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Spirit and Life

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"I see my record of debt nailed fast to the cross."

Hvorhen skal jeg dog fly
Fra Lovens Tordensky
Med mine Synder mange,
Hvor skal jeg Trøsten fange?
Thi hele Verden vide
Ei lette kan min Kvide.

O Jesus, naaderig!
Med Hjertens Sorg til dig
Jeg paa dit Ord fremtræder,
Mig ved din Naade glæder,
Og tror, hvad du forjætter,
Dit Blod min Synd udsletter.

Jeg arme Dødsens Barn,
Omsnært af Syndens Garn,
Til dig i Troen haster,
Og i din Favn mig kaster,
I Naadens Dyb jeg sænker
Den Kval, som Hjertet krænker.

Jeg ser, mit Skyld-Brev
Til Korset naglet blev,
Og i din Grav i Haven,
Der er min Synd begravet
Til evig Skjul og Gjemme,
Hvi vil jeg mig da gremme?

Jeg meget har behov,
Men Gud ske evig Lov!
Alt, hvad jeg kan begjære,
Hos dig jeg faar, ja mere;
Min Kraft i dig jeg finder,
Hos dig min Sorg forsvinder.

Om Satans hele Magt
Sig hade mod mig lagt,
For mig fra dig at skille,
De faa ei, hvad de ville,
Thi du mig Seier giver,
Dit Blod min Frelse bliver.

Men bøi, o Sjæleven,
Min Hjertens Hu derhen,
At jeg maa alt modstride,
Som mig fra dig vil slide,
Og altid her i Live
Dit Legems Lem forblive.

Where shall I flee away
From the thundercloud of the Law?
With my many sins,
Where shall I find consolation?
For all the world together
Cannot relieve my anguish.

O Jesus, rich in grace!
With heartfelt sorrow I come to you;
Upon your word I stand,
Rejoicing in your mercy,
And trust what you promise:
Your blood blots out my sin.

I, a poor child of death,
Ensnared by sin's net,
Hasten to you in faith,
And cast myself into your arms;
Into the depths of grace I sink
The torment that wounds the heart.

I see my record of debt
Nailed fast to the cross,
And in your grave in the garden
There my sin lies buried,
Hidden away forever—
Why then should I grieve?

I have great need indeed,
Yet God be praised forever!
All that I could desire
I find in you—and more;
In you I find my strength,
In you my sorrow fades.

Though Satan's every power
Should set itself against me,
To tear me away from you,
They shall not have their will;
For you grant me the victory,
Your blood becomes my salvation.

Now bend, O Prince of souls,
My heart's desire toward this:
That I may resist all
Which would tear me from you,
And always here in life
Remain a member of your body.

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Editorial Sigla.—

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1 First Sunday in Advent: The Year of the Lord's Favor

Luke 4:16–22. And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and according to his custom he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and stood up to read. And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him, and when he opened the book, he found the place where it was written:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim the Gospel to the poor; he has sent me to heal those who are brokenhearted, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And he closed the book and gave it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them: Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. And all bore witness to him and marveled at the gracious words that proceeded from his mouth.

Will the new church year that begins today become a year of the Lord's favor for our church?

The answer to this question depends on two things. First, whether the Lord, “according to his custom,” will come into our synagogues—that is, our congregations—and there let the Word be proclaimed. Second, whether we give the Word room in our hearts, so that the Word becomes for us a power unto salvation.

Blessed be the Lord, that the year of the Lord's favor, which began with his gracious preaching in Nazareth, has not yet come to an end. From that time it has been the year of the Lord's favor, inasmuch as the Gospel since then has sounded forth in an ever-widening circle. From Sunday to Sunday, from year to year, from century to century, preaching with power from God and the heavenly Spirit has resounded over the earth in thousands upon thousands of places.

Blessed be the Lord, that it still resounds. And that it resounds with its old, simple, and life-giving message. Even if it has at times been darkened and overshadowed by human commandments and human doctrines, it has nevertheless not fallen silent; but as the sun breaks forth again from mist and clouds, so the clear radiance of the Gospel has by the Lord's grace again shone forth. Still the Lord, through his Gospel, offers the kingdom of God with all its grace and gift to the poor; still he offers healing and restoration to broken hearts; still he offers sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed; still he opens his Savior's arms and says: “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.” Grace for every poor sinner, free grace, unmerited grace, remains the sum of the preaching, as it always was. The same old distress that again and again afflicts and presses human hearts can still be relieved by the same old faithful remedy, the precious blood of Jesus, which blots out all our transgressions and atones for all our guilt.

Therefore it has hitherto been the year of the Lord's favor for all of us who dwell in lands that are illumined by the true light of the Gospel, where the Lord's pure Word and blessed Gospel sound forth in the congregation from the mouths of the Lord's faithful witnesses.

But there are also places from which the Lord has removed the lampstand, and where the Gospel no longer sounds. Where now are Nazareth and Capernaum? Where are Jerusalem and Bethlehem? Where are Ephesus and Antioch and Smyrna? Where are even Rome and Alexandria? Therefore, you who have the light, do not be proud, but fear! Thank the Lord, who has allowed you to keep the light; but pray—pray in deepest humility—that he will allow you to keep the light “yet this year.”

And blessed be the Lord, we dare, despite our sins and our lukewarmness, nevertheless believe that he will still, “according to his custom,” come into our synagogues every Sunday and let the Word be read and preached for us. We may say with confidence that the Lord will still spare us, that he will let the new church year be “the year of the Lord’s favor.” He has not forgotten to show mercy, and he will not close the door of grace. Therefore we still proclaim, in faith and in the Spirit of Christ, the year of the Lord’s favor with Word and Baptism and Holy Supper, and with the blessed preaching of Jesus’ witnesses.

But will it also become the year of the Lord’s favor for you? Dear soul, consider this question well. There are so many—so many—who are part of God’s congregation and who take part in much of its work, but who do not share in its joy and blessedness. Why should this be so? If you bear the congregation’s burdens, then also take its goods and joys, and so it will become the year of the Lord’s favor for you.

How can this come to pass? Perhaps you could learn something by simply following our text. Jesus went, “according to his custom, on the Sabbath day into the synagogue.” You should begin with the same custom; perhaps you do not yet have this custom. One often speaks so contemptuously of habitual Christianity, and it is indeed true that it is a poor Christianity. But there are habits that are useful for the Christian life. Among them is this custom of Jesus Christ, to go into the synagogue on the Sabbath day. Follow it in full earnestness in the new church year, and do not let laziness or sluggishness or bad weather hinder you from gathering with God’s congregation in the Lord’s house. And even if the pastor cannot be present in the congregation’s assembly every Sunday, let that not hinder the congregation from gathering for its edification. The Word can indeed be read and work nonetheless.

But it is not accomplished with a good habit alone. If it is to become the year of the Lord’s favor for you, then the question is whether you will become one of the poor and brokenhearted, for whom the Gospel offers peace for the heart. If you go rich and satisfied and cheerful through the new church year, then it will not become better for you than all the other years. If your heart is great and strong and hard and whole, so that the Word finds no room in it, then it will not become otherwise than it has been; for with every day that passes, and with every word you hear without repentance and faith, you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath and of God’s righteous revelation. If the new church year is to become for you a year of the Lord’s favor, then bow, you proud heart, under the Lord’s law that judges your sin; then let Christ’s love melt the ice around the heart, so that you flee broken and poor to the cross and the blood.

Can a sinner then do anything for his salvation, you say. Must he not wait until the Spirit of the Lord seizes him so powerfully that he cannot resist? Must he not wait until a storm of awakening sweeps over land and people? — But have you not heard of him who stands at

the door and knocks? Shall he stand outside even longer? He brings salvation with him; he brings healing with him; he brings peace for the heart and blessedness with him; you can take nothing—absolutely nothing—but you can receive everything from him; oh, open up, open up, that he may come in. Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear! And if you hear rightly, then the Word gives faith and peace and life.

A man stands in the shade and freezes and trembles; a friend comes and says to him: “On the other side there is sunshine and warmth—go there.” And the man goes; he perhaps does not perceive any effect of the sun at once; but if he waits a little while, then the warmth of the sun begins to do him good. Have you tried the same with God’s Gospel? You go to church a single time; you leaf casually through your Bible; you perceive nothing. But remain standing in the light; give the Word time; hear it diligently and read it yet more diligently, and it shall itself plow the ground and break the stone crust and lay living seed down in the field of the heart. Let it be watered with tears and weeping over your own hardness, and the seed shall grow the better. Pray, and wait in faith and hope, and the year of the Lord’s favor shall also become your own year of favor, your day of salvation and the times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord.

May the Lord grant us a blessed church year with new glad tidings for our sorrowing and wounded hearts.

2 Second Sunday in Advent: The Kingdom of God Comes

Luke 17:20–30 But when he was asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom of God would come, he answered them and said: The Kingdom of God does not come in such a way that one can point to it. Neither will they say, See here, or see there! For behold, the Kingdom of God is within you. But he said to the disciples: The days will come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. And they will say to you, See here, or see there! Do not go out, and do not follow them. For just as the lightning flashes from one end of heaven to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. But first he must suffer much and be rejected by this generation. And as it was in the days of Noah, so it will also be in the days of the Son of Man: they ate, they drank, they married and were given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise also, as it was in the days of Lot: they ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they built; but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all; so it will be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed.

Few things are as deeply misunderstood—or as thoroughly filled with alien, carnal content shaped by human sinful desire—as this word: the Kingdom of God.

The pope seized both spiritual and temporal power over all Europe and called it “the Kingdom of God.” The Mormons in our own days have founded a society in which outward power, the Word of God, and sensual desire are shamefully mingled together, and they do not hesitate to call it the Kingdom of God. The individual often pursues honor and power by means of the Word and the congregation, and yet seeks to persuade both himself and others that he does it for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

No wonder, then, that the Pharisees also had their concept of “the Kingdom of God.” By this they meant a kingdom at once spiritual and earthly, like that of David, only far greater in extent, power, and glory—a kingdom such as the papal church later attempted to realize: a world-kingdom in which the Jews would sit upon the thrones of dominion with all nations under their feet. And this kingdom, they thought, would come fully completed with the Messiah.

Naturally, then, Jesus—despite his blessed words of life and his divine miracles—was not much to the Pharisees’ liking, when in his simple, poor outward appearance there was nothing that promised them visible glory and power, but rather the opposite: mockery and affliction. If he were the Messiah, then they were disappointed in what they believed to be expectations grounded in the Word of God, concerning a king upon David’s throne; they therefore preferred to see in him a deceiver and a mocker of Israel’s rightful hope.

With such an earthly understanding of “the Kingdom of God,” they came to him and asked: “When does it come?”

He knew well that his own disciples, then as now, are only too inclined to share, to a greater

or lesser extent, the Pharisees' earthly expectations with regard to the manifestation of the Kingdom of God in the world; and he therefore directed his answer partly to the Pharisees, partly to his own disciples. We will consider them together.

In two respects, he says—and he speaks not only to them, but also to us—you **have misunderstood and overturned the concept of the Kingdom of God. First, you have forgotten that it is spiritual, and that its visible manifestation in the world is not in glory, but in lowliness. Secondly, that it indeed will one day also be revealed in outward majesty and glory, but that then it will not become dominion over the world, but judgment upon the world. This is to be considered.**

“The Kingdom of God,” he says, “does not come so that one can point to it.” The word that stands in the original text, and which cannot easily be rendered by an equivalent word, indicates that the Kingdom of God, in its proper meaning, does not have such visible boundary-marks with regard to extent or nature, that one could either with the bodily eye or with fleshly reason recognize them, point to them for others, and say: “here the Kingdom of God reaches, and no further; upon this visible thing the true Christianity depends, and upon nothing else.”

Just as little as circumcision, despite the Jews' false trust in it, set any real boundary between those who belonged to the Kingdom of God and those who were outside, just as little can anyone rightly say: “all who live in a Christian country belong to the Kingdom of God,” or “all who belong to the congregation are in the Kingdom of God,” or “all who agree with us belong to the Kingdom of God.” For the Kingdom of God has no such visible or sensible boundaries; it is rather something within us, something spiritual: a living relation between each soul and the living God through the Savior, Jesus Christ—a relation which, by its very nature, stands opposed to all that is merely sensible and perishable. Therefore the Kingdom of God, in this sense, however hard it is for flesh and blood to acknowledge it, and however gladly we would evade it by making a compromise with the world, is nevertheless always in affliction, persecution, and lowliness. And insofar as the Kingdom of God, as it is on earth, must nevertheless also appear in an earthly form, with external organizations, buildings, and the like, all this is only the accidental and the transient, which, like the human body itself, will be brought to nothing; while that which is “within”—the power of the Spirit in the Word and the Sacraments, the life and fellowship in the Son and the Father—will only then shine forth in its full heavenly splendor, when all that is perishable and external has been stripped away.

