God? I have three thoughts. First, we ought to pray, lament, wait upon, and rely on our gracious God. Second, we ought to keep going. Third, we ought to be gracious to the world as our God is gracious to us.

First, we ought to pray, lament, wait upon, and rely on our gracious God. James Luther Mays in his commentary on this psalm says, *“When pilgrims from the world’s contempt lift their eyes to behold the one who rules the world, they find the grace that overcomes the world.”* We are in worship today to get another glimpse of our gracious God, to call on His name, lay down our laments, and trust in Him. He has overcome the world for us in Christ and He will overcome it on the Last Day. Until then, we are hidden as pilgrims in a strange land, just as Ezekiel was hidden behind a rejectable prophesy, God’s people hidden behind a pilgrim way, and God Himself hidden behind a suffering, crucified man.

Second, we ought to keep going. Jesus kept going in spite of rejection. The disciples kept going even if they had to shake off the dust here and there. Ezekiel kept prophesying no matter the receptivity of Israel. God’s people kept on making the pilgrimage regardless of what the world said. Paul explains all of this in the Epistle Lesson: *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”* God’s servants boast in weaknesses and are content with rejection because God’s strength is hidden in human weakness. No servant is above His master. If the world rejected Him, the world will reject the Church. And yet, He overcame the world, not with power and might, but with sacrifice and love. In Him, and through Him, we overcome the world, as well.

Third, we ought to be gracious to the world as our God is gracious to us. There might be some dust shaking, but even *that* is gracious. We’re not here to go to war with the world or with our neighbors, but to reflect to the world our gracious God. Because, amazingly, as we receive the grace of God for ourselves, God actually begins to work that graciousness through us. Not only do we come to the Temple where God is abundantly gracious to us sinners, but God sends us back out into a world of rejection as *abundantly gracious people*. That’s our weakness and God’s power.

My dad had a lot of options that day. He didn’t yell at the guy. He didn’t get mad about it. He simply *marveled* and went on his way. There’s something there for you and me as we encounter an angry and hostile world. We stand in a long line of pilgrims. With them, we are servants of a gracious God who has called us out of the world to represent Him to the world. So, as we walk the pilgrim way, defined by our destination with Him, we continue to trust in our abundantly gracious God and learn each day to be more like Him.

May the world *marvel* at the weak and gracious pilgrim people who look to and rely upon an abundantly gracious God.

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

The Healer's Compassion

Mark 5.21–43 for Pentecost 6B (Proper 8B) on July 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.

“Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord” (Psalm 33). It’s a beautiful, new banner we have, hand-made by our Altar Guild. *“Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord.”* But just how far are we from blessed? What kind of future do we really have as a nation?

“I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth” (Psalm 121.1–2). That’s what we should do. Why? *“The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is [His] faithfulness”* (Lamentations 3.22–23). In other words, He has *compassion*. There is no God like our God.

Even so, we fail to turn to Him. We also fail to be like Him. Our response to a sick world is an impatient demand for correction as if all the sinners are out there. God’s response is limitless compassion. Hasn’t the Lord had compassion on you? Hasn’t He healed your souls by forgiving your sins? Where’s your compassion for people? The real problem with the conversation about the ills of our nation is that it lets you escape without examination. But, there’s no escape today. God’s Word is like the bright light on the surgeon’s table. *You’re* the sick one. That’s why you’re here. That’s why Jesus is here, too.

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2.17). Read Mark’s Gospel and watch Jesus overwhelm a sick nation and sick people with healing. He isn’t overwhelmed by them but overwhelms them. He heals and forgives and cleanses and restores. What is the fuel that drives this Physician? It is divine compassion incarnate; limitless, endless, eternal compassion for a lost and condemned creation.

The word “compassion” only appears four times in the Gospel of Mark. It does not appear in chapter five, but it’s there. Our compassion amounts to an emotion. We hurt for people and hope they’re healed. Jesus’ compassion begins with emotion, but it bleeds out as powerful action.

Our world likes to talk about compassion the emotion. Compassion, love, acceptance, tolerance, it all goes together. What does not belong in the discussion is the idea of change. In fact, the world has come to define compassion as loving, accepting, and, if nothing else, tolerating people just as they are.

Christ’s compassion, on the other hand, accepts people as they are and then changes them, makes them different, heals them, forgives them, cleanses them from demons, feeds them so they’re not hungry anymore, teaches them so they are not without a Shepherd anymore, even raises them from the dead. Christ’s compassion does not affirm illness it does not affirm sin it does not affirm death. Christ’s compassion ends illness, forgives sin, and defeats death.

