Come, Lord Jesus, Make Ready the Way
Sermon on Luke 3.1–14 for Advent 2C on December 5, 2021
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

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

Advent means coming and coming means preparing. You get a phone call. People are coming for a visit. What do you do? You sweep. You dust. You put clean sheets on the bed. You stock the fridge. You plan the meals. Maybe you do more. Depending on who it is, you might need to do a lot more to prepare not just the house but yourself for that visit.

Advent means coming and coming means preparing. As it is at home, so it is with the church. For us, Advent means the coming of the Lord Jesus. Preparing for Him means preparing ourselves for His final judgment and for His endless rule and reign in a new heavens and new earth.

Advent means coming and coming means preparing. As it is at home and in the church, so it is with John the Baptizer. The Word of God came to John out there in the wilderness and John responded. He came to people, an unwanted visitor for some. But he came anyway and announced the coming of the Lord. So, he prepared people for Jesus. "[H]e went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." John was, in the words of Isaiah, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

So, the Word came to John, John came to people, and people came out to be baptized by John. His message was bold: "You brood of vipers! [that is, offspring of Satan!] Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not [even] begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." A message that bold came through loud and clear. It got people’s attention. The crowds heard John and they responded. They asked, “What should we do?”

John’s response was simple and clear: "’Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.’ Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, ‘Teacher, what shall we do?’ And he said to them, ‘Collect no more than you are authorized to do.’ Soldiers also asked him, ‘And we, what shall we do?’ And he said to them, ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.’"

With a message that bold, simple, and clear, people thought John might be the coming One. But "John answered them all, saying, ‘I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’" John came with a bold, simple, and clear message to get people ready for Jesus. But when Jesus came, there wasn’t a lot of cutting, threshing, or burning. In fact, John would later send messengers to ask Jesus if they should look for someone else to come.

Jesus is the coming One, the promised One, the Messiah. Jesus is the Savior, the Rescuer of the world, your Deliverer. Jesus is the Lord of all creation, God in human flesh. He came, but there were and there are doubters, disbelievers, and even enemies. Jesus is God, but some thought He was in league with Satan. Jesus is Savior, but some thought He was just a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Jesus is Messiah or Christ, but some thought He was a glutton and a drunkard.
Even though Jesus came to the world, the world was not prepared for Jesus. People did not receive Him and His claim to be God. They did not think they needed Him as Savior. They did not want Him as King. So, He suffered. Jesus was crucified. Jesus was killed. Jesus was buried. But on the third day, God raised Him from the dead. God justified Jesus as the coming One, the Savior, God in human flesh. He is exactly Who He says He is. Jesus Christ is Lord. And He is not finished. He is not done coming, acting, saving, or ruling. No, Jesus is coming again one final time to finish what He started. So, Advent means coming and coming means preparing. Jesus is coming. So, get ready.

But this is where our problem is. We know how to prepare our homes for visitors. We know how to prepare our church for Christmas. But do we know how to prepare our hearts and lives for Jesus? And if we do know how, do we do it? Do we let the message into our ears and minds to the degree that we actually respond and ask with John’s congregation, “What should we do?” Our problem is that we play games with this message. We try to get out from under it. We try to exempt ourselves.

One way we do that goes like this: “Well, look around. Look how bad this world is. It’s a shame, isn’t it? All those people out there. They just don’t get it. They don’t see. They don’t know God. They’ve rejected Him. You know what, they deserve everything they get.” That might be true. But how easily does that become a way for us to escape the fact that God’s Word addresses us?

Another way we avoid preparing for Jesus goes like this: “You know, all our good works, even our best works, are all tainted with sin. In fact, everything we do is sinful. The prophet Isaiah said that all our good works are like filthy rags. We cannot do anything to earn God’s favor.” That’s true. But how easily does that become an excuse not to hear the Word of God and do it?

Here’s another one: “Well, no one can really do the will of God completely. I mean, no one is able to fulfill God’s Law, except Jesus. Really what John wants us to do when we hear this message of preparation is to recognize that we cannot prepare ourselves at all and to just throw ourselves on the mercy of Christ who died for our sins.” Yes. There's truth there, too. The Word of God clearly shows us where we fail, where we sin, and where we are insufficient. And it does point us to God’s perfect Son, our Savior. But how easily does that become an excuse not to hear the Word of God addressing us and calling us to faith and life in Jesus?

There’s one more way we excuse ourselves. This one might be the most subtle: “It’s not really we who prepare for Christ’s coming, but it is God who prepares us.” Now, doesn’t that sound righteous? And, there is truth to that as well. God does do everything that we are unable to do. He saves us. He brings us to faith. He sends His Spirit to fill us. He begins the good work within us. He will even bring it to completion on the Day of the Lord Jesus. He is completely responsible for your salvation.

But so are you. You are also responsible for preparing for Jesus to come. He has given you a gift. Do you treasure it? He has given you faith. Do you feed it? He has given you His Word? Do you listen? He has begun His good work in you and promises to bring out the fruit of His Spirit in you. Do you let Him? God is responsible, but so are you. It is your mind, your heart, your hands, your eyes, and your mouth that God, the Creator, has made. So, He holds you accountable and responsible for how you use them and how you prepare for Jesus. God is responsible. But so are you. As St. Paul says in Philippians chapter two, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

Christ could come at any moment. The axe is laid at the root of the tree. The winnowing fork is in His hand. Now is the time to prepare. Whatever has been overlooked, look at it now. Whatever has gone unsaid, say it now. Whatever has been ignored, address it now in your heart and in your life.
And if that message has come through, we might ask ourselves “What shall we do?” The answer should go something like what John said in response to that. John addressed people in their place in life, in their calling. So it is with us, according to our place in life, according to our calling.

For those of us who have a lot, give to those who don’t.  
For those of us who do not have a lot, do not worry or covet but trust your Creator.  
For those of us who live alone, do not let the weight of the world turn your eyes from Jesus.  
For those of us who are married, don’t take your spouse for granted, but love and cherish them.  
For those of us who are parents, don’t anger your children, but show them how to fear and love Jesus.  
For those of us who are children, including us grownup children, honor and obey your parents.

For all of us as Christian people, listen and respond to the Word of God. Listen to God’s message of preparation: Our Creator holds all people responsible as our Judge. Listen to God’s message of redemption: Our Creator promised and then sent His own Son to rescue the world. He has done that. He has also sent His Spirit to bring Christ to you. Jesus forgives you all of your sins, reconciles you with your Creator, and promises you a place in the Father’s house He has prepared for you.

Advent means coming and coming means preparing. So, be prepared. And when all flesh sees the salvation of God in the person of Christ on the Last Day, you too, baptized believers in Jesus, will stand and glorify God. You, too, will come into that kingdom Jesus has prepared for you.

Come soon, Lord Jesus.

*In the name of the Father and of the *\( \Uparrow \) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*
Come, Lord Jesus
Sermon on Luke 19.28–40 for Advent 1C on November 28, 2021
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

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

Come, Lord Jesus . . . be our guest and let Thy gifts to us be blessed. Amen.

If you prayed that prayer before every meal for an entire year, you would end up praying it 1092 times. How many years have you been saying that prayer at a rate of around a thousand times a year? I’ll leave that math to you. The point is that you know these words. You’ve may have said them tens of thousands of times. You can rip through them without a thought.

But what are we praying for? Well, it’s pretty clear that we are asking the Lord to bless our food, that is, we are acknowledging that it all comes from Him, and we are asking that He bless our bodies by it so that we can be a blessing to others. But we’re also asking the Lord to come to us and be with us. “Don’t give us food from a distance. Be with us.” If you live alone and eating alone, you’re asking the Lord to help you see that you’re not alone. If you’re having a meal with others and enjoying their company, you’re asking the Lord to help you see that He’s there as a participant.

So, if you’re tempted to rip through that prayer and if that prayer has become hallow and perfunctory after thousands of repetitions, take a moment and think about what you’re asking Jesus to do and whether or not you actually want Him to do it. It’s one thing to say those words and pray that the Lord will come and bless us, provide for us, and sanctify our conversations. None of that is too invasive. But Jesus is invasive. He takes a seat at the table. He listens. He doesn’t just hear your words. He knows your heart. And when He speaks, His words cut you to the heart. He has a way of putting His finger right on it and addressing it. And whatever it is, it will be uncomfortable for you when He brings it up. You name it, He knows it and He owns it. He’s your Lord.

So, “Come, Lord Jesus“ is a dangerous prayer. Do you want Him there? Do you want the Lord of the universe sitting at your kitchen table? Do you want your Lord sitting in your living room? Do you want Him in your house at all? If He is there, it’s not really your house anymore. It’s His realm now.

Sometimes, I do want Him there. When things are difficult, when I’m feeling guilty, when I’m feeling overwhelmed by life. I want Him there in those times. But in my pride, there are also times when I do not want Him there. He is the Lord of my life and He has something to say about the way I live, the way I think, the way I treat other people, the way I talk with other people, and even what I do for fun. His words can cut to the heart. So, do I want Him to show up or would I rather He didn’t?

Today is the First Sunday in Advent. Advent is a time to celebrate the coming of the Lord of all Who we confess is also our Lord. We celebrate that He came in the past. We celebrate that He promises to come again in the future. And we celebrate that He comes to us today in His Spirit through His Word and Meal. Are you ready for Him to be here? Are you ready for Him to be here as Lord?

According to Luke nineteen, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, people either received Him or rejected Him. There is no middle ground when it comes to Jesus. You either pick up a palm branch and praise Him or you set your jaw, cross your arms, and turn your back on Him. There is no middle ground. Not then, not on judgment day, and not today. So, what will it be?
The problem is that we are proud people. So, even though there are times when we receive Him, there are also times when we reject Him. In His steadfast love and faithfulness, He comes anyway. He comes regardless of our response, whether we are ready or not, whether we’ve prayed for Him to come or not. That’s the message of Advent. So, we celebrate that He came to live and to die and to rise again. He promised that He would come again, and He will. So, we celebrate that. But our Advent prayer is that He would come and be with us today.

Up until now, we’ve mainly considered the first word of that little prayer, “Come, Lord Jesus.” What about the second word, Lord? We’ve already said a little bit, but we could probably be even clearer. When Jeremiah says “a righteous Branch” for David, He’s referring to a King. When Luke records the acclamation of people in Jerusalem, it’s, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord.” Now there, “Lord” is a reference to Yahweh, the Creator of the heavens and the earth. Why does Lord mean Yahweh? Because the Jews did not believe that it was appropriate to use God’s name, Yahweh, so they used Adonai in Hebrew, which comes into English as Lord. But the sense of Lord that we’re dealing with in the prayer “Come, Lord Jesus” is really about the presence and power of the king.