But precisely on account of this opposition between the spiritual nature of the Kingdom of God and all that is earthly and perishable, on account of the afflictions and the unceasing struggle and persecution to which the Kingdom of God is exposed, there is also in all God's children an unceasing sigh to see Christ again bodily and glorified, with majestic power in his hand to strike down the enemies and to establish his kingdom of glory here on earth.

“Guard yourselves against these voices and such temptations within you and around you,” the Lord says—and he says it especially to his disciples—“guard yourselves therefore; and when someone points to Christ here or there, then do not go out. For the Kingdom of God is always here below on earth something “within you,” not something that can be identified by

outward power or glory. Guard yourselves therefore; for this is the leaven of the Pharisees.”

The Kingdom of God must always be in lowliness, and just as Christ himself first had to suffer much and be rejected, so must his body, which is the congregation—the Kingdom of God on earth—first suffer and be rejected; and then comes the glory, then comes Jesus, the carpenter’s son from Nazareth, in his full divine majesty and power.

“Yes,” he says to the Pharisees, “the Kingdom of God, such as you expect it, will indeed in its time also come—but woe to you when it comes.” The Lord does not delay, he says to his disciples, in coming; he comes in his time. But be ready when he comes! Remember Lot’s wife. For when Christ is revealed in his glory with the hosts of angels around him, then he comes in the clouds for judgment.

For judgment.

Swiftly like the lightning that flashes from one end of the earth to the other—and terrifyingly.

Unexpected and unforeseen he comes with his kingdom, when the great mass of humanity, as in the days of Noah and of Lot, has sunk into spiritual sleep and undisturbed enjoyment of all the goods of earthly life—when love has grown cold and faith has faded upon the earth—when there is crying, Peace, peace! and human beings rejoice and mirror themselves in the Kingdom of God which, with the mind of the Pharisees, they themselves have built by earthly power and strength; then the Son of Man stands there unawares like the lion over the sleeping one, and the humanity which just now was eating and drinking and delighting itself in its sensuality lies at once upon its knees under wailing lament and unspeakable terror, and hides its face so as not to see the Son of Man.

Thus, you Pharisees and you heedless disciples, who so gladly would remove the cross and serve both God and Mammon: the Kingdom of God comes, and it comes soon.

But are you also ready to receive it?

Have you remembered Lot’s wife?

3 Third Sunday of Advent: The Way of the Lord

Luke 3:1–6. In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the land of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. And he went throughout the whole region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough ways shall become smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

When the Lord comes to his people, the question is whether his way is prepared for him, or whether the people are prepared, so that they are a people made ready for the Lord.

This preparation of the way and of the people was so necessary that the prophet Isaiah had already proclaimed that a crying voice should sound in the wilderness before the coming of the Lord; and it was foretold by the prophet Malachi that the messenger of the Lord should come before him, to prepare the way before his face; and again, that Elijah should come before the day of the Lord’s coming, so that the day might not become a curse instead of salvation.

And of John it was said, before he was born, that he would be this forerunner, this crying voice, this preparer of the people in the spirit and power of Elijah.

And in our text it is told that John himself, in the wilderness, received the word of the Lord. We do not know how the Lord spoke to John; nor is that of any importance; but we know both that it was the Lord himself who called him, and we know that it was in order to prepare the way of the Lord, and so that the coming Messiah might be revealed to Israel, that he was called.

And John walked the hard path of the divine calling, which led him to death. He went to the secure and defiant Israel and preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. In this way he was to prepare the way of the Lord; in this way he was to make people ready for the Lord.

But did Israel then need preparation? This chosen people of the Lord, with the Law and the Prophets, with the light of the Word and the call of the Spirit—did it need preparation for the coming of the Lord? They were indeed “children of Abraham” and “children of the promise”; the kingdom of God had been promised to them, the Messiah had been promised to them; and now they had waited so long and suffered so much—should they still need preparation? Were they not ready to receive the Lord, who would bring them vengeance upon their enemies and restore to them the glory of David? Would they not gladly see the day of the Lord and rejoice to meet their deliverer?

Alas, alas, Israel was not ready to meet its God; Israel was not prepared to receive the

kingdom of heaven. Their mind was earthly and fleshly; with anxious expectation they looked for improvement in their earthly conditions, for earthly glory, for worldly power and freedom. But the kingdom of heaven was not the longing and desire of the heart. Therefore the messenger of the Lord had to go before his face and cry: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!” Turn your hearts from the world to God, from the earth to heaven; for it is not the kingdom of David, but the kingdom of God that is coming; not an earthly kingdom, but the heavenly kingdom that is coming. It is not “all the kingdoms of the world and their glory” that are to be given to fleshly hearts for sensual enjoyment; but it is the kingdom of heaven that comes to broken hearts with heavenly peace and healing. It is a kingdom that no one can see unless he is born again of water and the Spirit.

And John, who knew his people’s insatiable desire for the glory of the world, and who knew that the Lord does not give his people a sensual and perishable happiness, but an eternal and imperishable glory, stepped forward with the preaching that the Lord himself had laid in his heart in the solitude of the wilderness. He came to his people and preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Thus the way of the Lord was to be prepared; thus the valleys were to be filled and the hills leveled; thus the crooked was to become straight and the rough to become smooth.

Is the same still needed?

Yes, precisely the same is still needed for the whole people and for every individual soul.

Why do the people struggle against one another in our land? Why is the bondage so great and the zeal so burning and the struggle so hard and the envy so bitter? Is it for a heavenly glory and for a heavenly crown that they fight and run and rush so eagerly? Or is it not far more earthly advantage and happiness and power that are pursued with such insatiable desire? Stop for a moment and consider! Look at the teeming crowd around you and ask what all these are seeking. But ask above all after the desire and longing of your own heart. Is it not earthly, is it not sensual?

What voice is it that presses among us? It is the voice of John, which should sound over city and countryside, into house and home, into heart and soul: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!” It is repentance that is needed among us. It is a baptism of repentance that we require, in order to escape the judgment of the Lord, in order to become a people prepared for the Lord.

The Lord is still coming to us; are our hearts ready to receive him? We speak of building a free church of free congregations; we speak of a renewal of God’s church among us; and this is indeed a coming of the Lord, a day of favor, one of the days of the Son of Man for us. Are we also a people ready for the Lord, so that he can use us in his service? Oh, it is time for the voice of John to sound among us: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!” It is time to go to the river Jordan and confess our sins and receive a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Will you not do it now, while it is the time of visitation?

We speak of unity and of peace in God’s church; we rejoice with joy toward the good days that are to dawn. Let us take care that we do not err. The good days are the days of the

Lord, and they do not become our days unless we open to him who stands at the door and knocks, and say to him: “You blessed of God, come in!”

We speak of Christmas and Christmas joy, of gladness and peace, of angel song and heavenly jubilation. Then it is time to turn the heart from the world to God, from the earth to heaven. Then it is time for sorrow and brokenness and humility before the face of the Lord; then it is time to “repent and turn again, that our sins may be blotted out, and that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.”

Then we shall see the salvation of God; then our hearts shall rejoice with imperishable joy.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!

4 Fourth Sunday in Advent: Four Witnesses

John 5:31–39. “If I bear witness of myself, my witness is not true; there is another who bears witness of me, and I know that the witness he bears of me is true. You sent messengers to John, and he bore witness to the truth. Yet I do not receive witness from a human being; but I say this so that you may be saved. He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light. But I have a witness greater than John’s; for the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, these works that I do, bear witness of me that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness of me. You have neither ever heard his voice nor seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe him whom he has sent. You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness of me.”

The Jews wished to kill Jesus, not because he had healed the sick man at the pool of Bethesda, but, as they said, because he had done it on a Sabbath.

The Lord took this as an occasion to show that his work was not bound by the Sabbath, because he was the Son of God and worked as the Father works until now. Therefore, instead of wishing to kill him, they were obligated to honor him as the Father—especially since they ought to remember that the Father has given all judgment to the Son, in time and in eternity.

These were heavy and perilous words for one to utter who in every respect appeared like any other human being; therefore he sets witnesses before the Jews, so that they might have no excuse.

The first is John the Baptist. The Jews had indeed made much of him. For a time at least he suited their expectations and aroused great hopes among them through his strict life, his prophetic appearance, and his earnest preaching of repentance. All Jerusalem and Judea had gone out to him. He had borne witness to Jesus and said: “Behold the Lamb of God, who bears the sin of the world.”

Should they not receive his witness gladly? As long as it was new and sensational, they rejoiced in it as in a burning and shining lamp, in the hope that something great for them would come of it. But when they began to take seriously what he preached—repentance and conversion and a suffering Savior—and when they saw that he himself had to lose his life for a king’s whim, they turned their backs on his holy words.

The Lord wishes to remind them of their faithlessness and the wavering of the heart, not because he needs John’s witness, but because it might perhaps bring them to reflection.

For he himself has a greater witness: the works that his Father had given him to accomplish, and which had taken place before the eyes of all the people, according to the Lord’s own words, which he sent to John in prison: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame leap, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the gospel is preached to the poor.”

And how did the Jews answer when the Lord had done these wonders and pointed to them?

Give us a sign!

They would not repent.

Jesus had another witness: the Father himself, as John had heard it at Jesus' baptism and proclaimed it, and as the apostles were allowed to hear it on the Mount of Transfiguration: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; listen to him!"

Did they listen to him? Alas, no; they answered: You are a Samaritan and have a demon; they would not listen to the Father either.

Therefore Jesus finally brings forward a last witness to them and against them: the Word of God, the Scriptures. "You search the Scriptures," he says, "you think that in them you have eternal life, and it is precisely these that bear witness of me and say: whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; but whoever does not believe in the Son does not have life, but the wrath of God remains over him." Did they bow under this witness? Alas, no; they did not have God's word abiding in them; they did not believe in him whom God has sent.

And now all you who are baptized with Christ's baptism and called by his name, what are these four witnesses concerning the Son of God for us? Have they bent our hearts or hardened them as the hearts of the Jews?

Perhaps you have been cast upon a sickbed, perhaps struck and paralyzed by some great sorrow, by deserved or undeserved misfortune; a lightning bolt has struck down before you as for Luther, death has opened its jaws toward you; a voice has sounded to you: "You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you! Repent while it is called today!" You were unspeakably terrified in your soul; you awoke from the sleep of sin with dread; you saw your sin, your evil corrupted heart, as you had never seen it before, and the judgment of hell stood painted before you. On the one side it sounded: "The axe is already laid at the root of the tree; every tree that does not bear good fruit shall be cut down and cast into the fire," on the other: "Behold the Lamb of God, who bears the sin of the world!"

But where have these voices and cries gone now? Where do you stand? That was John's witness; have you cast them all behind your back?

Yet strange works have taken place all around you; hard, resistant sinners have been converted to God and born again; they have abandoned the way of sin and vice and have learned a new song, a song of praise; they have received new sight and a new heart; they have begun to proclaim the great works of God and to love their neighbor with Christ's love; the old has passed away, and everything has become new; the gospel has been preached to the poor.

Has this too passed your heart untouched, without working anything other than a harder heart—oh, then remember the judgment of the Jewish people.

Or has the Father himself spoken to you?

Had you come so far that you were allowed to hear and appropriate in childlike faith this word: "Take courage, your sins are forgiven you," and did you receive witness from God's

Spirit in your spirit that you were a child of God and had the right to cry: Abba, Father?

Oh, where are you now? Have you remained standing in this blessed state of grace with daily access to the throne of grace in the Son, or have you even cast this witness from you, so that the last has become worse for you than the first?

But perhaps you still search the Scriptures; you have preserved the outward Christian life; you go to the Lord's table and to his house; you listen Sunday after Sunday to the Word of God and read it at home both morning and evening. But it strikes your heart and does not enter—a heart that has grown harder year after year. The sharpest arrows of the Law fall blunted against the hard wall of your heart, and the sweetest tones of the Gospel pass unnoticed by your soul. Oh, what a condition, when even the witness of God's Word loses its power! when it was "Hosanna!" yesterday and is "Crucify!" today! What a Christmas season for the one who not only with coldness and indifference, but even with contempt, looks upon the little child Jesus lying in the manger, the Word who became flesh in order to save us!

But praise be to the Lord! still it is the day of grace, still it is Advent time; once again the Lord stretches out his arms and says: "Come here, that I may save you! do not cast my words behind your back!"

What kind of Christmas shall it be for you?

5 First Day of Christmas: A Great Joy

Luke 2:1–14. And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This first enrollment took place when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. And it came to pass, while they were there, that the days were fulfilled for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her son, the firstborn, and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were shepherds in the same region out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, the angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. And the angel said to them: Do not fear! For behold, I proclaim to you a great joy, which shall come to all the people; for to you is born this day a Savior, who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David. And this shall be the sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, among people his good pleasure.

It is written of the shepherds on the fields of Bethlehem that “they were greatly afraid” when the angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them.

Why were they afraid? And do you also fear, O heart, when the light of the Lord shines around you? What is it that you fear?