And who is it that comes to Jesus in Mark chapter five? It's the sick who know that they're sick. It's not our nature to know that we're sick, much less admit it. So, God goes to work. He condemns and judges because it is only the people who have need, it is only the people who are not okay as they are, only the people who know they need to change who come to Jesus. And it is only to those people who humble themselves and approach Jesus believing that He is the answer to their need that actually receive Him. So, how does Jesus have compassion on you? After ten full chapters in Mark's Gospel of Jesus' compassion for sick bodies and souls, Jesus goes to work for you. *"For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"* (Mark 10.45). He was already on His way to Jerusalem when He said that. The same divine compassion that drove Him to overwhelm the world with healing, drove Him to the cross. Compassion incarnate embodied our sickness and death. *"[T]hough he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich"* (2 Corinthians 8.9).

Everyone Jesus healed in His ministry would eventually get sick again and die. So, Jesus' bodily healings were powerful testimonies to who He is and what He does, but we are here because of the healing He delivers to the soul. At the same time, we hold onto the hope of the day Jesus returns and brings us to that place where we will live in complete health of both body and soul for eternity.

Today, though, we need His healing. Our souls are sick with sin. That's easy to say. What does it mean? It means we cannot and will not see beyond ourselves. Our souls are sick with unbelief, slow to pray and slow to believe that God helps us. Our souls are sick with despair and hopelessness because of that unbelief. Our souls are sick with bitterness and anger toward other people. There is no compassion in us. Our souls sick with discontent. Our souls are sick with grief because of what the wages of sin has cost us. Our souls are sick of the suffering of the world. Our souls are overwhelmed by the challenges of life. We're needy people reaching for the hem of the robe of Jesus

But today we get so much more. We get Jesus Himself, the great Physician, the Healer of our souls. He comes right here and He forgives. That's the healing we need. He takes away our fear of God and gives us peace with God. He takes away our defensiveness toward each other and gives us His own compassion. He takes away our worry about the future and gives us the hope of heaven. This is the medicine our nation needs, too; and it will come to them through you, people healed by Jesus.

You know, Psalm 33, *"Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord,"* is really referring to the Church, the new Israel with a heavenly Jerusalem. That's the blessed nation. We have an unshakeable kingdom and an eternal city by faith along with individuals from every tribe, language, people, and nation. The Day is coming when we will see it and experience it in the presence of the Great Physician Himself. In the meantime, Jesus fills you with compassion here so He can send you with His compassion out there, not that we might be the saviors of this sick world, but so that this sick world might know the compassion its only Healer, Jesus.

May God grant it for Jesus' sake.

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

The Power of God's Word

Mark 4.35–41 for Pentecost 5B (Proper 7B) on June 24, 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.

The text today is from Mark chapter four, especially these words: *“And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.”*

Our focus today is very simple: Because God says it, it is true.

When evening had come, Jesus said to his disciples, *“Let us go to the other side.”* This was not an invitation or a request. It was truth. *“We will go to the other side.”*

But there was a storm. And although Jesus had said that they would go to the other side, that storm was easier to believe. It made the trip seem impossible. It was totally out of their control. They were afraid. And yet, Jesus had spoken His Word. *“We will go to the other side.”*

The disciples panicked. *“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”* They panicked because the things they really trusted, like their own abilities, strength, and skill, now failed them. The storm got them to look outside of themselves to Jesus.

Jesus had been teaching the crowd all day. He taught from the boat so everyone could hear. He was so exhausted now from teaching that He slept right through the howling wind and turbulent waves. When the disciples tried to wake Him, they called Him, *“Teacher.”*

Jesus taught in parables. The kingdom of God is like a sower who sows his seed. The kingdom of God is like that seed which grows outside of the farmer's control and understanding. The kingdom of God is like the mustard seed that is the smallest of the seeds but grows to be the greatest plant in the garden. The bottom line of those parables is the power of the Word of God. The seed the sower was sowing was the Word of God. The greatest tree in the garden was the Word of God. God rules His kingdom by His Word, and the Word is made flesh in Jesus Christ.

So, Jesus taught them and they called Him teacher, but Jesus had not taught them everything. It wasn't finished, and neither was He. So, He got up from sleeping, and He opened His mouth. Not to teach, but to act. Jesus rebuked the wind and the sea. Into that storm Jesus spoke His Word: *“Peace! Be still!”* It's just two words in Greek: *σιῶπα, πεφίμωσο*. It wasn't a request. It was truth. Jesus spoke peace and it happened. He spoke stillness and it happened. Because Jesus says it, it is true.

But then Jesus became the Teacher again. He turned to the disciples and asked, *“Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?”* Jesus' powerful Word exposed their fear and unbelief. They were afraid because

that storm was real. They were afraid because they did not have faith in what Jesus had said: *"We will go to the other side."* Faith is what Jesus wanted. Faith is what Jesus was looking for in his disciples; faith in His Word; faith that what He said was true. *"We will go to the other side."* Trust me. Do not be afraid. Believe me. Instead of faith, there is fear and they say to themselves, *"Who then is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?"*

Let's take comfort in the fact that the disciples did not fully grasp Jesus after He taught them. It wasn't just that day, but lots of days. It wasn't just Jesus' teaching, but Jesus their Teacher that they failed to grasp, even after they watched Him calm the storm.