Now, both “king” and “lord” are fairly disconnected from our everyday language, so let’s try to translate it a little bit. Kings don’t share thrones. The whole point it that there is only one of them in any given place. So, Jesus as Lord or King means He’s the One in control. He is the boss. He’s calling the shots. That’s one thing to confess about the universe and another thing to confess about our own lives. But He has a claim on us. He bought us with His blood from our slavery to sin. He owns us now. He’s in charge of us. He’s making our plans. He’s in command of our lives. He has all authority over us. That’s how He wants it in our personal lives. That’s how He wants it in our lives together as a congregation. There is no power here except for His power, the power of His Word.

With all that talk about control and power, we might get the wrong idea because we have so many bad examples of that stuff. But when Jesus rode into Jerusalem, He was riding a donkey, a humble animal for a humble king. His kingdom is not of this world even though this whole world is His. So, they thought the donkey belonged to someone else. But everything is the Lord’s. So, He sends His disciples to get it and lead it back to Him and if anyone asks, He tells them to say, “the Lord needs it.” That’s an image of the way Jesus claims you and me. We think we own ourselves. But the Lord of all comes and claims us as His own. That’s the way Jesus comes to people; one at a time. He comes to be the Lord within you. Whether you are praying for it or not, whether you are ready for it or not, He comes as the Lord. He comes to rule and to direct and guide and lead. Jesus doesn’t just enter a city as a king. He enters you, your home, your life, as your king. He wants to rule there.

If anyone receives Jesus as Lord, it is a miracle, that is, an unnatural act of God. “[N]o one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12.3). In other words, no person naturally submits themselves to the Lordship of someone else. Isn’t human history one big story of one group of people trying to get out from under the rule of another? The power struggle is our nature. Who in their right mind would allow themselves to be ruled by someone else?

But that’s where the third word of this prayer comes into play, “Come Lord Jesus.” The name Jesus literally means “Yahweh saves.” The path of this humble king would continue. He entered Jerusalem with His eyes fixed on the cross. In the end, we do not want and cannot handle a Lord beside our own selves. So, when this Lord continues to insist that He is God, that He has an ultimate claim on you and me, we kill Him. There’s no neutral ground with Jesus, remember. And in the end this world, everyone, including you and me, did not receive, but rejected this humble King. Not just once, but over and over again. Every time we go against His will, we reject Him as the Lord.
But when Jesus comes into Jerusalem, He knows the cross is coming. It isn’t an accident. It didn’t only happen because this world rejected Him. It happened because He wanted it to happen. He knows our hearts and minds. He knows that when push comes to shove we will reject Him every single time. When it comes down to Him or you, you will choose yourself every time.

So, He chooses you. He comes as your Lord, but He also as your Savior. He comes to take what you deserve for our pride and rejection of Him. But He does not reject you. God actually rejects His own Son instead of you. Jesus, the King wears a crown of thorns for you and rules over you from a cross. He pours out His blood to save you from God’s righteous judgment. He covers you. He washes you. He makes you acceptable to God so that He receives you as a Father embraces His children. But this Savior is still the Lord of all. So, death does not defeat Him. Our rejection of Him is not the end of the story. He lives and He reigns and rules as King. And He is coming again.

So, we pray, “Come, Lord Jesus.” That’s the Advent prayer. That’s our prayer today; Come, Jesus, as my Lord and as my Savior. And, you know, Jesus answers. He comes to you and He comes for you. The Lord of all comes here to serve you. And when He does, He opens your eyes to His gracious rule and reign. By being a different kind of King, He changes who you to be a different kind of people. You are humble and gracious, just as He is. How do you know? Because He is in you. He comes today for you and for all of us in, with, and under His body and blood. It’s the Meal; the Meal where He Himself is present as our Lord and Savior, with all of His endless blessings.

Therefore, we pray: Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest and let Thy gifts to us be blessed. Amen.
Thanksgiving
Sermon on Text for the Eve of Thanksgiving Day on November 24, 2021
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

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

Let us give thanks to God always and for everything to be conformed to Christ and to glorify Him.

Give Thanks to God
"I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. What does this mean? I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. [We confess both the past and the present activities of our Creator.] He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil. All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. [Then what?] For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him." And we have not even confessed the Second Article, yet. Give thanks to God. Life is a gift.

When gifts are received, the appropriate response is giving thanks to the giver. So, we're here in response, in response to God and His gifts all around us. The Creator's gifts reveal Him to be a good Gift-giver, an “eternal, inexhaustible fountain, which, the more it gushes forth and overflows, the more it continues to give” (LC III.2). God just keeps giving, out of the abundance of His goodness, so we just keep giving thanks with lips and lives; lips of praise and lives of obedience to God and love for neighbor; lives lived from the confidence of "Well, there's plenty more where that came from."

You've all been faithful in your offerings to Pilgrim this past year. I don't know the individual amounts, but I do hear about the total. You've been faithful, as a response to God and His goodness.

Always
So, give thanks to God . . . always. In Luke 17, ten lepers are living outside of town. Leprosy is bad. It looks bad. It smells bad. It feels bad inside and out. It eats human flesh and ruins lives. At that time, no one could stop it. It could not be changed. It was a stubborn, persistent, and destructive evil. It before it killed lepers, it forced them to live apart from everyone except other people who also looked bad and smelled bad and felt bad. Can you imagine that kind of life? Lord, have mercy! And Jesus does. On His way into town His goodness overflows. He gives a gift. He cleanses all ten lepers.

So, do you give God thanks sometimes, always, or never? Sometimes it's obvious like in Luke 17. Where are the other nine?! Usually, we live somewhere between always and never in sometimes. Is the probability of you giving thanks for any given thing something like one out of ten? Probably. Me, too. But God's Second Commandment always stands. Use His name to pray, praise, and give thanks.

And For Everything
Always . . . and for everything. You've given God thanks for some things. Why haven't you given God thanks for all things? It's bad enough that only one leper came back. I wonder if even that one leper came to a point later when he could actually thank God for the leprosy he had, not because the leprosy was a good thing, it wasn't, but because God brought good out of it, because through leprosy that former leper came to know the goodness of God in a way he could not have known it otherwise. Give God thanks always and for everything, not just to the gifts that are easy to take.
Of course, the greatest gift for which we are to give God thanks is the gift of His Son. We have not been healed from leprosy, but we have been healed from the spiritual disease of sin that would otherwise define our lives outside God’s family, separated far from Him and everyone else. Jesus did not separate Himself from us when our sin made us look bad, and smell bad, and feel bad. He became sin for us. He took on our disease and it killed Him. But His death reconciles us to God and each other. He lives to reconcile us again and again by His Word of forgiveness. You don’t need to go show yourself to some priest, but through your pastor God’s Word is effective to cleanse you from your sin and restore you to Himself and His people. How can we not give God thanks for those greatest gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation that are ours through God’s greatest gift, His Son?

But if God has given Jesus, proving that He truly is an “eternal, inexhaustible fountain” overflowing with goodness, why don’t you give God thanks for everything? Do you know the Scripture that says, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8.32). What about the one that says, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6.33). All those other things are God’s gifts, too, right down to the soles of your shoes. God richly and daily provides you with all that you need to support this body and life and even promises to graciously give you “all things.”

What I’m saying is this. It’s one thing to thank God for the good stuff as opposed to the bad stuff. It’s one thing to be able to count your blessings so that you can grin and bear what feel like curses. It’s one thing to balance God’s good gifts with the struggles of life. That’s one way to do Thanksgiving. But what I’m inviting you to consider is thanking God for those things that you don’t think of as gifts from Him. What are those things? Well, what have you held at a distance and labeled a problem? Who have you held at a distance and labeled a problem? Does God really not know how to be your Good Gift-giver? Does He really have no power to change things? So, instead of asking God to take things away or change things, what if we received those difficult things and difficult people as gifts from Him, like a former leper giving God thanks not just for healing but for leprosy? What if you received them as God’s gifts to teach you to trust Him? That’s a different way to do Thanksgiving.

To Be Conformed to Christ
Here’s another way to think about it. Most of life is spent somewhere between dealing with things that are changing for the worse and dealing with things that won’t change for the better. In other words, the things you wish wouldn’t change do change and the things you wish would change do not change. That is a hard combination that threatens to drive us to frustration and complaining. Tonight, I’m inviting you to give God thanks for those hard things. Why? Because those hard things that either change too much or do not seem to change at all are the tools God uses to change us. God squeezes us into a mold and presses us into a particular shape and that shape is Christ crucified.

Let’s consider a few examples of lives conformed to Christ. Let’s consider Joseph, the favored son of Jacob, who had dreams of power and authority that caused his brothers to hate him and throw him into a pit. They dragged him out of there only to sell him as a slave. Joseph landed in Egypt where things were looking up until that woman was looking at him and he landed down in the dungeon. Joseph was doing the right thing when he got thrown into a pit and into prison. It was totally unjust. What must have been going through his mind at those low points? Did he give God thanks for those opportunities to be shaped and molded? We don’t know. But we do know that “the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love” (Genesis 39.21). In God’s time and way, He lifted Joseph out of prison and raised him to that position of power and authority he dreamt about. We usually focus on that. You meant it for evil, God meant it for good. But what good? Do you think all of that left Joseph unchanged? Do you think he might have gotten to a point where he could actually thank God for the pit and the prison because it shaped him to be someone who trusts in God as a good Gift-giver?
Let’s consider Daniel, the prophet to exiled Israel in Babylon. Like Joseph, he was doing the right thing when he met trouble. He was faithful in praying to God even when the king mandated that everyone pray only to him. Daniel was condemned to death and sealed in a pit of hungry lions. God sent His angel into the depths of that pit to shut the lions’ mounts and Daniel was set free, saved from death. Do you think that confirmed Daniel in the faith? That whole experience could have only strengthened him as someone who trusts in God as a good Gift-giver. Thanks be to God.

Let’s, finally, consider Jesus. He is an example of the same thing, but He is more than an example. He is the image to whom God desires to conform all other human creatures. He is the image to whom God is conforming you. When Jesus came as the image of the invisible God, eyes did not recognize Him and ears did not want to listen to Him. Many rejected Him. But what did Jesus do in the face of those hard people? “In that same hour [Jesus] rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will’” (Luke 10.21).