He who has experienced it knows well what it is that makes a human heart so fearful and anxious when the light of the Lord breaks in and it becomes bright as day within. And many, many who have not allowed the light of the Lord to shine into the heart know very well why they do not dare open the door of the heart to the light and the day.

Oh, how carefully they strive to keep it dark in the closed chamber of the heart, so that it may not be revealed how things truly look within. They sense how badly things stand; they keep it dark so that naked reality may not laugh them in the face. They do not want to see it themselves, and when it is too dark for their own eye, they so easily deceive themselves with the false comfort: No one sees it; God does not see it!

But “the Lord sees,” it is written.

Foolish person, open the door of the heart, that the Lord’s light may break in. It is better that you be cast down in fear and terror when the light comes in, than that you try in vain to shut it out.

Futile? Yes, futile; for even if it should succeed for a short while to shut out the light of grace, it will be utterly futile when the light becomes a consuming fire of wrath.

O, if you tremble before the glory of the Lord, my poor heart—open up, open up! If you think with a half-suppressed sigh of Christmas as it comes, of the Gospel as it sounds, of the child in the manger, of Mary in the stable, of the shepherds in the fields—if you think: If only I were a child again, that I might rejoice as before—open up, open up to the light of the Lord!

Your heart is in trouble, but open up, open up to the light of the Lord, and there is still hope.

For what is it that you lack? It is the coldness of the world, it is the darkness of doubt, it is the burning fog of reason, it is the misery of sin that fills the heart. They are enemies of your joy and peace and blessedness that have pressed in and settled inside the heart. Let only the light of the Lord shine in, so that the nature of the enemies may be made known, and you may see the corruption they have wrought.

And when you then in terror must cry out: my sin, my sin! then comes the angelic message: Do not fear, the Savior is here! a great joy shall come to you this day.

A great joy? Yes indeed, a great joy—heavenly delight, the joy of children and the jubilation of angels.

For a Savior is born to you; “he shall save his people from their sins.” For this reason he has come into the world; for this reason he comes to you.

If your old sins weigh upon you, he will forgive them. If you think you are so unclean and filthy and ragged and torn that you dare not come before God—oh see, it is but a little child who stretches out his arms toward you and smiles at you; he does not take account of what you have been, where you have gone, how wretched and miserable you have become, if only you will now receive the little child and give him room with you.

Then you shall experience joy, joy as never before. For if you took the child Jesus into heart and home, then it was God’s life and love you gave room within you. There came new life, there came new joy. You experienced that all the old has passed away and all has become new.

Is that the great joy? Yes, it is the only pure and perfect joy that a human heart can experience here on earth. When all the old, all sin, all sorrow, all distress is sunk into the depths of eternal mercy; when all old anxious memories are taken away; when all uncleanness is washed away in the blood of Jesus; when you are permitted to begin life anew without any oppressive guilt, without any constricting fear, without any gnawing resentment, and you may live saved and free in the bright day of grace—then there is joy, heavenly joy in a human soul.

But there are few who taste this joy fully and completely. And yet it is precisely therein that the glory of the Christian faith proves itself in all its fullness.

It seems so small to the world to go to the manger in Bethlehem; it seems so contemptible in the eyes of the world to become a child again; it seems so impossible for one who is old to be born anew; and yet it is precisely this that is the glad message of Christmas: “A son is born to us, a child is given to us.”

Our reason says: Let us become better people, let us become more rational, wiser, more calculating, more cautious people.

Our conscience, inflamed by God's law, says: Become righteous, become holy, become good!

But God's Gospel says: Come to the manger of Jesus and become a child again!

That is the great joy. That is the new thing which God has done, and which fills our mouth with jubilation and our tongue with laughter: new life, eternal life, imperishable life given by God in his own Son, given to everyone who believes in the Son.

It seems so offensive to our old fleshly reason. And yet, if you are to receive an eternal life, does it make any sense to try to transform your old, perishable life into eternal life by your works?

Can an old garment become new by having ever so many patches sewn onto it?

Can perishability ever become anything other than perishability, no matter how greatly you exert yourself?

But either you must receive an eternal life as a free, undeserved gift from God, or you can never, never attain it.

And here the gift is given; here is the true God and eternal life. Come and see! Come and take the child into your heart in living faith, and you yourself shall be born anew.

Is that possible? Ah no, for a human being this is impossible; but remember what was said of the child Jesus: For God nothing is impossible.

If you believe this miracle, then the miracle has already taken place in your own heart. Then you yourself are a child of God, born anew by the miraculous power of God.

That is true and living Christianity.

Come, let us go with the shepherds and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us, and there shall be great joy in our hearts.

Joy is so greatly lacking in our Christianity because simple faith in Christ is so greatly lacking. Oh, that it might become better with us all at this Christmas feast! Let us then open the doors of our hearts wide and let the light of the Lord shine in; and when we are terrified over all our sin, all our self-love, all our unbelief, all our pride, all our self-righteousness, then let us also take the child Jesus in, and his holy love shall blot out sin and kindle the new heavenly love within, and we shall receive

a great joy.

6 Second Day of Christmas: The Pain of Christmas and the Joy of Christmas

John 1:1–14. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not grasp it. There was a man sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness to the light, so that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light. This was the true light, which enlightens every human being coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, and the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own did not receive him. But to all who received him, he gave authority to become children of God, to those who believe in his name; who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory, glory as of the only-begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

The angels proclaimed great joy to the shepherds, and added: “It shall be for all the people.” Today’s text shows us why the joy is so great that angels must sing it out over the earth. The child who is born to us, the Son who is given to us, the child in the manger, is “mighty God, everlasting Father” (Isaiah 9:6). The text also shows why not all people receive the joy that God intended to grant to “all the people.”

The Word, the Word of life, is the gospel contained in Christ himself, or the complete and all-sufficient, all-embracing revelation of God’s eternal being and his infinite love. Christ is the gospel, for in him the glory of God is revealed, so that all flesh may see it, that glory which is full of grace and truth.

What believers in the Old Testament saw only dimly in a mirror, that God was a Father with a father’s love for all his children, Christ revealed when he himself became a small, poor child among human beings, when he became like us in all things except sin, so that we, through faith, might become wholly like him.

How infinitely great this Jesus is, even when he lies as a small child in the manger! He is God from eternity. He was with God, and he was God, in heavenly glory before the foundation of the world was laid. And when the world was created, he was the one through whom all things came into being; nothing came into being, and nothing could come into being, apart from this Son who has now come down to the earth and become one of us. He commanded heaven and earth to come into being; he caused the sun to roll across the heavens; he set the stars upon their appointed paths. Infinite is he in power and wisdom from eternity to eternity. In him the Father’s being had its true image, and God’s glory its radiance. Therefore the Father spoke to him and said: Let us make a human being in our image, after our likeness. He was all that the human race was meant to be according to God’s purpose, and infinitely much more.

But sin entered the world; mankind tore itself loose from him who was its life and its light. Then humanity's true life was shattered; then its light was extinguished. In death and darkness, with blinded heart and wandering spirit, the poor human race wandered over the earth, groping for a way it could not find, striving for a goal it could not reach.

And yet the light was there, even though humanity had closed its heart and eyes to it. It was God's eternal Word, which shone and gleamed like "a light in a dark place" through Abraham and Moses and all the prophets. Throughout the whole time of the Old Testament there was a dawn-glow of the coming sun, which shone across the dark earth and called and beckoned to human souls. But they had turned their backs on the rising sun; they stared and stared at the shadows that lay across the earth, and they kept the darkness in their eyes and in their souls, although it was only necessary to turn around in order to see "the light from on high," which shone through the Word in the mouths of the prophets.

The darkness did not comprehend the light; the eternal, blessed light of God was shut out, and human beings walked in their worldly thoughts and desires, in the impurity and wickedness of their hearts, in pagan idolatry and abomination, or in Jewish self-righteousness and self-deification. Darkness closed in everywhere, and hearts did not find the way back to God and his radiant kingdom.

Then came John the Baptist. God sent him so that he might bear witness to the light, point to the Savior, and say to all people: Behold the Lamb of God! For light and life for sinners were to be found only with the Savior who laid down his life for them, just as the lambs died for Israel's firstborn in Egypt. John was to bear witness so that the worldly-minded might turn back before the Lord came, and believe in him who came with salvation for all who seek salvation, but with crushing judgment for all who loved darkness more than light.

The forerunner did his work, and how much fruit it bore was shown best when the Lord himself came. For a few—oh, all too few—John became a faithful guide who with joy led souls to their heavenly bridegroom; but most paid no heed to it. They perhaps rejoiced for a little while in his light, and then returned to their daily routines and their worldly life.

The Son of God came to God's people, and he found resistance, indifference, unbelief, contempt, hatred, persecution, and death. He came to his own, and his own did not receive him.

What infinite pain lies in these words. It is the sorrow that has followed the gospel from the very beginning. Those who ought to have been the first to receive the Savior, those who said they had waited so long for him, were the first to reject him. "Oh that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people," says the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 9:1). And Jesus himself wept over Jerusalem and said: Oh, if you had known on this your day what serves for your peace, but now it is hidden from your eyes. Thus sorrow also accompanies the joyful Christmas message; and it was not long before the angels' song of praise on the fields of Bethlehem was replaced by "weeping and loud lamentation," when the little children were murdered in Bethlehem by the cruel King Herod, who sought Jesus in order to kill him.

As then, so now. The gospel is met with resistance, contempt, and unbelief in the midst of a

dead Christendom. For most, Christmas brings no joy in Jesus and no song of thanksgiving for the wondrous child in the manger; no, for the vast majority who are called by the Christian name, Christmas is a time of worldly joy and sinful revelry, by which the life in God is often killed in the hearts of many young people. Still today God's Word continually utters this heart-rending complaint over God's people:

He came to his own, and his own did not receive him.

Therefore all true Christians also feel a living pain precisely at Christmas over the dreadful indifference and worldliness within Christendom. Can it not become otherwise? Must God's grace in the Son always meet with such resistance from sluggish, rigid, and defiant human hearts? Wake up, then, as you ought, you congregation of God; wake up, you worldly soul who sleeps so heavily in sin; and Christ, the light from on high, will shine upon you and lead you into God's peace and God's blessedness.

For truly there is joy, true and real joy at Christmas for those who receive him. It is not with Jesus as it is with other people. You receive them, you may have a pleasant time with them for a while, and when they leave you again there is perhaps a sense of loss for a little time, and then the waves of forgetfulness close over them, and it has no further significance for you that you met them. But with Jesus it is different. If he is truly received by a human heart, received with the whole distress and need of a grace-hungry, salvation-seeking heart, received as only one receives who has learned to hunger for love and receives it for the first time, then there also comes a great and joyful transformation in such a person.

Receive Jesus, and there will be a change in you that has significance for time and eternity. You become a child of God. No one can open the heart to Jesus with the broken soul's longing for relief and salvation without the Savior also granting salvation and life. Where he enters, he brings his grace and his gift with him, and his gift is God's own eternal life. You receive him in the bitter sorrow of repentance, with shame over your sin and yet with such deep longing for his grace; and behold, when he enters your heart, joy streams in like warmth with the sun, and you rejoice with unspeakable jubilation. This is the true joy of Christmas. Only the joy of becoming a child of God is the right and true joy over the child of God, Immanuel. Then he receives his honor and his praise. Then the true Christmas song sounds in the heart, a song that is not completed until you stand saved before the throne of the Lamb among the number of the blessed. You begin to see Jesus' glory as that of the only-begotten from the Father in the moment of time when you become a child of God; and when you one day see him face to face, you will recognize him, because you see the same glory so infinitely much more clearly.

Do you have this experience of being God's child, and do you have this Christmas joy, and do you have this living hope? Then Jesus has become your Savior. Amen.

7 Sunday after Christmas: The Fulfillment of the Promises

Luke 1:68–75

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, that he has visited and redeemed his people, and has raised up for us a horn of salvation in the house of David, his servant, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old: salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show mercy toward our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath which he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of our life.

These words are the beginning of the glorious song of praise which the aged Zacharias lifted up when he had received his speech again on the day when his son John was circumcised and given his name. For a long time he had been mute because of his unbelief; but during his long and heavy silence he had thought and struggled and believed, and now he spoke, “filled with the Holy Spirit.” As Elizabeth his wife, and Mary the mother of Jesus, had already earlier believed and confessed and praised God for salvation through the child who was to be born, so now Zacharias also had become one of those who believed and confessed that the day of salvation had dawned and that the hope of Israel—the hope promised by the Lord and awaited by the fathers—had at last arrived.

And it is no wonder if joy arose in the heart of the aged priest when it finally stood firm for him in the Holy Spirit: now the day of salvation had dawned, now the promises were to be fulfilled for God’s chosen people. Whoever knows what it is to have waited long, waited patiently, waited under great afflictions, waited often under doubt and fear and inward temptation—and then at last to reach the goal of all one’s longings—he can indeed grasp something of the overflowing joy that filled the heart of Zacharias and made its way over his lips in song of praise and jubilation. And yet the unspeakable joy in the soul of believing Israel cannot be fully grasped, for the hope of the fathers was now fulfilled; indeed longing and expectation and tension are multiplied and multiplied again when it is a whole people who wait and hope and long, when it is the expectation of millennia that comes, and when it is the entire plan of the Lord’s salvation that is to be revealed in a single moment.