You and I understand their situation better than they did. He is Teacher and teaching, the eternal Word of God right there with them in all His power. They had nothing to fear because He spoke truth and made things happen for them by His Word.

We can see their situation so clearly. Why can't we see our situation that way? You have the eternal Word of God right here with you in all His power. There is nothing for you to fear because He speaks truth and makes things happen for you by His Word.

Jesus wasn't done teaching those disciples. Jesus isn't done teaching us, either. It's a very old lesson and He always teaches the same thing (Luther, LC Preface).

Speaking of old lessons, our Old Testament lesson is from Job and it teaches faith. You know the narrative. Job was blameless and upright before God (1.1). Satan wanted to prove that Job was faithful to God only because God had given him such a good life. So, God gave Satan the power over all of Job's possessions and Satan took Job's herds, flocks, and even his children.

But when Satan saw that Job remained faithful to God, he wanted to take more. He wanted Job himself. God, in His wisdom, gave Satan the power over Job's body, but commanded Satan not to kill him. So Satan afflicted Job with sores and diseases. This time, it all got to Job. He did not think he deserved all of that. He believed that he had been righteous and upright and deserved God's blessings.

In our text, God speaks. *"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?"* In other words, "I alone am the Creator, Job! My Word created everything in this world. My Word created you! How can you be prideful? How can you question me? Why do you not yet trust me?" And Job repented. He acknowledged God as Creator and Lord. And then God, by his Word, restored to Job double of what he had before. God was faithful to His Word, even though Job had been filled with fear and unbelief.

It's an old lesson God teaches you. The powerful Word of God confronted Job, Jesus' disciples, and you. Why are you so anxious and afraid? Do you not yet have faith? Why do you worry? Why do you try to take control of your life and make yourself believe that you can handle it all? Why do you not have faith that God is in control of all things? It's a simple answer. You do not fear, love, and trust in God above all things. You do not trust the power of God's Word. But Jesus shows you so clearly that He is trustworthy and His Word is true.

You know, we have a tendency to make the storm in Mark chapter four a metaphor for rough times in life. That storm is an illness, a catastrophe, my little problem in my little corner of the world. But the storm isn't a metaphor. It's a storm. And the message is not that God will calm every metaphorical storm you might have, because He won't. The message is that Jesus Christ is with you, just as He was with those disciples, and that His Word is true and powerful. You can trust Him.

Jesus said in John sixteen, *"I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world"* (John 16.33).

The eternal Word that created the world with *"Let there be light!"* stepped into a human body, taught those crowds, slept in a boat, calmed the sea, and then went silently before Pilate and willingly to the cross as a Lamb to the slaughter. It was there that He spoke His most powerful Word. He suffered far more than you or me, far greater than Job. God did not protect Him but turned His back on Him. He looked away from all the fear and all the unbelief of all of us sinners. Jesus embodied that for you; your fear, your doubt, your lack of faith. Then, as He hung there, Jesus said, *"It is finished"* (John 19.30). Because He said it, it is true. The sacrifice is complete. The power of sin, death, and the devil is broken. Forgiveness, life and salvation have been won for you!

That is the good news for you. That is why Jesus came and still lives and reigns; not to calm every storm in your life, but to save you from your sin and God's eternal wrath and everlasting death and to give you eternal life. And it wasn't until the disciples and the crowds and the Pharisees and the chief priests and the Romans and everyone else saw Jesus on the cross that they understood who He was. That's how it is with you, too. You cannot understand who Jesus is, the One who has authority to calm a storm with His Word, until He empties Himself of all power to die and save us out of love. *"It is finished."*

But the Good News is not only what He has said and done in the past, but that He is still speaking. Here He convicts you of how slow you are to believe, but He says, *"You are forgiven."* This is not a wishful thought or a nice sentiment. It is reality. He forgives you. His Word does what it says. Even as light was spoken into being at creation, and just as the storm was calmed with God's Word, so God forgives you today. He says it. It is true. So, we trust Him.

He speaks in Baptism. He brings the Word and the water together to recreate who we are. We do not understand it. We do not fully grasp it. But we cling to His Word. He says it, so it is true. You are truly a child of God, clothed with the righteousness of Christ Jesus.

The Word of God speaks to us at His meal. *"Take, eat; this is my body."* *"Take, drink; this is my blood."* We do not understand it. We do not even fully grasp it. But we cling to His Word that what He says is true. This is His body and blood given and shed for you and the forgiveness of all your sins.

There is nothing certain in life except what God says. So, trust Him. He is faithful. He is with you. He is for you and forgives you. So, trust what He says, because what He says is true both now and forever.

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

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

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

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).

May the hope of the eternal victory that we do not yet see be our anchor until we do.

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

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.