So, Jesus experienced similar things as Joseph and Daniel. He was betrayed and imprisoned like Joseph. He prayed in His distress as He faced the condemnation of death like Daniel. But unlike Daniel, no angel came down to save Him. Instead, He gave Himself into death for us. That’s where God proves just how good a Gift-giver He is. He gives Himself and holds nothing back. But Jesus rose and God raised Him, like both Daniel and Joseph, to a position, to the position of power and authority over this whole universe. He is the King of creation. Nothing happens without His doing, not just without His knowing. He actively rules every detail, including every detail of your life. But He doesn’t rule from a distance. He knows what it is to live life in this world.

Through His life in this world, this world where good things change too much and bad things never seem to change at all, Jesus learned obedience to His Father (Hebrews 5.8). That faithfulness pressed Him and molded Him into the shape of the cross. And by that cross He has given Himself to you as a gift. But by that cross He has also given Himself to you as the shape of your new life in Him.

When we actually do give God thanks always and for everything, it changes us. Thanksgiving shapes us as dependent children of God, our good Gift-giver. God may not change your circumstances, but He very well may change you through them. Perhaps we might even come to a place where we can receive the hard, difficult things as God’s gifts to us. Because, in the end, like Joseph, Daniel, and Jesus, “after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you” (1 Peter 5.10). He will do that on the Last Day completely, but, by His grace, He’s doing it already today.

**And To Glorify Him**

Finally, all of these things, including our very lives, are all to the glory of God. When we give thanks to God, as we’re doing tonight, it orients our whole lives to Him and His glory. His gifts call forth a response that turns our whole beings back to Him as our good Gift-giver. So, whatever points us and the world to Him is a good gift from Him. He is God and there is no other. He is good and we could not do any better. He knows exactly what He’s doing with you. He’s glorifying Himself.

May the Father send the Spirit of His Son to lead us to give thanks to God always and for everything to be conformed to Christ and to glorify Him.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.
Remembered and Remembering
Sermon on Jude 20–25 for The Last Sunday of the Church Year on 11.21.21
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

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

The sermon today has five points. First, it does not take long to forget. Second, bad things happen when we forget who Jesus is and what He has said. Third, God calls us to remember Jesus. Fourth, through Jude, God calls us to remember to do seven things. Fifth, Jesus remembers you.

I. It does not take long to forget.
By the time you get out to the garage, you cannot remember why you went out there in the first place. Just a few weeks after some major global event, you cannot remember headline because the next new thing has taken its place. More seriously, though you know that you are baptized into Christ, it is a daily battle to remember who you really are in Christ; a child of God, no more and no less. What about the Second Coming of Christ? It doesn’t take long to forget.

As easy as it is to forget all of those things, it is perhaps even easier to forget the Letter of Jude. Not only is Jude only read once in the Church Year, and that on our Last Sunday, but the *Book of Concord* also contains only one citation from Jude, and it is an editorial footnote. In Dr. Luther’s section on the Lord’s Prayer in the *Large Catechism*, the editors cite Jude 20, among ten other texts, to substantiate his point that the church must “exhort and encourage people to pray, as Christ and the apostles also did” (BC 441.4). It is easy to forget that, too, to pray. To that point, in his comments on that same verse, Jude 20, the Venerable Bede said, “We pray in the Holy Spirit when we are moved by divine inspiration to ask for heavenly help, so that we may receive the good things which we cannot obtain on our own.”1 So, Jude, though easy to forget, helps the church remember both the Second Coming of Christ and how to live now by His grace as we wait for Him.

Jude wrote his little epistle around AD 68, roughly 35 years after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. The Apostles have died and Jude, who was not an Apostle, is compelled to write to the church in their place (1–3). He writes with this stated purpose: “to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe” (5).

In other words, the church had forgotten Jesus! They had forgotten His promised return. They had forgotten that He will come as both Savior of those who believe and Destroyer of those who do not believe, just as it has happened in the past at the Exodus from Egypt. Having forgotten the reality of who Jesus is, some Christians perverted the grace of God into sensuality, turned forgiveness into license, and denied the only Master and Lord, Jesus (4). So, Jude’s Epistle is a call to remember who Jesus is and what He has said (5, 17; John 14:26).

II. What happens when you forget who Jesus is and what He has said?
You see the problems of this world. When you see them, though, whose are they? If they're not yours, you might be tempted to distance yourself from those problems by thinking back in time and remembering the good old days, believing that the answer to the problems of the world is simply to return to the way things used to be, or at least to try. In other words, you may be tempted to believe that the solution to the worlds’ problems is someone or something other than Jesus.

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Remember that Jesus and Jesus alone is your Savior and the Savior of this world. He has saved you from sin and death by His death and resurrection. He continues to save you even now by His Word and Spirit through the means of grace where He does not remember your sin but forgives it completely (Ps 25:7; 103). He will save you finally and fully from this world destined for destruction when He comes again in all His glory and fills you with joy (24).

What happens when you forget that Jesus is the Destroyer of those who do not believe? You might see yourself as someone securely saved. You are tempted, in the same way the church of all times and places is tempted, to be comfortable in your ways, even comfortable in your sins, living the way you want to live, giving yourself license, falling into patterns of thinking and patterns of doing that are not in accordance with the Word of God, and convincing yourself that you do not need to worry about it or change anything. If that is the case, remember that Jesus is not only the Savior. Remember that Jesus and Jesus alone is the Judge. He calls you to repentance. He calls you to trust in His forgiveness. He calls you to live a new life according to His Word.

III. God addresses our forgetting that Jesus is the Savior and our forgetting that Jesus is the Destroyer, by calling us to remember Him as He really is, just as He did to the early church through Jude. In other words, God prepares us for the future by pointing us to the past. Remember that God has called you to faith, loved you unendingly, and kept you in the faith (Jude 1). Remember that Jesus is coming as both Savior of believers and Destroyer of unbelievers (Jude 5, 17). Remember that God has promised today “to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless” (Jude 24) on that Day of His glorious return. In short, remember who Jesus is for you and what Jesus has done for you.

IV. If it does not take long for us to forget Jesus as Savior and Destroyer, it will take us even less time to forget that God has called us to a list of no less than seven other activities in the text we read a moment ago. Do you remember what they were (20–23)?

1. “Build yourselves up in your most holy faith.” Faith lives by what it trusts. So, be careful what you trust. Trust in and be built up by God’s Word and Spirit (3, 17). This is a look back to the past as well as an encouragement to continue listening to the Word of God.

2. “Pray in the Holy Spirit.” This is an encouragement to offer prayer that is informed by God’s Word through which the Spirit works faith. This is a look forward to the future from the present moment.

3. “Keep yourselves in the love of God.” This is an encouragement to stay in the love God the Father has for you and has given you through Baptism (2, 21). This is a look to the present time.

4. “Wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Mercy is what happens when you do not get what you deserve. This is an encouragement to expect mercy from the Savior even though you deserve to be destroyed by Him as Judge. This is a look forward to the future.

Two Observations: 1. These activities are responses to what God has already done for you in Christ. It is like remembering. You cannot remember without the past. Similarly, you cannot live according to God’s Word apart from what God has already done and promises to do for you. 2. Having offered encouragement in how believers themselves should live in relation to God, Jude shifts to how believers should live in relation to others, especially “those who doubt” (22).

5. “Have mercy on those who doubt.” There is only one Judge. Jesus allowed Himself to be rejected by the world, and His message to the world through you has that same rejectable character. This is an encouragement to keep on showing the mercy that Jesus has showed to you no matter what.
6. "Save others." Christ has saved us from the wrath of God, snatched us from the destruction we have earned and truly deserve. Snatched from judgment by His grace, this is an encouragement to let ourselves be used by God to graciously snatch and save others.

7. "Hate the garment stained by the flesh." When you were baptized, Christ clothed you in the robe of His own righteousness. How can individuals or congregations knowingly and willingly soil that gift with unrepentant sin? Instead, this is an encouragement not to “pervert the grace of our God” (4) but to hate sin out of love for Jesus.

How can you remember this list? Remember Jesus. Remember what He has done. He gave His life for you. He conquered death for you. He sent His Spirit that you might believe His promises of forgiveness, life, and salvation. He has promised to return in glory for you. Yes, He has promised to destroy those who do not believe, but He has also promised to save those who do. And listen to His promise in John fourteen: “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:26).

V. You can remember Jesus because Jesus promises to remember you.

He hears your prayer that echoes the thief on the cross, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23.42). He does. Jesus remembers you. You are His own. He bought You with His blood. He adopted You as a child of His Father, the Creator of the heavens and the earth.

So, Jesus always has been and always will be mindful of you. He who has all “glory, majesty, dominion, and authority before all time and now and forever” (Jude 25), remembers you by calling you, loving you, and keeping you with His church (Jude 1). He has called you through the waters of Baptism where He joined you to Himself and joined you to all other believers in Him. He continues to love you by feeding you with the fruits of His cross. He promises to keep you in the one, true faith by His Word and Spirit until the Day you see Him face-to-face.

Earlier we prayed, “Lord Jesus Christ, so govern our hearts and minds by Your Holy Spirit that, ever mindful of Your glorious return, we may persevere in both faith and holiness of living; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.” Jesus does live and reign. He hears your prayer. He answers you. He remembers you. Therefore, you do remember Him and His return today and forever.

“Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever” (Jude 24–25).

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.
Bloody Days
Sermon on Hebrews 10.11–25 for Pentecost 25B on November 14, 2021
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

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

Many people tell me, “There are good days and there are bad days.” Why is that? Why are some days better than others? Sometimes, we know. Sometimes, we do not. What kind of day is today?

According to Hebrews, today is a bloody day. But it is not the first or the last of its kind.

There will be a bloody day.
Blood, violence, and destruction will mark the Last Day and even the days before it.

Daniel says, “there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time” (12.1).

Jesus says, “when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. . . . nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. . . . And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death” (Mark 13.7–8, 12).

Why will there be blood, violence, and destruction? This is what the world has coming on account of sin! This is what you have coming on account of sin: “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6.23)!

But some will be delivered from this bloody destruction. Daniel says, “But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book” (12.1).

They will be the “saints,” “the excellent ones” in whom the Lord delights, who will not “see corruption” but walk “the path of life” (Psalm 16.3, 10–11). Are you a saint?

They will be “those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever” (Daniel 12.3). Are you wise? Have you turned many to righteousness?

They will be “the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7.14).

So, will you be delivered from the bloody destruction? Yes, because . . .

There was a bloody day.
Jesus sacrificed Himself. On the day of His bloody destruction, Jesus fulfilled all prior sacrifices, the whole priesthood, and even the Temple destined for destruction with “a single sacrifice” (Hebrews 10.11–13). None of your sacrifices or your self-justifications have any power to save you.