Can anyone wonder that in such an hour the Spirit of the Lord finds a believing heart wide open, so that he may fill soul and mind and mouth with words from God?

It is the promise to the house of David, of which the holy prophets have spoken, that is fulfilled. It is the oath to Abraham that is now kept. The ancient, faithful words of the Lord, upon which the fathers had placed their trust, now showed themselves to be true, as the Lord himself is true.

The promise to David had pledged a “horn of salvation” for Israel. This means a saving power that could strike down all enemies, that could break all resistance. It was the eternal kingdom that the Messiah was to possess, the kingdom of God that was to overthrow the kingdoms of the world, fill the earth, and itself endure forever. Of this Nathan spoke to

David; of this Isaiah and Daniel and all the prophets prophesied. Now it was to come through the child whom the virgin was to bear. This is the wondrous ability of true faith, to see the great in the small, to see the power of God in what the world calls frail. Blessed is she who believed! Blessed also are Elizabeth and Zacharias, who believed with her! Blessed is every soul that believes, believes in the Lord Jesus Christ, and finds in him a horn of salvation against all its enemies, a fortress in times of distress.

And the oath to Abraham—we read it in Genesis 22:16–18:

“By myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore; and your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”

This was the great word that Abraham and his descendants had received from the Lord on that dreadful day when Abraham offered his son and received him back from God as one raised from the dead. And now it was truly to be fulfilled. Zacharias saw in the Spirit that the child in Mary’s womb was that offspring of Abraham who was to possess the gate of his enemies. He saw that his own son John was to be the forerunner and the greatest of the prophets, who was to prepare for the Lord a people set in readiness. Zacharias saw how an innumerable multitude of blessed children of Abraham and children of God would find salvation—peace and life, righteousness and holiness through faith in the promised Messiah, who had already come.

Brothers and sisters, do we also have the faith of Zacharias? Has the Holy Spirit also filled our hearts and our tongues with the joy of salvation in this blessed feast of Christmas? Or do you still doubt, dear brother? Who is a God like our God, who proclaims salvation to Abraham for all the peoples of the earth, and who fulfills his word and remembers his covenant, as we see it with our own eyes? In Jesus it is all fulfilled—everything that the Lord had promised, everything that the fathers had hoped for. If you long with the fathers for a Savior, then come and see; seek your salvation in Jesus, and you will find it.

For in him and through him and with him it is also granted to you to serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of your life. And this is the proof that he is truly the Savior of the world. If he can save you, you poor child of sin, whom then could he not save among poor sinners?

Without fear you shall serve the Lord when Jesus gives you the forgiveness of all your sins and makes you a beloved child of God. It is only the child with an evil conscience who fears his father; it is only the sinner with unforgiven sin who must tremble and quake before God. When the blood of Jesus blots out all your sins, and the Spirit bears witness with your spirit that you are a child of God, then you no longer fear; then you love God. This is blessedness, this is salvation from all enemies, this is victory over the world and sin and death. Fear is not in love, for perfect love casts out fear. But when love is born and created in the heart, then there is righteousness and holiness. For what is born of God does not sin. And holy is the one who is like God, and God is love.

Thus a sinner is saved by the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus the image of God is restored in us. And what further salvation is needed? If we are beloved children of God who love God because he loved us first, who then shall separate us from the love of Christ? Tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or hunger, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

But if Jesus has become your Savior, then you know that in him there is salvation for all peoples. Yet to all the blessing of Abraham has not yet reached. Therefore Christmas is the time for mission. Let the light of the Gospel shine to the ends of the earth; this is Christmas's urgent call to all who share in its joy. Lift the light high at home and send it far out into the darkness of the world and unbelief, that God's salvation may be made known to the ends of the earth. If you are glad, then share your joy with the many who are afflicted; you yourself will become gladder thereby, and the kingdom of Jesus Christ will be extended, and his love will receive the reward of its suffering.

Come then, take part in the work that the blessing of Abraham may come to all peoples!

8 New Year's Day: And so this year as well

Luke 13:6–9. And he spoke this parable: A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down! Why should it also render the soil useless?

But he answered and said to him, Lord, let it stand yet this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it— if it then bears fruit; but if not, you shall cut it down afterward.

It is not difficult to see the connection between this parable and the two preceding statements of Jesus. Eighteen men had been killed at once when the tower in Siloam fell upon them, and Pilate had had some Galileans killed while they were offering sacrifice, so that their blood flowed together with the blood of the sacrifices. People commonly thought that God had thus punished these people because of grievous sins they had committed. But the Lord says:

Do you think that these people were sinners beyond all other Galileans, or all who live in Jerusalem?

No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

This applies to every person: all must repent, and moreover each has been given a certain season of grace in which this must take place.

Thus the parable of the fig tree enters in, and it is especially to be pondered today, when you step into a new year—perhaps the final year of grace.

The Lord here, as in the parable of the sower, takes his image from daily life. A vineyard was generally a small garden from which a man lived much as from a farm among us; for the extraordinary fertility of the soil made it possible in Judea to reap great yield from what by our standards would be a very insignificant plot of land, half or a quarter acre. In return, the soil had to be cultivated with the utmost care and used to the utmost. And since daily wages were exceedingly low, a vineyard owner could afford to hire one or more laborers or vinedressers to keep the ground well cleared, fertilized, and productive. Where it could be done without harm to the vine cultivation, fruit trees were planted to make use of the soil. If they proved unfruitful, it was a double loss for the owner: first, time and labor wasted; second, precious soil rendered useless. And it lies in the nature of the matter that a gardener who works with fruit trees from their first planting onward binds a special affection to them, almost as to living beings. This can be observed among us as well. And thus the full meaning of the parable at once stood fairly clear before the hearers, and ought so to stand for us.

For, as the prophet says, “the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his delightful planting” (Isaiah 5:7).

The Lord's vineyard is his dearly purchased congregation, and he comes today to find fruit in his vineyard.

You are the fig tree—whoever you are—who by baptism was grafted into Christ's body and

to this day has been warmed and watered by the sun and rain of his grace. To you—whoever you are who hear or read—comes today the holy and righteous God to find fruit in you.

He takes you aside alone and says: Come, let us set things right between us!

Is there anything I could have done to make you bear fruit that I have not done? Where, then, is your fruit?

There is only one fruit that the Lord requires of his planting: saved souls—no more nor less. For God has not placed his congregation and his children to help advance or improve the world, but that the world might be saved through them. God works by his Spirit and his Gospel through human beings, to bring peace to those far off and to those near, as it is written:

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring glad tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion: Your God reigns.”

But in order to proclaim this glad message in such a way that souls are saved, one must first have experienced its blessedness in a true and living faith. Only thus does a person become able to proclaim his excellencies, who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light—that is, by word and life to draw souls to Jesus. For this reason God has placed us here; for this reason he has given us the heavenly soil of his congregation, with the dew and warmth of the Gospel; and for this reason he has the right to seek fruit on his fig tree.

But what do you have to answer? Look back upon the year that has passed. Early and again and again the Lord has called to you by his Word and said: “Soon I am coming to seek fruit.” “Not yet, not yet,” you have said, and allowed the world and its love to rule and dry out your heart.

Look upon him who hangs and bleeds on the cross for you; will you—do you dare—trample his blood under your feet?

Perhaps you have been frightened and awakened from your sleep of sin; perhaps you have wept over your condition and cried out: “Yes, yes, Lord, I will repent and bear fruit for you”—and then immediately forgotten it.

Has not the Lord also had his severe dealings with you—illness, sorrow, death, loss of what was dearest—and you have made promises to the Lord and not kept them?

Now the righteous Judge stands over you: “Two evils my people have committed: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that hold no water” (Jeremiah 2:13). “Therefore the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will bear its fruit.” And two evils you have committed against me: my Gospel you have despised, and your entrusted place in the congregation you have made useless.

Thus the verdict sounds:

Cut it down!

Where shall I flee
From the thunder of the Law?
With my many sins,
Where shall I grasp consolation?¹

But the eternal abyss yawns open beneath you; the anguished cry of the rich man sounds up from below: One drop of water! One drop of water! One minute, and you are lost forever.

Then a voice comes in between, full of unspeakable love and compassion: “Let it stand this year also! One more year, one more attempt—perhaps it may then bear fruit. Oh, how I will dig and fertilize it, if only it may yet stand one more year.”

And the Lord says: “Let it be—one more year!”

Who is it, then, who so narrowly escaped the dreadful torment of eternal judgment?

It is you, O friend, who are reading this—who have entered a new year and with shame perhaps must look back upon an entire life of sin and negligence; yes, who belong to the Lord’s congregation and up to this time have stood as a dry, unfruitful branch.

You have received yet a small season of grace in the new year. A mother perhaps has prayed for you and moistened the Lord’s feet with her tears for her lost child. A friend, a servant of the Lord, a congregation has pressed in upon God that he should spare you for Christ’s blood’s sake.

How will you regard this final call, the new year God in grace has granted you? The Lord will require a soul of you.

And you who have prevailed upon the Lord with your prayer, and who have promised to dig and fertilize—shall this be a new year for you? Will you in this year give yourself no rest or peace with the gifts and powers the Lord has given you, until the soul you prayed for is won for Jesus?

You to whom children are entrusted—immortal souls, bought with Jesus’ blood—shall this be a new year for you, so that you not only pray for your children, but also labor for them with reverence and inward love?

You servant of God, for whom the work of the congregation often becomes so manifold and overwhelming that you at times forget the individual souls, especially if they are healthy in body—shall this also be a new year for you, so that you sincerely strive to keep what you have promised, to dig and fertilize the unfruitful fig tree in your vineyard, not only by the general preaching of the Word, but by all the manifold means which true love is so inventive in using, to approach that soul gently and tenderly and to draw near with particular and personal care?

And you, the Lord’s planting, Christ’s congregation, where it must be confessed with shame that multitudes of fig trees are without fruit—you holy “remnant” of God in a ravaged garden—will you immediately and gladly offer yourself “to uproot and tear down,” cut down! cut down! or will you humbly and lovingly cry to your heavenly Father: Spare the tree one

¹Hymn by Hans Adolf Brorson (1694–1764); the complete text is printed in the front matter.

more year!—and then begin anew “to build and to plant,” with burning zeal and heavenly power, because the Lord has granted also you

“one more year!”

9 Sunday after New Year: A Treasure in Heaven

Luke 12:32–34. “Do not fear, little flock; for it has pleased your Father to give you the Kingdom. Sell what you have and give alms. Provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure that does not fail in heaven, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

The words ‘Do not fear, little flock’ appear here in a striking context. A man had come to Jesus in order to take advantage of his selflessness and great influence among the people. He demanded that his brother divide the inheritance with him and wanted Jesus to compel the brother to do so. “Take heed and beware of covetousness; for even if someone has abundance, his life does not consist in his possessions,” was Jesus’ answer. Then he told the parable of the rich farmer and, on that basis, exhorted especially his disciples not only against all anxiety for earthly things, but also against all pursuit of them.

“Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”

This was one of the sharp blows by which Jesus often struck down the disciples’ earthly expectations of the Messiah’s kingdom, and by which they were even “greatly astonished,” as when, on the occasion of the rich young man, he said: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God” (Mark 10:25).

“Who then can be saved?” the disciples asked in their terror and despondency.

Therefore the Lord applies his heavenly balm to the wound when he here says:

“Do not fear, little flock; for your Father has been pleased to give you the Kingdom.”

But immediately thereafter he adds again: Sell what you have! Give alms! Provide yourselves a treasure in heaven, so that your hearts may be there; and do not be “unfruitful or barren” (2 Peter 1:8), but let your loins be girded and your lamps burning, and—above all—watch! watch!

So it is with the Kingdom of grace: renunciation, labor, struggle, and vigilance go hand in hand with grace. Not that they can produce grace; for then it would no longer be grace (Romans 4:4). But where these are absent, it is because grace has not been received; where works are lacking, it is because faith is lacking (James 2).

Oh, how the self-righteous and the sharp-witted scribes have striven to separate these two things from one another—some by building on works and despising grace, others by resting in grace and mocking works.

But here the Lord has united the two and forced the disciples’ fleshly mindset to face itself, just as Paul also says: “We are glorified with Christ, if indeed we suffer with him” (Romans 8:17).

“For the Lord desires truth in the inward being,” and “blessed is the one in whose spirit there is no deceit.” If you say that you are willing to receive by grace the forgiveness of sins, life,

and salvation—yes, heaven itself—from God, and yet in sincerity are not willing to use the power of that grace to do the little that the Lord asks of you: to suffer and labor with him through a short earthly life, a small breath of eternity, or to renounce and relinquish, for the glory of heaven, the small, petty things that are called earthly riches, covetousness, and honor—then you have neither learned to know nor to value the treasure of grace in heaven, nor have you sincerely received it. You deceive yourself and others, and the truth is not in you.

For if God has forgiven you ten thousand talents, would it be something great to forgive a brother, or even an enemy, a few dollars? And if you neither can nor will do this, can you then sincerely pray, “Forgive me my debt,” when the Lord nevertheless says: “If you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matthew 6:15)?

And what sincerity is there in saying that you have your life with Christ in God, and yet being ashamed or shrinking back from letting it be revealed among people, when Jesus says: “Whoever does not confess me before people, I will not confess before my Father,” and Paul adds: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, who walk according to the Spirit and not the flesh.”

But for the one who is willing and ready
to do everything the Savior asks of him
though in weakness,
yet in sincerity of heart—

for the one who with joy is willing
to convert all earthly possessions
into spiritual values and in all he does asks:

How can this serve my Savior’s purpose?

for the one who strives to be merciful
as our heavenly Father is merciful,
to love as Jesus loved,
and not to close his eyes to a brother’s need,
but to help and relieve and heal where God gives opportunity,
and who in all earthly things sees only the perishable and fragile,
which thieves steal and moths consume,
and therefore has his gaze and his heart
continually turned toward the invisible and eternal,
having received the Kingdom of grace in humble faith—

for the one who thus feels his foreignness
and abandonment in the world,
his smallness and weakness,
the unceasing danger
and pursuit by the world and its prince—
oh, how blessed and precious is this word:

“Do not fear, little flock!”

Do not fear, you worm Jacob—you little flock of Israel, I am your Redeemer—do not fear, Mary; what is impossible for people is possible for God—do not fear, you of little faith, for I still the storm—in all distress and danger, spiritual and temporal, in tribulation and persecution, in despondency and abandonment, he stands before you, who has all authority in heaven and on earth, and says:

“Do not fear!”

You are little, that is true; but you are a flock, that is just as true—you congregation of God. You have a shepherd who went into death for you, and who rendered powerless the one who has the power of death; a shepherd whom God has subjected all things under and set as head over the congregation, his body, his fullness, who fills all in all (Ephesians 1:22–23).

He says to you, O congregation—to you, you poor, little, anxious soul who flees to him as the chick under the hen’s wings:

“Do not fear!”

Why? “Because your Father has been pleased to give you the Kingdom.”

Oh, what blessed words! What balm for wounded hearts; what strength in the weak; what victory for the downtrodden!

Your Father—that is what the holy, righteous, and almighty God is for the little ones who have believed in the one whom he sent. A Father who says: “Though a woman forget her nursing child, yet I will not forget you.” A Father who, without any merit of yours, but solely out of his fatherly goodness and mercy, has been pleased to have compassion on you in your lostness and misery of sin, and despite your enmity and resistance has had compassion on you, so that he has given this his only-begotten Son into death, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish.

Since this unspeakably loving Father, according to an eternal decision, has been pleased in the Son to have mercy on poor sinners, he now stands here in the Word and by his Holy Spirit with hands full of grace and bestows upon a world-harried, anxious soul “everything that pertains to life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us by his glory and power.” He gives freely and abundantly without money and without payment, without merit and without works, to everyone who in his distress and misery sinks down before him and childlike and sincerely asks for it.

And what does he give? The Kingdom. Nothing less. Precisely that which the disciples at this moment feared to lose because they understood it carnally; precisely that which a hungry and thirsty human soul in its inmost being both desires and needs—not goods or gold, not the glory and honor of the world, nor even their opposite, but God in us: God with all that he is and has, with the Son and the Holy Spirit dwelling in the heart of a poor and helpless sinner; with cleansing from all sin; with the right of children in God’s house; with authority over everything God has, according to the word: “Whatever you ask in my name, you shall receive”; with the same power to overcome Satan and his entire kingdom with which God raised the Son from the dead; with an incorruptible, undefiled, and unfading

inheritance kept in heaven; and a hope that does not put to shame, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit—this is the Kingdom, this is the “treasure in heaven,” this is the unspeakable gift which it has pleased the Father to give to Jesus’ disciples, precisely because they are small, a little flock, and precisely because they are anxious and concerned about their own weakness and helplessness in the midst of an evil world, so that at all times they need to hear this blessed word of his Holy Spirit:

“Do not fear!”

What then shall we say, friends? “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all—how shall he not also with him graciously give us all things?” Oh yes; “for I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor rulers nor powers, neither the present nor the future, neither height nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Is this “treasure in heaven” worth some small renunciation, to deny ourselves and all that is dear to us in the world? Or is there anything in the world that, either for the individual soul or for the whole congregation of God, can outweigh the blessedness of being able to appropriate this word:

“Do not fear, little flock;

for your Father has been pleased to give you the Kingdom”?

10 Epiphany: Not by might and not by power, but by my Spirit

Matthew 12:15–21. And great crowds followed him, and he healed them all. And he strictly charged them not to make him known, in order that what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled, who says: Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved in whom my soul delights; I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel nor cry out, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not extinguish, until he brings justice to victory. And in his name the nations will hope.

Jesus had his own quiet manner of working while he walked here on earth in the days of his flesh. He was a king who had come to establish the kingdom of God and to spread it over the whole earth. He was to conquer the world and bring it under himself. Yet he advanced in an entirely different way from all other kings and conquerors. He did not march at the head of an army; he did not raise a people to an outward struggle for freedom. Around him there resounded neither the raw cries of triumph of victorious warriors, nor the lament of the defeated, the groans of the wounded, the pitiful wailing of the dying. Nor was he the great ecclesiastical prince who gathered around himself the great and small ambitions of the church and by their help advanced his own cause and that of his church.

According to our text, Jesus' way was wholly different from the way of the world and of the worldly church. And since Jesus' way is the only right way both in the individual soul and in the congregation and its mission, it is all the more necessary to heed it, the rarer it is that it is actually trodden by those who wish to be Jesus' disciples and followers.

Jesus works this way: he uses his divine power to help those who truly need it. He does not seek his own honor through his miraculous works. Nor does he seek to satisfy the honor-seeking and vain Jews who waited for the Messiah with such carnal impatience, because through him they hoped to attain the fulfillment of their earthly expectations. Jesus walks the path that leads him to the cross, that incites the Jews against him, but that makes him a Savior for all who labor and are burdened, all who are poor in spirit, all who hunger and thirst for righteousness. For him, everything comes down to this: he will not break the bruised reed or snuff out the smoldering wick.

Think only what victories Jesus could have won if he had called legions of angels to his aid and with them struck down his enemies! Think what enthusiasm and jubilation he could have awakened among the Jews if he had placed himself at their head in the struggle against their oppressors! Think what a jubilant multitude of friends would have followed him if he had grasped earthly power and distributed lands and offices and riches and temporal pleasures to his followers! Think how quickly he could have stretched his scepter over the nations if it had merely been a matter of dominion!

But behold, the greatness of the earth and the glory of the world were far too small for him; and the perishable joy that the world gives was too paltry a gift for his disciples. He would

not bow down to the god of this world to gain its kingdoms; nor could he allow his followers to become slaves of the world. He had come to destroy the dominion of the devil, not to fortify it. He had come to free souls, not to enslave them.

Therefore he went forward in a way altogether different from what the Jews desired; therefore his way was so unlike the way of the world. He wished to give God's salvation in human hearts and eternal life in their souls; he did not wish to delude them with an empty appearance and a continual earthly enjoyment. Therefore he did not step forth in dazzling splendor, nor did he gather around himself the great and rich and learned and righteous and esteemed, so that such respect might surround him and his following that the wretched, miserable sinners would have to shrink back in fear and shame and hide themselves from this glorious one and his proud retinue. Had Jesus chosen what was esteemed in the world and exalted among human beings, had he allied himself with the self-righteous Pharisees, then he would also have driven back into sin and despair the poor, struggling souls who longed for true righteousness and for God's peace and joy.

Jesus healed them all, says our text; yet at the same time he strictly commanded them not to make him known. He so willingly wished to help; he did not wish thereby to win any honor among human beings. He wished to save; he did not wish to awaken any earthly zeal and fanaticism. He wished to exercise divine mercy toward souls; he did not wish to gather a party against those who said that his work was of the devil. If poor sinners were truly to benefit from his mercy, they must not become vain partisans who boasted in an earthly way of their great leader. Therefore Jesus proceeds in the Spirit of God, and with the most inward tenderness he bends down and raises up the bruised reed and blows upon the smoldering wick, that the blossom may live and the fire burn.

This is the true power, which alone is great enough to save. For this love and Spirit of God alone are mighty to give human hearts true joy and real blessedness. Therefore it is this inner, hidden power of Christ's death and resurrection that alone effects the salvation of a soul and the spread of God's kingdom to the ends of the world. Therefore Jesus' course is so quiet; therefore the working of his Spirit is so mighty. Therefore he is the true glory of Israel and the true light of the nations. Therefore he casts down the pride of the mighty; therefore he lifts up the lowly from the dust.

Jesus' way is always good. And it is the only way that is good for our souls. Every soul that wishes to experience his salvation must walk this way of his. It is a way of lowliness and humiliation; yet there is no one who can truly become a partaker of God's glory unless he becomes like the bruised reed and the smoldering wick, an object of the inward mercy of God and of our Lord Jesus Christ. The soul's way to life and salvation passes through the painful experience of one's own sin, one's own unworthiness, and one's own inability.

So long as a human being lives in his own power and seeks his own honor, greatness, happiness, and joy, he has not yet entered upon Jesus' way. For all their contempt for the Pharisees, such people are nevertheless very much Pharisees themselves. They do not wish to hear of Jesus; they do not need his grace; they help themselves. And just as they despise grace, so they also despise those who need grace and seek grace with Jesus. They have no thought for the bruised reed and the smoldering wick; they despise such things; they believe in strength and

ability; what is weak and sick and fearful and suffering is, in the opinion of these capable and powerful people, of no value. It is not viable, so let it die. That is the cold, Pharisaic wisdom of the world; there is nothing in it of Jesus' love and God's truth. Unless God bends such people's greatness and pride, they will, with all their ability and righteousness, nevertheless have no share in the kingdom of God.

If we are to enter upon Jesus' way, the way of life and salvation, then we must through a painful experience of our own inability descend into the valley of humility, in order to walk there and remain there. For only those who walk there are on the right way to heavenly glory. God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. But when a human being experiences his sin, his unworthiness, his inability; when he is made to taste what it is to struggle to become righteous by his own power and cannot become so; when he is made to taste what it is to labor to attain honor before God and is continually put to shame; when he breaks all his strength in the struggle against death and condemnation and yet accomplishes absolutely nothing—then he truly becomes a bruised reed and a smoldering wick. Then the proud head is bowed, then the ambitious eye is lowered, then a human being collapses, and he is worth nothing and worthy of nothing in the world; but then, in all his unworthiness, he is an object of the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

A father has a child who possesses the whole love of his soul, and it is to him dearer than the world and heaven and God and all. If such a child is laid upon a sickbed and sinks quietly and unceasingly into the arms of death, and the father sets everything into motion to fight the unequal battle and to conquer the creeping illness and the threatening death, how will it look in the despairing father's heart when the final hour comes for the beloved child, and it closes its eyes for the last time, and no earthly love can accomplish anything more for it? It is a picture of the soul that strives for eternal life by its own strength—and fails. It is a bruised reed. But Jesus does not break it; he has healing for the wounded soul, he has salvation and life for the crushed human being. His grace shall save a sinner, and his mercy shall bind up the wounds of the heart.

Friend, if you have entered upon this way of Jesus, then walk upon it! Remain in the valleys of humility and persist in poverty of spirit. And if you then continually feel yourself to be a bruised reed, then know that the Lord has a loving Spirit and hand, and that he takes pleasure in saving where it is impossible for human beings.

Jesus' way is the same also with his congregation and within his congregation. He does not intend to make it great in the eyes of the world; nor does he wish it to become great in its own eyes. God's congregation is the people who walk with Jesus and are healed by him. And even if they are many, the Lord nevertheless wills that they should not boast of their great number and think that therein lies their strength. The congregation's way is only then the right way when the congregation walks in Jesus' footsteps and does not seek to draw to itself the great unconverted multitude of the world by its visible greatness and power, but much more has the mind of Christ, which has compassion upon the bruised reed and the smoldering wick.

If we are to be the body of Christ, then we must follow our head. "He will not quarrel nor cry out, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets." It was not Christ's way to seek outward

exaltation and worldly power. By such means he could indeed force the world to pay him homage as a mighty lord, but he could not compel the salvation of a single soul. What does all the greatness of the world avail, if we lack the Spirit of Christ? But this is the mark of the Spirit of Christ: that we have his inward love, so that we seek what is lost, that it may be saved.

Away therefore with all ambition and vanity in our congregational work! Away with the desire to glitter in the pulpit, away with the desire to be foremost in the congregation! Away with laboring to become a great congregation without the Spirit of Christ! Let us follow Jesus in his inward love's self-sacrificing work for the raising up of fallen human beings, for the salvation and blessedness of poor sinners.