Instead, Jesus was delivered over to a bloody death and destroyed in order to deliver you from the coming destruction you deserve (Mark 10.33).

Paul says, He “gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father” (Galatians 1.4).
Peter says, "Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God" (1 Peter 3.18).

So, it is in Jesus' blood that your name has been written in His book on that bloody day when He was destroyed (Daniel 12.1).

Jesus not only delivered you on that day of His bloody destruction. He also sanctified you on that day (Hebrews 10.14). Jesus has cleansed you by His blood and forgiven you all your sins (Collect). Jesus has claimed you by His blood to be His holy one, His saint (Psalm 16.3). Jesus has opened for you, by His body and blood, the "new and living way" to approach God and stand before Him in holiness now and forever (Hebrews 10.19–20).

But Jesus' flesh did not "see corruption" (Psalm 16:10). He rose and lives and reigns to all eternity. He is present here and now by His Word and Spirit. Therefore . . .

This is a bloody day.

Jesus is present with you today, in His body and blood, as your "new and living way" to enter into the presence of God in "confidence" (Hebrews 10.19–20). Therefore, you "draw near" (Hebrews 10.22) and you joyfully walk "the path of life" (Psalm 16.8, 11).

Think about this center aisle in the middle of our sanctuary. It's wide open. There are no hurdles or holes. It's a straight shot without obstruction. That's a picture of how it is between God and His Church. We can "draw near with a true heart," as we say in the liturgy. Jesus' blood makes that possible. His blood on us gives us access to God because His blood cleanses us from sin. But it is not as if He sacrificed Himself and then left us alone. Even when we don't use the processional cross, what it symbolizes is always the case. The Church never enters God's presence without Jesus leading us, without Jesus going with us and accompanying us, and without Jesus bringing us into God's presence in order to change us, all by means of His blood, and all happening today.

Today, Jesus calls you to "draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith" (10.22). He calls you to live as one who has been cleaned by His blood. You enter here by His blood and you will enter His heaven by His blood.

Today, Jesus calls you to "hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering" (10.23). You are confident to stand before God on that Last Day because of Jesus' blood. So, now He calls you to live toward that future He has prepared, not against it, in attitude and action.

Today, Jesus calls you to "consider how to stir up one another to love and good works" (10.24). He calls you to forget yourself and remember others, not neglecting them, but being compassionate toward them as He has had compassion for you by His blood.

How can all of that happen? How can you be cleaned, confident, and compassionate people? Not by might, nor by power, but by the Spirit (Zechariah 4.6). As you "draw near" (Hebrews 10:22), the Holy Spirit descends to both destroy you and deliver you through Jesus' blood (Hebrews 10.15–18).

First, the Holy Spirit destroys you. It is not necessarily bloody (Hebrews 12.4), but the Spirit aims to destroy every idol, including your own righteousness (Psalm 16.2, 4). The Spirit aims to "release us from the bonds of our sins which by reason of our weakness we have brought upon ourselves" (Collect). The Spirit aims to put to death self-centered ways in you by writing His laws on your heart and mind (Hebrews 10.16). So, there is destruction today.
But then, the Holy Spirit delivers you. Just as He delivered you on the day you were “washed,” when your name was “written in the book” (Hebrews 10.22; Daniel 12.1), He does so again today. Just as He has forgotten your sins through Absolution many times before, He absolves you today and forgets them all over again (Hebrews 10.17–18). Just as He has brought you near to him “by the blood of Jesus,” (Hebrews 10.19), He does so again today by Jesus’ blood in His Supper.

So, today is a bloody day as the Spirit sanctifies you, makes you holy by Jesus’ blood, and gives you all the gifts Christ won for you by His sacrifice on the cross, Therefore . . .

Every day is a bloody day.

By the blood of Jesus, you, God’s Church, are the fulfillment of Jeremiah 31 quoted in Hebrews 10 where God declares, “I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds . . . I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.” (10.16–17). In other words, the blood of Jesus makes you new people individually and collectively.

By the blood of Jesus, you, God’s Church, are “the saints,” “the excellent ones” in whom the Lord delights, who will not “see corruption” but walk “the path of life” (Ps 16:3, 10–11). By the blood of Jesus, you, God’s Church, will “shine like the brightness of the sky above . . . like the stars forever and ever” (Dan 12:3).

Now, every day is a day to be the Church by the blood of Jesus. Every day, you are cleansed by the blood of Jesus. Every day, you are confident by the blood of Jesus. Every day, you are compassionate by the blood of Jesus.

Though you might have good days and bad days, every day, even the Last Day, is a bloody day; a day defined by Jesus’ blood for you.

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

Today, God gives us a glimpse through the doorway of heaven. Look through that door while it is open. What do you see? You see the saints. It’s a huge multitude no one can count. They are covered in white robes. What are they doing? They are standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They are waving palm branches in their hands. They are shouting out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Revelation 7.10).

Let your eyes scan the crowd. Every one of us knows someone in that numberless multitude. There are many new faces, but there are friends, grandparents, parents, spouses, siblings, children, and grandchildren. Do you they see you? No. They are looking up at God. They are standing before His throne, waving the palm branches of victory, and they are shouting out praises to God.

Now, there might be a face or two in that crowd you didn’t expect to see. How did so and so get through the door? But then we see again how people come to be called saints, how people get those white robes. It’s not their sinless life, or their unlimited kindness, or their sacrificial giving, or their saintly patience. It’s not that God needed them for something. No, their robes are white and they are called saints because they have been washed in the blood of the Lamb (Revelation 7.14).

Just listen to what they’re shouting: “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” God brought them there. He won salvation for them. They are there because of Him.

That’s it. The door closes. Our glimpse through the doorway of heaven is gone. Where does that leave you and me? What does this vision do to you? Does it make you wonder whether you’re going to make it? Does it make you feel uncertain about the future? It might. But know this: God lets us peer through that doorway of heaven in order to give us hope; not the kind of hope that might be called wishful thinking, but confidence. He gives us confident hope that we will be numbered with that numberless multitude. That confident hope doesn’t come from us. It comes from the Savior. Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb! There is hope in Him.

After Scripture opens this doorway to heaven and gives us a little glimpse, the door closes again. That’s all we get. But, you know, that turns us around. It invites us to look in the opposite direction, not up but down and around at the saints below. What do you see, here? Do these people look like saints? I don’t see a multitude, just a little group of pretty ordinary looking people. I don’t see a bunch of white robes and I don’t see palm branches, either. If a glimpse of the saints above gives you confident hope, what does looking around do to you? Maybe there’s a little uncertainty.

Maybe you’re uncertain about those around you. It’s not so much about whether or not they will be called saints in heaven, but how they could possibly be called saints today. You might call them many things, but maybe you wouldn’t call them saints. They don’t look very saintly. They have problems. They sin. Maybe you find yourself looking around and judging souls by what you can see. Maybe you hope they’re not doing the same thing with you. There is uncertainty.

Maybe you’re uncertain about yourself. Maybe you don’t feel especially saintly. Maybe you look in the mirror and you hope no one else can see what you see. Uncertainly.
You know that your Savior sees. Matthew five: "Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him" (Matthew 5.1). He sees so much more than we could ever see. But when He looks at His disciples and opens His mouth He opens the doorway of heaven from his viewpoint to give us a glimpse of what He sees when He looks around at the saints below.

He sees you, His saints, and He calls you blessed. He says it nine times. He calls you blessed not because of your appearance or your circumstances, but in spite of them. He calls you blessed because yours is the kingdom of heaven, not will be, but is, right now. You are poor, not in possessions, but in spirit. You are lowly in the eyes of the world. You look at yourself and those around you and you wouldn’t call them saints. Instead, you see emptiness apart from Jesus.

Our problem is that we spend so much of our time and energy trying to deal with our uncertainty about ourselves by trying to raise ourselves up in whatever way we can. We want to see our saintliness. We want some credit for being saints. So, we assert ourselves and defend ourselves. We elevate ourselves. But, when we do, we exchange confident hope for uncertainty.

It was February 16, 1546. Martin Luther jotted down a note. "Let nobody suppose that he has tasted the Holy Scriptures sufficiently unless he has ruled over the churches with the prophets for a hundred years. . . . Lay not your hand on this divine [story], but bow before it, adore its every trace. We are beggars. That is true." Two days later, on February 18, 1546, Martin Luther died. Those are the last words he wrote. "We are beggars. That is true." Certainty. We are empty apart from Jesus.

Did you know that’s what I see when you come to the Lord’s Supper? Did you know that you’re confessing your hunger, thirst, and spiritual emptiness when you receive the body and blood of Jesus to eat and to drink? You’re saying that you’re not saintly but sinful and unclean. You’re saying you’ve failed to be saints, God’s holy people. You’re saying that appearances of saintliness aside, you’ve gone too far and you haven’t gone far enough all at the same time. We receive this meal because we are poor in spirit, powerless to conquer our own sin. We’re empty.

But to the Savior, your emptiness is your doorway to heaven. Not that there is something special about emptiness, but that those who see their emptiness look to the only One who is able to fill them. In the Savior, those who mourn will be comforted. The meek will inherit the earth. Those who long for righteousness will be satisfied. They are lowly now. They are empty now. They come now with nothing. But this is the doorway to heaven. “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” This isn’t uncertainty. This is confident hope.

So, the kingdom of heaven is yours today all over again. I don’t have to tell you that there are all kinds of things you still have to wait for. You don't have it all yet. You don’t see it all yet. But the Savior sees you and He calls you blessed. You already have the whole kingdom of heaven. That is confident hope in the Word of Jesus. And because of His Word, there will come a Day when you will actually see it all. You will see yourself and everyone else and the whole kingdom of heaven as they all really are. For now, it is enough to know that Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb. That’s your song today. You already have the kingdom of heaven. The uncertainty is gone. There is now confident hope.

How can you be so confidence and certain? Out of love for the empty God emptied Himself. The Creator became a creature. He emptied Himself again by spending time with the least saintly people around. He went around with lowlifes. He became a lowlife. He was betrayed, spit on, beaten, whipped, and then put up on a cross. He emptied Himself again and poured out His life. When you look at the Savior hanging on that cross, you’re looking at the doorway of heaven.
But God raises up the lowly and He raises up the Savior. Jesus lives. He lives triumphant from the grave; He lives eternally to save; He lives all-glorious in the sky; He lives exalted there on high. He lives and grants me daily breath; He lives, and I shall conquer death; He lives my mansion to prepare; He lives to bring me safely there. Uncertainty? No. Because He lives, we live. Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!