Jesus' way is the true way of mission. All the armies and navies of the world together can accomplish nothing for the salvation of the nations. All the merchant fleets of the world and all its means of communication can accomplish nothing to give the nations hope of eternal life. If culture and civilization are never so loud and boastful, over against the darkness and despair of paganism they stand powerless. It is only Christianity that can enter into this black night full of devilry and misery and, with the Spirit of Christ and the light of the gospel, seek out the lost souls in order to show them the way and give them life.

Not by might and not by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord, shall the work be done.

God's kingdom in the individual soul, in the building up of the congregation, in the work of mission, is always advanced in the one and same way. The Spirit of the Lord, who without worldly greatness and outward glory heals the wounds of souls, creates life, imparts love, and makes hearts glad in the Lord, is the hidden power that drives the blessed work which from day to day brings us nearer to the goal: the gospel of the kingdom shall be preached to all nations, and then the end shall come.

Do not aspire to the high things, but keep to the lowly; let Christ's humble and unassuming way, with its healing power for sick and wounded souls, with the world's proud contempt and bitter hatred, but with God's blessed promises of eternal joy and glory, be our way, and we shall one day reach the point of seeing the King in his beauty and all God's children in their blessedness.

Amen.

11 First Sunday after Epiphany: Let the little children come to me

Mark 10:13–16. And they brought little children to him, that he should touch them; but the disciples rebuked those who brought them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them: Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly I say to you: whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall never enter it. And he took them in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Late one evening a man found a little child outside his house that had wandered off and could not find its way home by itself. The child could not tell where it belonged, but nevertheless bore a mark by which the man discovered where it belonged. But it was too late to bring it home that night.

What did he do with the child?

Perhaps he acted like the man the apostle James speaks of and said: “My dear child, go bravely out into the dark night; the Lord will surely lead you safely to your mother, if it is his will. Go on!”

Or perhaps he said: “I have no room in my house, and my wife is frail; I will set the child down at my neighbor’s door, ring the bell, and go my way. He can take care of the child; he has better means and more time than I.”

Or did he take the child to the police station and let the authorities see to bringing the child to its rightful mother?

No, this man did none of these things. He had read and learned a little about the merciful Samaritan. He took the weeping and helpless child into his house; his wife cared for it, spoke kindly to it, and wiped away its tears.

“Lie down now and sleep peacefully,” she said; “early tomorrow morning you shall come to your mother.”

And the child slept sweetly through the whole night and found its mother the next morning, who had almost been beside herself with anguish over the lost child.

Did the man not act rightly? And if he had acted otherwise, knowing to whom the child belonged, would he not have been worse than a wild beast?

Now then, father and mother, do you not also have a child — perhaps several — and do you not know to whom they belong? Are they not among those of whom Jesus says that “such belong to me”?

What then have you done to lead your child to Jesus?

I do not ask what you have done so that your child might fare well in the world.

Nor do I ask whether you have often wished: “If only my child might be saved!”

Let the frivolous flatter and deceive one another with their frivolity. I ask you in earnest: What have you done — to lead your child to him whom you know it belongs to, and who is more than a mother to it, yes — who has marked it and made it his own in the holy water of baptism; — what have you done, so that your child might come to Jesus? What have you done in the short time it was entrusted to you, from evening to morning — a little, short child-life?

Oh, surely you have not hindered it? — It would be too dreadful even to think.

To hinder a poor little child from coming home again to its mother — its Jesus!

And yet the Lord himself says: “Do not hinder them!”

Then it must indeed be possible — to hinder.

Father and mother, could the terrible thing have happened, that you have hindered your own child — humanly speaking, your own flesh and blood — from coming back to its rightful Lord and Father, Jesus, who has acquired a right to it by his own precious blood?

Oh no, not hindered?

You lie down and rise up without Jesus in your thoughts or on your lips. The child lies down and rises up, and Jesus becomes a stranger both to its thoughts and to its speech.

Is that to hinder?

At the midday table in a hotel, a son sitting beside his father was asked by the waiter what he would like to drink. “The same as my dad,” he said. The father looked at the waiter and then at the son. “Give me water,” he said.

For the first time in his life he truly felt the meaning and the heavy, incalculable responsibility of being an example.

Have you given your child a bad example? That is to hinder.

A harsh and unfeeling word, a heated and reckless act, an unforgiving or frivolous utterance or deed in your own house — where many often make use of a self-indulgent freedom — has often dug a grave of offense for your own child, so that it did not come to Jesus.

But even if you have not hindered your child — and who can lift the first stone? — you have still not come far in leading a child to Jesus.

“Let them come to me,” that is, work, strive, pray night and day that your child may reach where it belongs, that it may be saved.

Father and mother, what have you done?

Have you entrusted to your neighbors, or perhaps to society, the task of raising your child for heaven? There are Sunday schools and weekday schools where religion is taught; if someone sends his child there, is that all one is obligated to do for one’s child’s — immortal soul?

Oh, how heartless!

Was this what the Lord meant when he said: “Let the little children come to me” — that we should send them to religious school, and that be the end of it?

There you see a mother in the evening kneeling by her child’s bed. The small hands are folded and lifted upward. The little heart beats in blessed joy at the thought of heaven and Jesus, whom the mother has so often painted with the bright colors of faith, and to whom they now pray together.

That is what a mother has been granted grace to do.

The father takes the children in his arms, sings with them, tells of God’s wondrous deeds among his people, and lifts their gaze from what is passing to the imperishable above. The children ask and answer, so that one is often compelled to marvel. It is as though they were truly like Jesus in the temple, having come onto their own field, into their rightful house, when they speak of the “home” up there.

This is what every single father can do, in order to lead his child to Jesus.

And no one must say: “I cannot; I have no ability to teach children,” for then he must at the same time confess that he does not love Jesus.

It is not outward ability or lofty learning that matters.

There are two things that are required, in order to become leaders of one’s children to Jesus.

They are: first, to know and love the Savior oneself; second, to love and esteem the children.

Many do not esteem children higher than things or animals, which they would make Christian by coercion or beating.

Praise be to the Lord, that Jesus esteems both us and the children more highly, and loves us and draws us to himself with deep patience and mercy. Let everyone remember how the Lord has led him; in that way shall he lead his children.

“Let them come to me and do not hinder them!”

Others again do not esteem children as dearly entrusted treasures. They regard them more as a kind of personal possession, a sort of luxury and toy, from which they can draw purely human pleasure and satisfaction.

Rabbi Meir had two sons whom he loved above all earthly things, and a godly wife. One day, while he was in the synagogue, the two sons suddenly died. The mother had them carried up into the upper room, and with a compressed heart laid a cloth over them. The Lord made her strong.

When Meir came home, the wife asked whether one is not always obligated to return what has been entrusted. Meir looked sternly at his wife. “Can my wife ask such a thing?” he said.

Then she gently took him by the hand, led him upstairs, and showed him the two bodies.

“That was the dearest thing the Lord had entrusted to us,” she whispered; “now he has demanded them back.”

Tears ran quietly down the old rabbi's cheeks; but he thanked God, because the children had come safely home.

For this reason children are entrusted to us — that we should lead them home to Jesus.

If this were always clear and alive before us, what children there would be! and what a new generation to bear God's congregation and its message of salvation to the ends of the world!

“Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them!”

12 Second Sunday after Epiphany: Zacchaeus

Luke 19:1–10. And he entered and passed through Jericho. And behold, there was a man called Zacchaeus, and he was a chief tax collector and was rich. And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not because of the crowd, for he was short. And he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and noticed him and said to him: Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for today it is necessary for me to stay at your house. And he hurried and came down and received him with joy. And when they saw it, they all murmured, saying: He has gone in to lodge with a sinful man. But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord: Behold, Lord, half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone by deceit, I restore it fourfold. And Jesus said to him: Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost.

“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God,” it is written; and of Zacchaeus it is written: “And he was a chief tax collector and was rich.”

It was not easy for Zacchaeus. Everything seemed to stand in the way of his salvation. In every respect he appeared to be far from the kingdom of God, and all doors seemed shut.

He was a tax collector; and these despised men, who had taken service with the Romans—how could they hope to share in Israel’s promised inheritance? Had not the tax collectors done as Esau and sold their birthright for a dish of food? In Roman gold and bread they sucked and cheated their countrymen and grew rich by plundering the poor Israelites. Truly, they had forfeited all right to Israel’s glorious promise, to the kingdom of God which the Messiah brought. If Jesus was truly the Messiah, then there was little prospect of help for Zacchaeus with him.

Zacchaeus was a man of high standing. His high office was a new hindrance to him. “Not many mighty, not many noble are called,” it is written. People of high rank and position are often too great and too proud to inquire after Jesus of Nazareth. Often they are also too busy to set aside time to seek the Savior of the soul. And here in Jericho the coming of Jesus was accompanied by such a commotion among the “common people,” such a crowd gathered, that it was utterly beneath Zacchaeus’s dignity to have anything to do with the matter. Had Jesus been a refined and noble philosopher, it would have been another thing; then the crowd would have stayed at home, and Zacchaeus could have had him to himself as an honored guest. But out on the street, in the midst of the crowd, Zacchaeus had to seek him if he would find him.

Zacchaeus was rich; and his wealth had been acquired in a bad and ignoble way, as is often the case. This was almost the greatest hindrance. What had the rich man to gain from the poor one? What more was there for Zacchaeus to desire than money, the “almighty” money?

But Zacchaeus was not satisfied or content. There burned a fire within him that gave him

no rest. He had to, he had to see Jesus. Let it cost what it would, and let it be the same whether it helped or did not help; he would see him in spite of everything.

And Zacchaeus did see Jesus; but it was a hard struggle for him. The little eager man cared nothing for mockery and scornful words; the distinguished tax collector cared nothing for the pressure and shouting and laughter of the crowd; the rich man found no satisfaction in his riches. He tried to force his way through the crowd to Jesus, but could not; he ran ahead, climbed up into a sycamore tree, and there he sat, anxiously watching for Jesus who was to pass by.

And Jesus passed by and saw Zacchaeus. Just as Zacchaeus had thought of Jesus, so Jesus had also thought of him. Or how could anyone seek to see Jesus, and Jesus not seek to meet the seeker? Can longing burn in a human heart for the Savior, and his longing of love not be kindled? Oh no; he seeks those who seek him. He will meet those who inquire after him.

And therefore there is a blessed meeting. That Zacchaeus sees Jesus is not yet enough; but that Jesus also sees Zacchaeus and enters his house—that is the main thing. And who can describe or explain the joy that is in such a meeting with Jesus? It is impossible, because human language can scarcely express the human feelings that move a heart; but it is powerless before the divine movements that shake a person's inmost being when a new heart is created and a new spirit within him. Small and poor images of it may be found in the joy that earthly love can produce in a human soul; but the joy of finding Jesus and tasting his love, of belonging to him and being born again, is not only infinitely greater, but also of an entirely different kind and nature. As heaven is higher than the earth, so Jesus' love is higher than earthly love, and the joy in him higher than all the joy of the earth.

Therefore it is not strange that Zacchaeus “hurried and came down and received him with joy.” Like a fresh living spring for the thirsty, so were Jesus' words and love for Zacchaeus's soul. He was born again; he was a son of Abraham.

But people did not know it; only Jesus' eye saw what was taking place in the tax collector's heart. Therefore the onlookers murmured and said: “He has gone in to lodge with a sinful man.”

Yes indeed, “a sinful man”; and blessed and praised be the Lord for it. He has come to “seek and to save the lost.” Here he has found a lost sinner. In this lies all our comfort; on this we build all our hope: the Son of Man lodges with “a sinful man.” And yet no longer “a sinful man.” Now that he has found Jesus, and Jesus has found him, now the great change has taken place; now he is converted, now he is born again and has become a son of Abraham, an heir of the promise, with free access to the kingdom of God.

For the meeting with Jesus has opened his heart, so that he says: “Behold, Lord, half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone by deceit, I restore it fourfold.”

This is the language of repentance and love. He does not deny that he is a sinful man; he confesses that there is unjust property in his hands; but now, since Jesus has entered his house, he will hasten to be rid of it. Unrighteous mammon and Jesus, the friend and Savior

of sinners, do not belong together. And not only will he give up all unjust property, but he will restore it fourfold and thus cause joy where he previously caused sorrow and bitter pain. Truly he is a converted man, a son of Abraham through faith. The friend of the poor, the helper of the oppressed has he become—he, the tax collector, the deceiver, the bloodsucker.

“The sinful man” is no longer a sinful man.

What do you think now? If this is how a sinner is saved, how is it then with you and me? How is it with our rich men, who have gathered riches unjustly and who perhaps for the sake of their riches are highly esteemed in the congregations? Where is the poor man’s half, or has anyone heard of the one who was defrauded receiving fourfold back from the deceiver? Alas, there are surely not many like Zacchaeus. We so gladly comfort ourselves with the thought that Jesus is “the friend of tax collectors and sinners”; we so gladly rejoice that he “lodges with a sinful man.” But what does it help if Jesus’ friendship does not make us new people, with the love of God poured out in our hearts?

Let us then awaken in earnest and seek Jesus until we find him and he finds us, so that there may be new birth, a new heart, a new mind, and a new way of life, so that we too may become children of Abraham and heirs according to the promise. Behold, the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost!

Friend, has he also found and saved you?

13 Third Sunday after Epiphany: A Teaching with Authority

Mark 1:21–35. And they went into Capernaum; and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught. And they were greatly astonished at his teaching; for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. And there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, saying, What do we have to do with you, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God. And Jesus rebuked him, saying, Be silent, and come out of him. And the unclean spirit convulsed him, and cried with a loud voice, and came out of him. And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, What is this? What new doctrine is this? For with authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him. And immediately his fame spread throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee. And immediately they left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law lay sick with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. And he came and took her by the hand and raised her up; and the fever left her, and she served them. And at evening, when the sun had set, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a solitary place, and there he prayed.

It is especially the first two and the last verse of this text that we shall here consider. Between them lies the account of how Jesus cast out “an unclean spirit,” healed Peter's mother-in-law, and—after the report of him had spread throughout all Galilee—how in the evening the whole city of Capernaum was gathered at his door, and he healed many sick and possessed among them.

On the one side, the people's impression of Jesus' teaching and work: they were greatly astonished, they were all filled with awe—it was a “new doctrine”; he taught as one who has authority, and “not as the scribes.”

On the other side, the Son of God, the Son of Man, in his humble rest and childlike devotion to God, his Father: he “went to a solitary place and prayed there.”

“Doctrine with authority” and “prayer”!

“Out of the mouth of infants and nursing children you have prepared praise,” was Jesus' answer when the chief priests and scribes complained that the children greeted him with Hosanna in the temple. Children sometimes know Jesus better than scribes.

The people who heard Jesus' discourses and saw his signs received an impression such as they had never received from the sermons of the scribes. Was this because the latter taught false doctrine? The Lord himself says (Matt. 23:2–3): “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on

Moses' seat; therefore do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do; for they say, but do not do."

Their doctrine was therefore correct enough, but their heart was not in their words; their words were sound in teaching, yet at the same time only sounding brass and a clanging cymbal, because they lacked the love that is poured into hearts by the Holy Spirit of God. Their preaching was indeed both thorough and well supported by passages of the Law, but it was barren and powerless, because it lacked the force of personal conviction. It did not come from the heart and did not go to the heart.

It was otherwise with Jesus. He not only taught rightly according to the Law, but he also revealed its spiritual content; for he had come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 5:17). He was not only led by the Holy Spirit of God; he had "the Spirit without measure" and was one with God himself. His words were not merely the fruit of his personal conviction; rather, his person and his words were one—he himself was the Word, just as his person itself was the Way and the Truth and the Life.

Therefore his words made such a mighty impression on the people that they said, "Never has a man spoken like this man" (John 7:46); "he spoke as one who had authority." The words from Jesus' mouth passed like a two-edged sword through their consciences, and when they saw the unclean spirits depart at his command, they were all terrified and asked one another: "What is this new doctrine?"—a teaching with authority and force.

But when the crowds had been gathered around him to receive relief and healing from his gentle and mighty hand also for their bodily diseases, he withdrew in the solitude of the night in order to renew his strength through childlike and intimate fellowship with his Father in heaven. **There he found the strength that made his words a doctrine with authority—there he daily sought new power for the great conflict he was to undergo with him who had the power of death, and to gain the power "to deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage," and "to save completely those who come to the Father through him." This is the true "doctrine with authority"; it comes from Jesus' intimate filial relationship with the Father.**

"Do not rejoice in this," says the Lord to the returning seventy disciples, "that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20).

The great miracle is not that unclean spirits are cast out, that the sick are healed, or that the dead are raised bodily; the great miracle occurs when a soul is saved by the blood of Jesus, and the angels in heaven also rejoice greatly when "one sinner repents." Therefore the Lord also says to his disciples: "Whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and he will do greater works than these, because I go to the Father" (John 14:12).

What works are greater than those Jesus did? It is to proclaim Christ crucified and risen, a Savior for sinners. For this cannot take place until Jesus on the one hand has truly died and been raised, and on the other hand has sent someone his Holy Spirit to carry out his work.

Therefore he also says: "It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you" (John 16:7).

Without the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, there is therefore no one who can be a true disciple and perform the greatest of all works, to proclaim salvation through the blood of Jesus, “not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power” (1 Cor. 2:4); for without the Holy Spirit no one knows Jesus, the Son, since “no one can call Jesus Lord except by the Holy Spirit.” And without that same Spirit no one knows God, the Father; for only by this Spirit can we cry, “Abba, Father!” Only by this Spirit can we have that childlike, intimate, heartfelt fellowship with God which the Son himself had, and which is called prayer. In such a daily and unceasing life of prayer, a child of God finds the power by which he can do greater works than these, namely the love of God that is poured into the hearts of believers by the Holy Spirit,

so that for Jesus’ sake and in his stead they are ready to go out into the wilderness and seek the lost sons and daughters, and on the strong shoulders of the Gospel carry them home to the Father’s house.

Therefore no one can carry on a true and living proclamation of the Gospel unless he himself through faith has become one with Jesus Christ, made a partaker in the power of his death and resurrection, and with him a son in the Father’s house, so that in the anointing and conviction of the Holy Spirit he can testify to what he himself has seen and heard.

But if someone in such unity of faith and Spirit with the Father and the Son boldly preaches the Gospel to the poor—let it be that “his body is weak and his speech mediocre”—then he shall experience that the Lord is today and yesterday, yes, to all eternity the same; that his power, which with a word drove out evil spirits, dwells in him; and that his strength is perfected in weakness. And when such a messenger in Christ’s stead, in heartfelt love, pursues souls and in unceasing prayer cries out for their salvation and daily humbles himself in the dust before the living God, then the same testimony shall meet him from the mouth of the people as once met the Lord himself:

“You speak as one who has authority, and not as the scribes.”

Brothers and sisters, should we not pray to God that this “doctrine with authority” may become more and more the reigning one among us, in all congregations and in all lands?

14 Fourth Sunday after Epiphany: In Faith and in Doubt

Matthew 14:22–33: And immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone. But the boat was already far out on the sea, distressed by the waves, for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus came to them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified and said, “It is a ghost,” and they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Take courage; I am here. Do not be afraid.”

And Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He said, “Come.” And Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw the strong wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me!” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat fell before him and said, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

This narrative sets before us the apostles of Jesus in the hard and yet blessed school of the cross, as a pattern for the disciples of Jesus and for his followers and servants in all times.

Jesus had revealed his divine power by feeding five thousand men, besides women and children, with five loaves and two fish. The twelve apostles had been his willing, obedient, and believing instruments in that great miracle. And the people had become glad and uplifted when they received food in the wilderness in a wondrous manner, just as ancient Israel in the days of Moses.

Then enthusiasm arose among the people; a jubilant murmur ran through the assembly: He is the prophet who is to come; him we will have as king. And did not the twelve also feel a blessed rapture at their Master’s glorious self-revelation, and at the same time a secret joy in observing the powerful impression that Jesus’ work had made upon the people? So do we often rejoice when we see something similar of God’s work, and when it seems to us that now it goes well, now many are being won for Jesus, now all the people are gathering around him.

There was faith among the twelve at this moment; therefore Jesus wanted them to depart from the people, lest the people’s carnal enthusiasm should become a temptation and a fall for them. Therefore he also willed that they should be separated from him outwardly, so that they might learn to believe without seeing. Therefore “he immediately compelled them to get into the boat and go over to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.” He himself wished to be alone to pray for the people and for the twelve, who each in his own way were placed in a dangerous and difficult situation, that it might yet be granted them to understand the Lord’s meaning with the great miracle.

The twelve apostles set out upon the sea according to the Lord’s command. Alone in the

darkness of the night they were to row over to the other side. It was not far, and the men were accustomed to the sea; there seemed to be no danger at all. Nevertheless it became for them a peculiar trial. For the twelve found themselves in that distinctive state of mind which the miracle and the people's enthusiasm had produced, a half-spiritual, half-carnal uplift, in which they felt as though everything must yield, and as though all obstacles must give way, since now the kingdom of God was coming with power, and they were to be its bearers under the leadership of Jesus.

Jesus saw that they needed to be tested. Therefore he sent them out alone against the storm, which he himself had caused, and they labored and toiled the whole night against wind and waves, and yet made almost no progress. It was a hard night after a long day, when the work had not felt heavy because they had been borne by spirit and faith, but which had nevertheless wearied them with that kind of exhaustion that is felt doubly when the tension is over and the miracle's excitement has faded. And when they were in the middle of the sea, the boat was in danger, and the hearts of the disciples were discouraged and fearful. Darkness and storm, labor and the raging waves had taken away the festive mood, and there was not much left of their courage and faith.

But Jesus, who was upon the mountain in prayer for them, saw them in their distress and came to their aid. Yet he used his own way and manner. They were to reach the place to which he had sent them, but they were not to reach the goal without him. If they had trusted at all in their own strength when they began the journey across the sea without having Jesus in the boat, they had now learned their own weakness. And now Jesus came to them in a new miracle: he came walking on the sea. Then icy fear seized them, and the Savior who came to help them became for them a ghost, which foretold death rather than their salvation. But Jesus spoke kindly to them and said, "Take courage; I am here. Do not be afraid." Thus it was he himself who came; there was the Lord, there was the Savior, there was the friendly helper who came, he who had watched over them with fatherly love and who was ready to help with divine power. In the hour of weakness he himself was near to them with miraculous power.

Then Peter's faith awakened with overflowing strength: "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He thought that he too would take part in this miracle, as he had taken part in the miracle of the feeding. And the Lord, who rejoiced in his faith and wished that he should gain more experience, said to him, "Come."

And indeed, the incredible happens: Peter steps out of the boat; he who just before had been afraid, though he had the boat between himself and the water, now walks out upon the raging sea to come to Jesus. At first it goes well. The sea bears him—no, faith bears him upon the sea; but then Peter looks at the sea and the waves, and as his gaze leaves Jesus, fear again slips into his heart, and with fear, doubt; faith no longer bears him, and he sinks into the angry waves.

But Peter is not to go under. He is given time to utter the cry of distress: "Lord, save me!" And immediately Jesus takes his hand and leads him safely into the boat and says, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Then the storm subsided outwardly and inwardly, upon the sea and in the hearts, and with holy trembling all in the boat fell down before the mighty

Savior and said, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

As the little boat upon the Sea of Galilee with the precious band of disciples on board, so is the Church of God upon earth since Jesus has ascended and is no longer visibly present among his believers. The world into which Jesus has sent them, while he himself has gone to the Father, is a hostile world. Dark and threatening as the storm cloud in the west at evening stood the black, thick paganism against which the Lord sent the disciples when he commanded them to go out into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. And it was not long before apostles and evangelists came to experience that “the wind was against them,” and that there was toil and struggle with the spiritual hosts of wickedness under heaven, which enlisted princes and kings on earth into their service in order to crush and annihilate the little Church of God.

But in this distress of the Church there is continually this blessed consolation for all God’s true and genuine children and for all sincere workers, that Jesus is in prayer for them with the Father; he watches the little struggling host; and when distress rises to its highest point, and faith is on the verge of yielding to doubt, then he himself comes near, walking over the surging and roaring sea of the peoples of the world; and when human wickedness lifts itself high and seems as though it would crush the Church, then at that very moment the Lord reveals himself and brings help to the terrified in their need. Thus the death of the martyrs is both the world’s threat and at the same time a blessed testimony of the Lord’s nearness; and through the firmness of stones and the flames of the pyres sounds his own loving voice: “Take courage; I am here; do not be afraid.”

And when again and again the servants of the Lord have ventured forth against the violent passions of human hearts, both within the Church and among the pagans, then they have indeed had to repeat Peter’s experience, that they sank whenever they looked away from the Lord and toward the many difficulties; but no one who has tried to raise the cry of distress like Peter, “Lord, save me!” has cried in vain. The Lord has heard also the cry of the one of little faith—yes, of the doubting one—and immediately helped and spoken the reproving and yet blessedly consoling word: “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Why? In truth you have no reason for doubt if your situation is like Peter’s. If it is at the Lord’s command that you walk upon the sea, then pay heed only to the Lord’s command and the Lord’s eye, which so kindly follows you the whole time while you are placed in such great danger. And above all, if you feel that you are beginning to sink, then do not neglect, even in the very moment of doubt, to cry out to your Savior, and behold, he will immediately stretch out his hand to you and hold you up.

There are so many fearful souls among us who walk so timidly and therefore so close to sinking. They see resistance all around them, and they feel doubt and discouragement and unworthiness within themselves. Hear the voice of Jesus: “Do not be afraid; only believe!” “You of little faith, why do you doubt?” Jesus, who has commanded us to walk in the world with his testimony against the world, nevertheless sees all our path and all our danger, and he sees no reason why we should doubt. If we see something that frightens us, it is because we see too low and too short; we do not look high enough up to the Lord, nor far enough forward to the glory with God.