So, today, God gives us three things to see. We look up and see the saints above. We look around and see the saints below. And we see the Savior. He is the One who makes us all saints in the first place by His forgiveness. So, Jesus Himself connects those saints above and us saints below. He is the only doorway between heaven and earth, and between earth and heaven.

And today, He opens that door again and not in an invisible way. “Take, eat, my Body. Take, drink, my blood.” With confident hope you and I approach this table of the Lord. We come confessing our lowliness and our emptiness. But the Savior comes raising up the lowly and filling the empty. No uncertainty, here, only confident hope in the Savior.

But there is something else that happens here. With physical eyes we can see the saints below all around us, but we believe that we join with all the saints above, with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. Oh, blest communion, fellowship divine! We feebly struggle, they in glory shine; Yet all are one in Thee, for all are Thine. Alleluia! Look and see the doorway to heaven.

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.
Unshredable
Sermon on Revelation 14.6–7 for Reformation Day on October 31, 2021
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

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

Paper shredders. Maybe you have one. If you don’t, you can pay a company to shred your paper for you. But, either way, what kind of paper do you shred? It’s not the junk mail. It’s the paper with your social security number, your account number, or some other important information on it. It’s a little ironic, but we only shred the important stuff.

Did you know that there is a paper shredder in the Bible? It’s not a machine. It’s a person. It’s King Jehoiakim of Judah. Listen to Jeremiah 36.23: “As Jehudi read three or four columns [from the Scroll of Jeremiah], the king [Jehoiakim] would cut them off with a knife.” We only shred the important stuff. Jehoiakim shredded the written Word of God.

Behind King Jehoiakim, though, stands the Paper Shredder of this whole world. We know him by the names of Liar, Deceiver, Destroyer, Devil, Serpent, and Satan. Satan doesn’t want us to read, hear, understand, let alone trust and rejoice in God’s Word. Satan knows the power of God’s Word that created the universe from nothing. Satan knows the truth of God’s Word that negates all his lies. Satan knows the hope of God’s Word that promises eternal life as a free gift. Most of all, Satan knows the Word made flesh, our Savior. So, Satan shreds God’s Word whenever he can. He knows, maybe even more than we do, just how important God’s Word is, and he doesn’t want you near it.

Satan finds all kinds of ways to shred God’s Word. Here are a few examples.

God’s Word calls God “Creator.” Satan shreds that word “Creator” and pushes “big bang” or maybe “higher power” or even “intelligent design.” Notice that there is only One Who qualifies as the Creator of the heavens and the earth while Satan himself actually qualifies as a “higher power.” So, Satan puts himself in the place of God and shreds God’s Word to do it.

God’s Word calls us “human creatures.” Satan shreds that word “creature” because it implies a Creator and he pushes “autonomous individual,” someone flying solo, unhindered by relationships, subject to no one but “self.” So, Satan puts you in the place of God and shreds God’s Word to do it.

God’s Word calls humanity “male and female.” Satan shreds “male and female” and pushes “cisgender” for people whose “sexual orientation” happens to correspond with their biological sex. Satan shreds “male and female” and pushes “gender preference” regardless of what was “assigned at birth.” So, Satan puts self-chosen identities in place of God and shreds God’s Word to do it.

God’s Word calls “sin” what it is. Sin is unbelief. Sin is disobedience against God’s commandments. Sin is failing to conform to the will of God in any way. But Satan shreds the word “sin.” Why? Well, when it’s not “sin,” it’s untouchable and unchangeable. Without sin, people just are what they are. But when something is confessed as a sin, it’s not the end of the road. Ironically, it’s the end of the road if something is not confessed as a sin. But when sin is confessed to God as sin, God forgives. Then, it also becomes something He can change or turn us away from. God promises to forgive sin and to send His Spirit to fight sin in us, but that cannot and will not happen if we are not willing to call sin what it is. So, Satan puts our favorite sins in place of God and shreds God’s Word to do it.
God’s Word calls it “forgiveness,” but, along with “sin,” Satan shreds the word “forgiveness” and replaces it with something more palatable to our ears like “acceptance” or even “tolerance.” If you wonder what the difference is, acceptance doesn’t cost God anything but forgiveness cost God the death of His only Son. So, Satan puts our emotions in place of God and shreds God’s Word to do it.

As significant as those words are—Creator, creature, male, female, sin, forgiveness—Satan really aims to shred the Word of God in a more personal way. Satan doesn’t just seek to shred God’s Word in general. He wants to shred God’s specific Word to you so that he can shred your whole life.

Listen again to the Word we’ve heard today, but allow me to change the pronouns:

“God is my refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. . . . The LORD of hosts is with me; the God of Jacob is my fortress. . . . He says to me, ‘Be still, and know that I am [your] God’” (Psalm 46). God gives Himself as your God, here, and with Him comes heavenly peace and eternal security to you through these words. So, Satan wants to shred them before you can hear them or believe them. He says, maybe someone else is good enough for God to be a “very present help,” but you must not be good enough for God because He doesn’t seem to want to be “a very present help” for you.

Jesus says to me, “If I abide in His word, I am truly His disciple, and I will know the truth, and the truth will set me free. . . . [and] if the Son sets me free, I will be free indeed” (John 8). Jesus’ absolution frees absolutely from sin, death, and the power of the devil. So, Satan wants to shred that word before you can hear it or believe it. He wants you to believe his lie that you are a slave to exactly who you are and that no one, not even God, can set you free.

I confess with Paul, “[I] have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, but [I am] justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Romans 3). That simple, pure gift of righteousness by the blood of Jesus means everything. It means eternal life. So, Satan wants to shred it before you can hear it or believe it. It cannot be that simple. God does not hand out free gifts. He does what the rest of the world does: He justifies you based on your performance.

Finally, John tells me that there is “an eternal gospel” for every person on earth, every race, culture, language, and people (Revelation 14). It is good news from heaven to earth. It is good news straight from your Creator. We deserve His judgment. But His Son died to bring reconciliation and now lives to bring a new creation. That means hope for all people. So, wants to shred the eternal good news before anyone can hear it or believe it. He calls Christianity not a universal but a racial religion.

Martin Luther knew this world’s Paper Shredder. That’s why he held on so tightly to the written, spoken, and sacramental forms of the Word of God. And because of his commitment to the Word, Luther became the object of another paper shredder—the medieval Roman Catholic Church.

In 1517, an archbishop named Albert of Brandenburg was selling indulgences, pieces of paper purchased from the church to supposedly lessen people’s time in purgatory. Luther taught that indulgences were meaningless. If you want to shred something, shred those. When people began believing Luther instead of the church, Albert sought to shred God’s Word.

In July 1519, a debate was held in Leipzig, Germany. John Eck defended Rome’s position that people are saved, in large part, by what they do. Luther held on to salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, for Christ’s sake alone. After the debate, Pope Leo X excommunicated Luther. But Luther shredded his letter by throwing it in a fire. Leo quoted Psalm 80:13, “Arise, O Lord, a wild boar has invaded your vineyard.” He believed Luther was that wild boar, so, he sought to shred God’s Word.
On April 17, 1521, the Roman Catholic Church demanded that Luther recant. Luther asked for an evening to think about it. Then, on April 18, the reformer announced, “My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant!” He echoed 1 Peter 1.25: “The word of the Lord endures forever” (NIV). Rome responded by seeking to silence Luther and shred God’s Word.

Why is God’s written Word so important that so many have sought and continue to seek to shred it? The written Word of God gives Christ crucified for sinners to sinners. Christ crucified means every one of God’s promises in His Word are yours, simply because He has spoken them to you. Jesus is your refuge and strength. Jesus is with you. Jesus abides in you. Jesus has set you free. Jesus has justified you. Jesus has redeemed you. Jesus has an eternal gospel that He is speaking to you today, that God has overcome your sin and death and promised to you eternal life as His gift.

That free gift to you was not free to Jesus, however. The Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, gave Jesus over to professional shredders, Roman soldiers. They literally ripped Jesus up. They shredded His skin. And that was only the preparation for the biggest shredder ever built. Rome called the cross “the most vile death possible.” Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried.

But Jeremiah 36.32 says, “Then Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to Baruch . . . who wrote on it at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the scroll that Jehoiakim king of Judah had [shredded and] burned in the fire. And many similar words were added to them.” In other words, Jeremiah said, “Shred God’s Word and next time He’ll add to it!” God resurrected Jeremiah’s scroll and then some!

Jeremiah’s resurrected scroll pointed forward to another resurrected Scroll and then some! Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, shredded on the cross, rose again. He lives to be present with you and active for you, His Church. He lives to act by speaking His Word. In the Lutheran tradition, we call it by its Latin name, the viva vox evangelii, the living voice of the gospel. To you and for you, right now, in this place, Jesus lives to announce the forgiveness of all your sins, He lives to shower you with God’s grace, and He lives to rekindle your hope in your resurrection and your eternal life with Him in paradise. And wherever God’s Word is preached, heard, written, read, studied, memorized, believed, and received, Jesus, our risen and reigning Lord, is victorious over every satanic force that would try to destroy it and people who have it. That’s our prayer when we pray, “Thy Will be done.”

Luther said, “My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant.” The reformer took his stand on 1 Peter 1.25, “The word of the Lord endures forever” (NIV). Again, the Lutheran tradition latched onto the Latin: Verbum Dei Manet in Aeternum. VDMA. Luther and his followers sewed VDMA on their coat sleeves. Today, God puts VDMA on your heart, so that just as God’s Word is unshredable, so God’s people are unshredable, God’s Church is unshredable.

Today, we boldly confess, Verbum Dei Manet in Aeternum, the word of the Lord endures forever.

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.
Who is a true disciple of Jesus? Are you? Today we meet a true disciple of Jesus in Mark chapter ten.

Mark recounts Jesus acting mercifully and working miraculously to restore sight to a blind man. Mark even tells us his name, Bartimaeus. Jesus knows him by name. Jesus knows you by name. Jesus gives you His name so that you can call on Him personally and know for certain that He hears you.

What Jesus does for blind Bartimaeus is a story worth telling all on its own. But in the context of Mark’s Gospel, this miracle does not stand all alone. A few chapters earlier, Mark recounts another time when Jesus restored sight to another blind man. And these two sight-restoration-miracles work like bookends for Mark, the beginning and the ending of the central section of this Gospel.

We've already heard the account from Mark ten. Here’s the account from Mark eight: “And they came to Bethsaida. And some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him. And he took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, 'Do you see anything?' And he looked up and said, 'I see people, but they look like trees, walking.' Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. And he sent him to his home, saying, ‘Do not even enter the village.’” (Mark 8.22–26).

In many ways, these two stories are very similar. They’re both amazing events of healing for men who have been reduced to begging. But they are also slightly different. Their differences, in some ways, are the result of some important things that happen in the time between these two miracles. We’ll talk about that in a moment. For now, what we can say is that, together, these two events help us see that the true disciple of Jesus is the blind beggar who, by Jesus’ mercy, follows in His way.

There are actually three important things there. First, the true disciple is a blind beggar. Second, the true disciple receives Jesus’ mercy which gives sight. Third, the true disciple follows in Jesus’ way.

So, first, the true disciple is always first a blind beggar.

It shouldn’t surprise us that Mark highlights the healings of blind men. For one thing, blindness is evidence that this creation is fallen and Jesus came to restore this fallen creation. For another thing, the restoration of sight to the blind is a major sign of the Messiah’s coming in the Old Testament. Consider, for example, the promise in Isaiah thirty-five: “Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened” (Isaiah 35.4–5). So, the literal, physical reality of two blind men receiving their sight is extremely significant on its own. But, because Mark pairs these two miracles and uses them as bookends, he is pointing us not just to the physical reality of the restoration of sight but also he also invites us to see both blindness and the miracle of regaining sight as spiritual metaphors.

What is spiritual blindness? Just before the first healing, the disciples showed an amazing lack of understanding about Jesus when He fed the five thousand and the four thousand. At one point, Jesus asked them, “Although you have eyes, do you not see?” (8.18). How often might Jesus ask us the same question? After all Jesus has done, can we still not see Him as the King Who reigns over all things?
So, blindness can be both physical and spiritual. Because of that, Bartimaeus is not alone. All of us struggle with blindness. We have no choice but to beg with Bartimaeus: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me! Many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’” (10.47–48). The first point is this: The true disciples is always first a blind beggar. Let us not forget that and let us not fail to come to Jesus, begging for mercy.

Second, the true disciple receives Jesus’ mercy which gives sight.

Jesus loves to show mercy. Notice how He shows mercy to Bartimaeus immediately. Mercy is a matter of withholding what is deserved and instead giving what is not deserved. Mercy is the most basic prayer of God’s people. Psalm eight-six, for example: “But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Turn to me and be gracious to me; give your strength to your servant.” We echo this prayer almost every time we gather for worship in the words of the Kyrie Eleison, “Lord, have mercy.” He hears you. He has mercy on you.

And, as we saw before, Jesus’ mercy is not only the source of physical sight, but also the source of spiritual sight. Let’s go back to the comparison between these two miracles. In chapter eight, Jesus healed the blind man in two stages. At first, the man could only see vaguely. Then, after Jesus’ second touch, the man could see clearly. In chapter ten, Bartimaeus saw clearly immediately. The key to that difference is what happens in the time between these two healings. Between the two healings, Jesus predicts His passion and resurrection three times (8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34). What’s the point? Mark is telling us that the coming of God’s kingdom in Christ, the coming of the sight-restoring Messiah, can only be seen clearly in light of the cross and empty tomb.

In other words, what is the sight Jesus wants to give to you today? Is it the sight to see everything? No. Is it insight into His infinite mind? No. He wants you to see that His kingdom has come in Jesus in a very particular way for the purpose of your healing in both body and soul. After Jesus’ mercy caused Bartimaeus to see, Jesus said, “Your faith has healed you (that is, saved you)” (10.52). So, we see clearly when we believe that Jesus’ death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead has saved us and healed us. In that way, the true disciple receives Jesus’ mercy which gives true sight.

Third, and finally, the true disciple follows in Jesus’ way.

Bartimaeus’ healing shows us that after Jesus gives mercy, He calls us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him (8.34). In a very literal way, Bartimaeus did that with Jesus; he followed Him on the literal path that led to Jerusalem and the cross. In a similar way, we also follow Jesus as beggars, dependent on His mercy, on the road that will lead to our own sufferings. It might not be blindness, but we all experience the brokenness of this world. We get hurt. We get sick. We sin. We hurt others and we offend our merciful God. We cannot fix ourselves. We cannot fix so many of the problems all around us. We even show our spiritual blindness by grasping for control of little things to make ourselves feel more secure. But what this fallen creation really needs is full and final restoration. That is what Jesus has promised to mercifully provide on the Last Day. Until then, we follow Jesus to His cross because after the cross comes the restoration of resurrection, the new and endless life in His kingdom.

This is the sight Jesus gives us today. He opens our eyes so we can see Him clearly, the merciful King over all things. And in seeing Him clearly, we also see ourselves clearly. We are His true disciples.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.
Dependent Children of Our Good Heavenly Father
Sermon on Mark 10.23–31 for Pentecost 21B (Proper 24B) on October 17, 2021
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

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

The text for the sermon today is the gospel Lesson, from Mark ten. Last week, we heard what comes immediately beforehand: a man, a wealthy man, ran up to Jesus, knelt before Him, and asked what he must do to inherit eternal life. He did not understand that inheritance is not a matter of doing but a matter of being. He did not realize that Jesus' call was not a demand to achieve but an invitation to receive Him as Lord. He did not follow Jesus but went away with a heavy heart.

Heavenly Father, let that hardness of heart not happen today! Today, as we hear Your voice, soften our hearts to fear You more than anyone or anything, to love you more than anyone or anything, and to trust You more than anyone or anything. Let us be Your children. To that end, by Your Spirit, by the words of my mouth, and by the meditation of our hearts put away all things hurtful from us and give us those things that are beneficial for us, through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

"And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, 'Children'” (Mark 10.23–24a).

Children? Jesus calls his very capable and responsible adult disciples “children”? Yes. And how quickly we forget it. Only eight verses earlier, after Jesus lets the children come to Him and blesses them, He says, "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it” (10.15). And now, from within that reign and rule of God, Jesus calls his disciples “children.” That title is the heart of the whole thing. Are we or are we not children of God? We are. How do we know? God has baptized us. How do we now see life? We see it all in light of the fact that we have a good heavenly Father. How do we now live? We live by faith in Him, trusting that He, even at this very moment, is giving us all things beneficial for us, as a dearly loved child trusts his dearly loved father.

If we do live as children of a good heavenly Father today, God alone has made it possible. He has given us the Spirit of Jesus and He is working in us. If we do not live as children of a good heavenly Father today, we have made it impossible. We have in us the spirit of very capable and responsible adults in this world, the spirit of people with some means in this world, the impossible spirit of humanity is also working in us.

What must God do to do the impossible and make us His children? He must show us and teach us that we are dependent on Him. We are creatures of our Creator and “no creature is hidden from his sight” (Hebrews 4.13a). But we do not only depend on God for salvation on the Last Day. We depend on God at all times and in all places. But as responsible adults and people with some means, we have a hard time believing that everything depends on God. Surely, some of life depends on us.

With that mindset that life still depends on us to some degree, we join the disciples in Mark ten: “And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, ‘Then who can be saved?’” (Mark 10.26). In other words, if rich, capable, responsible adults cannot be saved, then who can? See, the assumption is that people who have money, property, and possessions are blessed by God. That’s true. Every good and perfect gift comes down from our heavenly Father. But the human spirit often takes it a step further and asserts the false belief that if someone has more than someone else, it is because
they are blessed by God more than someone else. In other words, rich people are blessed most by God. So, if the people blessed by God the most cannot be saved, then there’s no one who can be saved. The problem for the disciples and for us is that our material blessings and our fear of not having them, our love for them, and our trust in them, prevent us from being children, making it impossible for us to be saved because the only way to be saved is to be saved by God.

What must God do to do the impossible and make us His children who depend on Him for everything? He must break down our view of His blessings and raise up a new perspective in its place. For us, the last become first and the first become last in that those who have received an abundance of God’s material blessings are unable to confess their emptiness and the depth of their need while those who have not received an abundance of God’s material blessings are able to confess their emptiness and the depth of their need. So, if you know you are needy, you are blessed to know it. It is the gift of God. It is the impossible miracle of God. It is His blessed work to make you His beloved and dependent child.

How is God showing you your dependence on Him today? In what ways are you running on “E,” on empty? What do you not have that you think you so desperately need? It might not be money. It might be health. It might be peace and contentment. It might be joy. What is lacking? What is needed? How is God showing you your dependence on Him today? How is God teaching you to be His child and to trust that He is a good heavenly Father who will put away all things hurtful from you and give you all things beneficial for you?

Running on “E” refers to running on empty, but we could also think of it as running on Ecclesiastes. This beautiful and wise Old Testament reading is a living and active Word of God that cuts us both ways: it empties us in order to fill us; it brings us down in order to raise us up.

Two ways of life are depicted, here: the never-ending hamster wheel versus the wings of an eagle soaring above it all. Life on the never-ending hamster wheel is always grinding, striving, exhausting, and never arriving. That’s how it is with the endless pursuit of possessions. That’s how it is when we depend on ourselves in any way. We work ourselves to death and we get nothing for it. We die as naked as we are born. The whole thing is empty. It’s vain. We cannot find contentment in things. In fact, more money means more problems. That is life as capable, responsible adults in this world.

Oh, but there is another way to live. How different is life on the wings of an eagle? The eagle with its outstretched wings is always gliding, soaring, exhilarating. The movement is effortless, carried by wind. That is life as a child of the heavenly Father. We are like infants carried in His arms.

“Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God. For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart” (Ecclesiastes 5.18–20).

The wisdom, here, is faith in our good, heavenly Father. Faith in Him brings enjoyment in this short life, even in the toil, because it accepts everything as a gift from God. Faith doesn’t fight it. Faith accepts, that is, receives the lot God gives to us as a gift. More than that, faith stops striving after empty things so that the Father might actually fill our hearts with joy to know that we are not on a hamster wheel but soaring on wings and carried by Him. That is the rest we enter by faith. And it truly is a miracle when someone lives by faith. Today, God is working that very miracle in you.
“Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.’ And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, ‘Then who can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God’” (Mark 10.24–27).

Children are fully needful, but adults, full up on and loaded down with all the capabilities, responsibilities, and possessions cannot fit through the narrow door, just like a full tank cannot possibly receive a filling. But receiving is the issue. As far as man is concerned, receiving is impossible. But as far as God is concerned, people can be rescued not only from the hamster-wheel but also from eternal damnation in hell, far from Him. It happens when God gives Himself to us as the good heavenly Father and when we receive Him and believe that we are His beloved children. Today, God is giving Himself again and you are again receiving and believing Him.

“Peter began to say to him, ‘See, we have left everything and followed you’” (Mark 10.28).