“I live, and you shall live,” says Jesus to his believers. Amid the many dangers and great hardships of the wilderness journey, let us hold fast to the invisible one as though we saw him. And even if we are led in strange ways through storm and calm, let us hold fast to the faithful Savior’s hand, which is stretched out to us through the dark storm clouds that seem to close heaven entirely over us. And if we should even let go of his supporting hand for a moment, so that we come to know that we sink unless he holds us up, then let us remember that such experience is beneficial for us, so that we may once again learn the ancient cry of distress: Lord, save us! Amen.

15 Fifth Sunday after Epiphany: The Seed that Grows

Mark 4:26–29. And he said: This is how it is with the kingdom of God: when a man casts seed into the ground and sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows, though he himself does not know how. For the earth bears fruit of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the fruit is ripe, he immediately swings the sickle, because the harvest is at hand.

There are three things this parable presses upon the heart concerning the kingdom of God:

1. That the seed, that is, the life of God in us, grows and must grow; 2. That the power for this growth is not our own power; and 3. That this growth has a conclusion and a final goal.

These are truths that touch the very foundation of the life of God, and without whose inward and daily recognition and embrace life, both in the individual and in the congregation, will wither and die. For just as it is said: “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather scatters,” so it is also true that what does not grow withers, and the one who does not go forward in grace and faith goes backward and falls away.

The seed of which the Lord speaks is life through the Word of God. “You have been born again,” says Peter, “not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding Word of God.” Faith is therefore not mere intellectual assent that leaves the heart untouched, nor is it a moral striving to live outwardly respectable and devout; faith is a heavenly seed, a new life created by the Spirit of God in a heart hungry for salvation, as the Lord himself says: “Unless you are born again, you can neither see the kingdom of God nor enter the kingdom of God; for what is born of the flesh is flesh, and only what is born of the Spirit is spirit,” and: “As many as believe in him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”

If the grain of wheat that is laid in the ground does not after some time come up, it is because it was dead, without germinating power. But if it is a living seed, then it will indeed lie some days unseen in the ground, yet it is at work there, drawing nourishment from the soil, and soon pushes up out of the earth, despite all hindrances, as a fresh green shoot which, though not always quickly, gradually brings forth blade, ear, and full grain, and promises the sower fruit and joy.

So it is with the seed of faith in a human heart. It may indeed for a time seem hidden from the eyes of other people, but not forever; otherwise it is dead and useless. If it is of the right kind—if it is born of God—then in its time, whether you understand it or not, it goes to work within the hidden depths of a person, sanctifies them, permeates them with its divine life, and finally, and not too long thereafter, breaks forth, despite the resistance of the flesh and the world, as a fair and fresh planting of God, so that all may see and know that something new and divine has taken place here, a great miracle of God. The one who stole, the one who drank, the one who sought all his joy in the world and mocked God and his gospel does so no longer; the one who was proud, self-centered, hateful, slanderous, greedy, is so no more, but loves people and praises God in word and deed. Is it so with you, O soul?

And yet it is not enough. Sun and drought may come, and the shoot wither, and that is worse than if it had never been planted. If the plant does not set leaves and ears, it cannot bear fully ripe fruit.

Thus the life of God in human hearts must grow and go forward, if it is not to wither and die. Here the Word of God contains so many earnest exhortations, not only to take up the whole armor of God, to fight and strive against the enemies, to renounce and suffer with Christ, but above all to be filled with the love of Christ and to practice it more and more, so that people may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven. It is here that the children of God are often lukewarm and indifferent, as they take comfort in blessed memories from the first time of awakening and childhood, and forget to apply all diligence to bring forth into the open, in the power of faith, but also in power, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly love, and, as the crown of it all, love toward all, and to have these things in abundant measure and not remain idle or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, lest they become nearsighted, forgetting the cleansing from former sins, and thereby make firm both their calling and election and be preserved from falling (2 Peter 1).

A faith active in love is what God requires of us, so that we show mercy to the poor, the suffering, the helpless—not in word, but in deed—just as Christ has shown mercy to us, not with lofty and glorious speeches, but by giving his life for us; so we also are obligated to give our lives for the brothers, if our faith is not to die because it has no works (James 2).

This is the growth that is required, friend, if you are not to become unfruitful and cast out as a dry branch. But alas, you say, how shall I, so frail and powerless, be able to do these things, and if God requires this of me, how then can I be saved?

Alas, I say, how often do we not seek to slip away from God's holy demand by all manner of empty excuses about our weakness and great sinfulness and frailty!

If you meant it sincerely, you would say with Paul: "When I am weak, then I am strong." Your powerlessness to grow comes from this, that you seek the power for it in yourself instead of in him who gave birth to it in you, who cannot sin, he who laid the seed in you so that you received your life hidden with Christ in God and were made a partaker of the divine powers of eternal life, which were given to you undeservedly, without money and without payment, for the sake of Jesus Christ alone, and which therefore are called grace.

This is the power that brings the life of God in a human heart to grow and bear fruit, and this alone is the power. If you go daily in childlike faith to the fountains of grace, to Siloah's quietly flowing streams of the cross, then you shall become like "a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season, and whose leaf does not wither," and in all that you do you shall prosper, because it is done in God. It is God who works in us both to will and to do according to his good pleasure, and if I forget all that lies behind me and, emptied of all my own, let this power of grace work through the Holy Spirit in my heart, then you also, however small and disregarded you may be among people, may confess with Paul: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

If, then, there is no progress or growth in your life of God—no more inward fellowship with

God in prayer and in the knowledge of the Word, no stronger will to renounce your own and to confess Jesus in word and deed, however slowly it may go—then you must seek the cause not in any lack of love or patience on God’s part, but in your own unwillingness to give room in your heart to the power of his grace. There is danger that you grow lukewarm, become weary in the struggle, or find it less necessary, become indifferent about watching, or fall into spiritual pride and fleshly self-confidence. For the Lord will not only begin but also complete; the Lord does not grow weary or tired in his work of grace, and when your sin has abounded, grace has abounded all the more.

Therefore, when this happens to you, that there is stagnation or sluggishness in your spiritual growth, then first look within yourself and test whether you stand in the faith, then look upward toward heaven and toward the goal that has been set for you: to bear fruit for the harvest in its time.

For God has also given each individual human being a certain span of time—according to his own reckoning of time (2 Peter 3:8)—a time of grace in which he imparts the grace he has determined, and after which he requires the fruit which his gracious power, according to the measure allotted to each, can and shall bring forth. Then comes the day of reckoning, when it shall be rendered to us according to what has been done through the body, whether good or evil: for those who remain steadfast in the faith, eternal blessedness; for those who have squandered grace, eternal perdition: “When the fruit is ripe, he immediately swings the sickle, because the harvest is at hand.”

Therefore Paul says to Timothy (2 Timothy 4:5): “Be watchful in all things, endure suffering—fulfill your ministry,” and adds concerning himself: “I am already being poured out, and the time of my departure is at hand; I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course—and the crown of righteousness is laid up for me, and not only for me, but for all who have loved his appearing.” And in another place he says that he counts everything as nothing and does not even hold his life dear, in order that he may finish his course with joy—the course he compares to the marked-out distance that must be run on a racecourse, where only the one who finishes receives the prize.

This is something for each of us, and for every day, to take to heart:

Begun is not finished—

Mark this well:

You who know your Jesus,

Press on.

(Hans Adolph Brorson)

God will require a soul from us and has set a boundary of time when the account must be settled, sometimes swiftly as with the rich farmer—“Tonight you must die!”—sometimes somewhat extended—“Spare the tree yet one year!”—but always, humanly speaking, short: today, and for the great multitude of people, unexpected. The Lord will require fruit—the naked clothed, the hungry fed, the wretched comforted—so that he may say to you, humble and sincere as the one who is saved, because he knows it is all of grace: “See, this you have done to me, for you have done it to the least of my little ones.”

O friends, let us never lose sight of this holy and blessed goal; it hastens toward the end, and there is no time to waste. Let the power of God's grace through a childlike faith therefore be given great room in our hearts; let us daily examine ourselves thoroughly and see whether we have oil in our lamps—so that when the day comes, we may not, with shame, be left standing outside. For if the righteous, those justified by grace, are scarcely saved, how shall the ungodly, the lukewarm, the sluggish, the apostate come through?

16 *In progress*****

17 Twenty-fourth Sunday after Trinity: They knew neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.

Luke 20:27–40. Then some of the Sadducees, who deny that there is any resurrection, came to him and questioned him, saying, ‘Teacher, Moses prescribed for us that if a man’s brother dies, having a wife, and he dies childless, his brother shall take the wife and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife and died childless; and the second took the wife, and he also died childless; and the third took her, and likewise all seven; they left no children and died. Last of all the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had her as wife.’ And Jesus said to them, ‘The children of this world marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy to attain that world and the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. But that the dead are raised, even Moses indicated, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him.’ And some of the scribes answered and said, ‘Teacher, you have spoken well.’ For they dared not ask him anything further.

The Sadducees were of that kind of people whose religion essentially amounted to the denial of the resurrection. Just as in our own day there are those who deny that Jesus is God, always ready to dispute and to use their supposed learning to demonstrate that Jesus is never expressly called God in Scripture, so the Sadducees, with their worldly wisdom, were always prepared to prove that Moses teaches nothing about the resurrection of the dead; and thus their entire religion consisted essentially in the denial of this doctrine of God.

This suited the creaturely life they led very well, to be able to convince themselves and others that there is no life after this one, that they have no accountability, and to encourage one another in the service of their belly with these words: ‘Eat, drink, and be glad, for tomorrow we shall die.’

They also believed they had very strong arguments, and thought they demonstrated their superiority when they could dispute with Jesus about the resurrection.

But it went with them as with most other theological disputants. With all their sharp-witted learning, they were ignorant of the main thing, of the catechism, so to speak; they knew neither the Scriptures nor the power of God (Mark 12:24). Whoever seriously applies himself to these two will have better things to do than to dispute.

A man who was not in every respect faithful to the truth wished to have an excuse and a defense for his falsehood. He thought that if he could first prove that an emergency lie was justified, then he could himself decide when a lie was an emergency lie.

He said to a friend: ‘A madman with an axe in his hand was pursuing another and stopped where the street divided in two, not knowing which way the pursued man had gone. There

he met another person and said to him, “Tell me which way my enemy went, or I will kill you.” What should this person do? If he keeps silent, he himself will be killed; if he tells the truth, the other will be killed. Was it not necessary here to use an emergency lie?”

The friend replied: ‘I will answer yes, if you will promise me never to speak an untrue word until the above-mentioned situation occurs.’

Jesus, however, answered the Sadducees in a far more earnest and considerate manner, when they, in order to create a semblance of proof for their denial of the resurrection, rooted in the flesh, produced an equally unreasonable story about the woman and the seven brothers who had been married to her.

He did not engage in their foolish and dishonest example. As was his custom, he went straight at their hearts and spiritual condition.

You Sadducees, he would say, deny the resurrection of the dead, and the reason is not that you possess any sound proof for doing so; the reason is that in your carnality and spiritual blindness you know neither the power of God nor the Scriptures.

If you knew the power of God and were not so clouded by your own sensuality, then you would know that life in this world and life in the world to come are two entirely different things. In this world, life—even the very best—is bodily, corruptible, and mortal. Since we all must die here, and since God’s plans of salvation could not be realized without the continuation of the human race, the Lord from the beginning gave this command: ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.’ Therefore it belongs to life in this world to marry and to give in marriage.

But there, where God has revealed his power in a man and raised him from the dead, there begins a life in Spirit, in incorruptibility and immortality. Then death is swallowed up in victory, and the man can no longer die, but becomes like the angels, with a transfigured, glorified body, whose nourishment is the vision of the Lord’s face. There they neither marry nor are given in marriage, because each has an eternal existence of his own.

But neither do you know the Scriptures, despite your imagined learning. You strain out the gnat and swallow the camel. The most important thing escapes your blinded eye. For it stands written in Moses, in a well-known place, that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Can the living God be God of dead people? Then Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who are dead, must, according to Scripture’s own testimony, be risen to new life. ‘Therefore you are greatly mistaken.’

No wonder that both the people and the Pharisees marveled at his simplicity and authority, and that from that time on they did not dare to ask him anything further.

Friend, you are not like the Sadducees? You do not dare to deny that there is a life after this; you still believe in the resurrection of the dead, and you do well. But have you also considered what the resurrection of the dead means for you?

Do you know the Scriptures and the power of God?

Do you know that the Son of Man has been given authority to carry out judgment, and that the hour is coming when all who are in the graves will hear the voice of the Son of God and come forth—those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment (John 5:24–29)?

Thus the Scripture sounds, and thus the power is exercised.

Friend, are you prepared?”

18 *In progress*****