Adult Peter, still puzzling over being a child that is totally dependent on what God does, wonders, then, if what he and the rest of the disciples have done for Jesus counts for anything.

Jesus said, ‘Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first’” (Mark 10.24–31).

The first part of Jesus’ response to Peter is a promise. The second part is a rebuke. The promise is that children of the heavenly Father will be provided for both now and in the age to come. Through Christ and by the Spirit, they have been brought under the reign and rule of God already now and already now they have eternal life with Him as a gift as a result of what He has done by Christ’s death and resurrection. If God has done that, He will do everything else. So, the promise is that God will provide for His children completely and eternally. The rebuke is that Peter and all of Jesus’ disciples, including us, need to stop worrying about the reward and start worrying about receiving God Himself. Jesus’ disciples also need to stop worrying about their status in relation to other disciples and start worrying about their faithfulness in relation to God. God has His own way of deciding our status in His kingdom. Like everything, leave it Him. We’re tempted to think we know better. Faith trusts that your good heavenly Father knows exactly what He is doing.

Today, God is doing what is impossible, as far as we are concerned. He’s emptying us in order to fill us. He’s blessing us with lives that show us and teach us our need for Him. He’s giving us faith in His promise to be our heavenly Father. He’s teaching us to live life within His reign and rule. He’s doing a miracle today and He’s making you His dependent child. You would never let it happen if it were up to you. Only God is able to overcome your idolatry. Only God is able to bring you to your knees. Only God is able to empty you. But only God is able to fill you. Only God is able to accomplish salvation for you. Only God, the Father of your Lord Jesus Christ, is able to give His Son so freely as your Savior. Christ lives the life of faith today and it is His faithfulness that saves you, His poverty that enriches you, His death that gives you life, His living Word that calls you today, gives you His Spirit, changes your perspective, conforms you to Himself, and makes you His child all over again.

Heavenly Father, it is Your voice that we hear today. Soften our hearts to fear You more than anyone or anything, to love you more than anyone or anything, and to trust You more than anyone or anything. Empty us that we might be filled with joy. Make us needy that we might receive You again. Put away all things hurtful from us and give us those things that are beneficial for us. Amen.
You Are Loved by Jesus
Sermon on Mark 10.17–22 for Pentecost 20 (Proper 23B) on October 10, 2021
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

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

A Man
Mark chapter ten: “And as [Jesus] was setting out on His journey” there was a man (10.17). Who is this man? What kind of person is he? Well, let’s look at what he does.

He runs up to Jesus. This is a driven and passionate man, a man on a mission. But for what?
He kneels before Jesus. This man is appropriate, polite, educated, and pious. He is religious.
He calls Jesus, “Good.” He does and says the right thing but what is happening in his heart?
He calls Jesus, “Teacher.” He’s not wrong, but is that all Jesus is?
He wants to do something to inherit something. So, he doesn’t realize how an inheritance works!
He wants to inherit eternal life. Well, who doesn’t? But what are his reasons?
In any case, he has not kept and is not keeping all of God’s commandments in relation to others. Has he?
Finally, he does not follow Jesus into joy, but walks away from Him into sorrow.

Can we know who this man truly is based on what he does? Is this all we can say about him? What if there is more to who we are than what we do or do not do?

Notice how Jesus sees this man. He does not define him based on what he has done or might do.
This man, in spite of his words and actions, in spite of his pride and confusion, is a man loved by Jesus. “And Jesus, looking at him, loved him” (10.20). Jesus loved him. Jesus didn’t love his pedigree or his wealth or his manners or his religious etiquette or his morality. Jesus didn’t love his accomplishments or his commandment keeping, past or potential. Jesus loved him.

So, that’s the issue, here. Who is this man? Is he self-made or is He loved by Jesus?

How about you? Who are you? Are you a self-made person or a person loved by Jesus?

You are a person loved by Jesus. He loves you, not something about you, past or potential.
You are a baptized child of the heavenly Father.
You are a treasured possession of the God who made you.
You are an heir of heaven.
You are a citizen of the eternal kingdom of God.
You are a subject of Christ’s righteous rule and reign.
You are a follower of Jesus.

But if that’s the case and if you know all that, why do you still live like your identity is up to you?
You still live as if you are what you do or what you do not do. You still live as if it’s up to you to create and maintain who you really are as your daily life presses you do be a certain kind of person.

This man represents all of us. His identity is in question and he doesn’t even know it. He wants to be good and he believes it is up to him to become good enough. He disguises all this as a pious desire to reach heaven. But heaven isn’t an achievement. Heaven is an inheritance to certain kinds of people.
**The Man**

In contrast to this man who is uncertain about who he is and wants to base who he is on what he does, there is another man, the Man, Jesus of Nazareth. They face each other in Mark ten as one instance of the way every person must come face-to-face with Jesus.

The man who does not know who he is runs to the meeting. Jesus, however, is not franticly running but calming walking because He knows exactly Who He is, the Son of God and our Savior. We know Jesus was walking because Mark tells us, “He was setting out on His journey” (10.17). What journey?

Jesus is on a journey from heaven to earth and from earth to heaven. He is the Son of God, so His journey is from God to man to bring God to man. He is also the Son of Man, so His journey is from man to God to bring man to God. He is “of one substance with the Father” and He “was made man.” He “came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10.45).

In other words, the journey of Jesus, the coming of Jesus from heaven to earth changes everything. We thought it was our doing that makes us who we are. Jesus reverses it completely. He makes us who we are first and from that identity in Him, as a result of the fact that He makes us to be certain kind of people, we then do in accordance with who we are.

Jesus comes not to teach us some new doctrine, but to give us new hearts and minds. Jesus comes not to teach us some new morality, but to give us a new identity. Jesus comes not to train us to be certain kinds of people, but to make us new people. He does all of that by being a certain kind of person Himself, not to show the way but to be the Way. Jesus comes not to point to heaven as a goal but to bring heaven itself right down here as a gift.

**Follow Me**

Because of Who He is, Jesus says to this man that He loves, “Come, follow Me” (10.21). Just as Jesus did not love something about the man, but actually loved the man himself, so Jesus does not call this man to follow something about Him, like His teaching or His example, but to simply “follow Me.”

Being a Christian person is not, first and foremost, following teachings or ideas. Being a Christian person is, first and foremost, following the Person of Jesus.

There are a lot of ways to play “follow the leader” in this world. Most are no good. In fact, all of them lead nowhere except for one. It all comes down to Who the Leader is, what kind of person He is. Can you trust Him? Will He actually lead you or not? And if it comes down to what kind of person He is, then being one of His followers really comes down to what kind of person you are.

You are a person loved by Jesus.
You are a baptized child of the heavenly Father.
You are a treasured possession of the God who made you.
You are an heir of heaven.
You are a citizen of the eternal kingdom of God.
You are a subject of Christ’s righteous rule and reign.
You are a follower of Jesus.

It was because Jesus loved this man that Jesus called Him to follow Him. And that was a call for that man to let go of trying to achieve something and instead receive something; to let go of trying to create his own identity and let Jesus make him who he is; to let go of trying to be the leader and to simply be a follower of Jesus. Jesus calls you in the same way today (Psalm 95; Hebrews 3.13, 15).
When Jesus calls you to follow Him, He exposes your moralism as a dead end. He calls you to get off that path of trying to create who you are by what you do or do not do. What you do does not make you who you are. What you do comes from who you are. First, He makes you who we are, a person loved by Him, an heir of heaven. That, then, is the source of your ability to do what He desires. First, the good tree. Then, the good fruit. It's not the other way around.

And this is exactly how inheritance works. It works because of who you are not because of what you do or do not do or might do. This is what that uncertain and sorrowful man did not yet understand. This is what we so often do not understand. Your identity is not something you attain. You are not good or evil because you do good or evil. In fact, apart from the coming of Jesus, we can only be evil because we are all born enemies of God. But Jesus comes to give us a new identity through Baptism as children of the Father and heirs of heaven. As it is with our identity, so it is with heaven. Heaven is not something to attain, a goal that is up there or out there for you to achieve. Heaven is an inheritance given to heirs and you are an heir of heaven because Jesus has made you one, a child of God through Baptism. Through Baptism, Jesus has made you to be certain kinds of people.

**Being Followers**

We are followers. The world might wonder how you can really be someone if you are just a follower. The key really is the identity of the Leader. When we're on a journey, as Jesus was on a journey in Mark ten, we tend to focus on the destination. In our case, Jesus is the Leader and we believe that our destination is heaven with Him. But if that is the picture in our minds, we actually have it backwards, just like the man in Mark ten. The truth is that Jesus has journeyed to bring heaven to earth. He's brought heaven to you. The destination has already arrived. What's the goal of the journey, then? The goal of this journey the Church is on is to be certain kinds of people. The goal is living from the identity God has given you. If it's up to you to determine the destination, there will always a big question hanging over your life. But God has already brought the destination to you.

You are a person loved by Jesus.
You are a baptized child of the Father.
You are a treasured possession of the God who made you.
You are an heir of heaven.
You are a citizen of the eternal kingdom of God.
You are a subject of Christ’s righteous rule and reign.
You are a follower of Jesus.

We pray it all the time in the Lord’s Prayer: “and lead us.” So, you follow His leading. But to what end? Heaven someday? Yes, but also being certain kinds of people today, namely, followers of Jesus.

Jesus’ followers fear, love, and trust in God above all things.
Jesus’ followers trust the identity God gives them.
Jesus’ followers live their lives along with that identity not against it.
Jesus’ followers do not love their money or their stuff more than God.
Jesus’ followers do not love their money or their stuff more than other people.
Jesus’ followers love God with all they are and they love their neighbors as themselves.
Jesus’ followers do as God commands not to become loved but because they are loved by Him.

You are this kind of people. You are followers of Jesus. Jesus has journeyed to bring heaven to you and today the journey of being His people is beginning again at this very point where He is arriving.

*In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*
Love One Another Earnestly from a Pure Heart
Sermon on 1 Peter 1.22 for LWML Sunday on October 3, 2021
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin
Based on a Sermon by Dr. Dale A. Meyer

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

So, why did you come to church today? Why did you come to this church today? Did the option of no church cross your mind? Did the option of another church cross your mind?

You know that there are options. Lots of options. You could attend a lot of different churches today. Most of the churches you pass when you drive around the area invite you to do that. But I would have a hard time doing that. I would have my guard up, especially if I went by myself. It might be different if I knew someone there. I might be willing to go with someone I respect and trust.

The people are not the whole answer to the question of why you come to this church. But the people are part of the answer. An important reason why you’re here is this group, right here.

Today we are highlighting the people and the work of the Lutheran Women’s Missionary League. An important part of what they do is sponsor mission efforts that reach around the world with mites, small offerings that help more and more people hear and believe the Good News of Jesus. The theme for today is from our Epistle Lesson, 1 Peter 1.22: “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart.”

Picture a heart, a literal, blood-pumping heart. And then picture that literal heart in a literal hand. This is the picture of a transplant surgeon. That surgeon literally takes out a diseased heart with his hand and puts in a completely different, healthy heart. That’s a little more graphic than the graphic on the front of your bulletin, but that’s the image for today.

What a transplant surgeon does in a physical way is what God has done to you in a spiritual way. If you look at the picture on the bulletin cover, there is not just a heart but also a cross and a drop of water. The cross represents Jesus’ death for you and the forgiveness of your sins. The drop of water represents Baptism. Baptism is our participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Read Romans 6. Baptism is, as I said last week, God’s declaration of war on our old nature and His invasion of that nature with a new nature. Baptism is God’s operation when He gave you a new heart, a pure heart with all the gifts and benefits of Jesus’ death and resurrection. This is exactly what God promised through Ezekiel, “I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you,” (Ezekiel 36.26). God has kept that promise and He has fulfilled it in you. And unlike a physical heart transplant, the new heart God gave you through Baptism will last forever.

Why is the gift of a new heart such good news? It is so good because I know that my heart is so bad. Doctors use scans, scopes, and cameras to look inside our bodies. But what if the people around us could do that with our souls? What if people could look at us and see all the thoughts and feelings and ideas and desires of our hearts? All of us would be absolutely ashamed. I would be ashamed. Our hearts are not pure. Our hearts are diseased from birth. Our hearts daily show symptoms of that disease in many and various ways. We might hide it all pretty well from people, but God is the Great Physician of our souls. “No creature is hidden from his His sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Hebrews 4.13). That account is an account of sin. That’s a story that will continue until we die. Only when we die do we finally stop sinning.
But the mystery of Baptism is that even as that old story continues, Jesus gives you a new story, another account of who you really are. Yes, you are a sinner. This is most certainly true. But, at the same time, Baptism gives you a new identity, story, and account in Christ. Baptism gives you the forgiveness of Jesus here-and-now so that you are not just a sinner but a forgiven sinner and, with that new identity, Baptism gives you grace to live a new and holy life here-and-now.

This is why Baptism is often described as a new birth. St. Peter describes it that way a few verses before our Epistle Lesson for today. He says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3). That new birth happened once at Baptism, but God brings the effects of that new birth out in you in new ways every day. When a surgeon transplants a human heart, new physical life comes to a dying patient. When God gives you a new heart, a clean heart, a pure heart, the new spiritual life that follows is a life of love.

“Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart” (1 Peter 1.22).

What does Peter mean by “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth”? That sounds like you make yourself pure by keeping God’s commandments. That is not what Peter means. Instead, that phrase “obedience to the truth” should be understood as faith in the person of Jesus, who is the Truth. Faith in Him purifies our hearts because faith receives and believes His promise of forgiveness. Being pure before God is not something we can do. It’s God’s gift. “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2.8).

What, then, does Peter mean by saying that faith is for a “sincere brotherly love”? That does not refer only to men, but both men and women who believe in Jesus and share a familial relationship with Him and His Church. Peter’s point is that new hearts purified by faith in Jesus live by loving others. Notice how that image on the bulletin cover actually has two hearts. Your heart is the littler one. Jesus’ heart is the bigger one. Without His love, our love will fail. But as the Church, it is not our love we share, but His love. And that means that this place, His Church, is a big-hearted place, a Christ-hearted place, where our hearts are held together by His strong, love-scarred, and living hand.

Why come to this church? The answer is that God has brought us together by His Holy Spirit. He has called us each to faith and new life through Baptism, but He has also gathered us together and holds us as one in His loving hand. COVID helps us see how important and beautiful it is to be able to come together. And when we do, God gives us new hearts designed to love. Our new hearts need others in order to live out the new life Christ gives. So, we gather together to hear God’s Word and receive His gifts for ourselves and for life with each other. Here in this big-hearted place, God gives us opportunity to “love one another earnestly from a pure heart” as He holds us together in His hand.

But Jesus’ hand has room for more hearts and He is reaching out all the time. When a leper met Jesus and begged to be healed, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him (Mark 1.41). When Jairus’s daughter died, Jesus took her “by the hand and said to her, ‘Talitha cumi,’ which means, ‘Little girl, I say to you, arise’” and she had new life (Mark 5.41). When Peter tried to walk to Jesus on the water, he got scared and began to sink. Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him (Matthew 14.31). He took them [the little children] in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them (Mark 10.16). Today He is reaching out His hand through you and me to people who don’t yet know His life and love, people who have spiritually diseased hearts and desperately need the new heart only Jesus gives. God has you in all kinds of different places outside of this church and, with your new, purified heart, He is reaching out His hand to love others through you.
After the sermon, all of us are going to recite the LWML pledge together. The heart of that pledge is this phrase, “fervent gratitude for the Savior’s dying love and His blood-bought gift of redemption.” Said another way, our hearts are in His hand. From that foundation comes the rest of the pledge; all the love and service and generous gifts that now define our new lives in Christ. May that pledge be the case for the women of the LWML and for all of us.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, You have operated on us through Baptism. You have given us each new, clean, and pure hearts through the blood of Jesus. You have also gathered us as Your Church and You now hold all of us together in Your hand. Fill our hearts with Your love for others. Make us big-hearted people and a big-hearted church. Use us to extend Your hand to many others. Finally, let Your Word be fulfilled in us: "Above all, keep loving one another earnestly (1 Peter 4.8).

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.
Today, the Word of God pulls back the curtain and shows us that we are at war. We can see battles all the time: the US versus China, conservatives versus liberals, Western civilization versus anarchy, older generations versus younger generations, and Church versus world. But none of these visible battles with clear battle lines are the underlying war God's Word reveals.

God's Word reveals a war that is not being waged out there in our culture or out there in the world. Instead, God's Word shows us that this war is in us. When we were baptized, God brought that war right to our souls. He declared war on our old nature and invaded our old nature with a new one. Now, the real battle lines are drawn right through the middle of our souls. Our old nature battles on the side of Satan and his evil angels. Our new nature battles on the side of God and His good angels. And like all war, it's not pretty. Paul describes this battle so well when he says, "the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do" (Galatians 5.17) and, in another place, "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do" (Romans 7.15). So, what is this war about? It's about souls in relation to God.

The good news God's Word reveals today is that while we are in this war and this war is in us, we are not alone. God and His angels fight for us and Revelation twelve is very clear that God and His angels have already definitively won this war in heaven, even though the battles continue on earth. Today, we'll consider the two sides of the conflict. First, the foes and their tactics. Then, the friends and their tactics.

First, who is our enemy? The temptation for us is find the foe in a human individual or a human group or a human entity or a human institution. But the human soul is the battleground. So, there are forces beyond and behind and beneath what we can see, so we should not assume to know exactly what's going on. We know the enemy is there, but what can we know from Revelation 12?

One name God's Word gives our enemy is "the great dragon" (12.7–9). A dragon symbolizes hidden, unknown qualities combined with overwhelming, deadly power. So, the dragon uses disguises and lies to fill people with fear in relation to God. How does this dragon use fear to makes you question or lose faith in your heavenly Father? Then again, God uses this dragon's overwhelming, deadly power to call us back to faith not in our own heroic abilities, but in our Champion, Jesus Christ.

Another name God's Word gives our enemy is "that ancient serpent" (12.9). That verse unmasks the serpent from the Garden of Eden who slithered in to question God's Word: "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?” (Genesis 3.1). He tricked Adam and Eve into serving him instead of God, and he tries to do the same to us using whatever disguise is most effective.

A third name God's Word gives our enemy is "the devil" (12.9, 12). In the original Greek, the term is diabolos, that is, "accuser" (12.10). His main job is to use our sin to accuse us before God so that God will condemn us or at least so that we will condemn ourselves before God. He is like a spiritual bully who tricks you into sinning and then laughs at you and tells everyone about how bad you are. He is the source of evil who feels better if he can accuse others of sharing that evil.
Finally, the Word of God gives our enemy the name "Satan" (12.9). He’s “the adversary.” But he wants to hide that. He doesn’t want you to know that his goal is to destroy you spiritually. But He does want that so he tries to pull you from faith in God, God’s Champion, God’s angels, and God’s victory. That’s his goal with you and with every other soul in this world.

The enemy’s names already give us a lot about his tactics, but I have two addition thoughts. First, he wants to lead you away from God. He doesn’t care where he leads you—just so it is away from God, out from under His rule and reign. If he can’t make you feel so bad about yourself that you don’t deserve God’s love, then he will make you feel so good about yourself that you don’t need that love. If he can’t make you despair, he will make you proud. If he can’t make you hate others, he will make you love them as idols. His goal is to get you away from God at all costs. Second, he accuses you on the battlefield of your conscience. He wants to tell God how bad you are and he wants you to believe that God’s condemnation is His last word for you.

We’ve discussed our foe. Let’s discuss our Friend. God’s Word is clear: “Now has come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ” (12.10). Our Friend is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus shows His friendship with us first by letting go of His authority as God and putting limits on Himself as man. He did not stand at a distance, outside of the battle, and tell us what to do to win it. He stepped into the battle between God and Satan over human souls and He gave His life for us, that is, in our place. When He rose from the dead, He rose victoriously. The war ended right then and there on Easter morning. Now, it’s just a matter of that message spreading to the ends of the earth. When Jesus rose, all authority in heaven and on earth was given to Him. Now, His name is above every name and every knee will bow. Now, His authority is His gift to us.

Think about this. Satan only has two weapons against you: sin and death. When he accuses you of sin, the authority of Jesus says, “You are forgiven.” When Satan says you will die, the authority of Jesus says, “You will rise.” “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31b). God is for you and you know that because of His promises in Christ. So, your best defensive weapon in the battle against evil is confident trust in Jesus Christ and His promises for forgiveness, life, and salvation.

But there is more. God’s Word reveals that the archangel Michael and all the angels also fight against Satan and all his demons. We are saved by Jesus, not by angels. But God uses the angels to help carry out the ministry of Christ. Jesus says, “I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15.10). The Scripture says, “Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?” (Hebrews 1.1). Beyond that, the Bible is filled with stories of angels guarding and protecting people and you can know, from Psalm 91, that God also sends angels to be with you in the battle between good and evil.

So, God’s Word reveals the war, the foe, the Friend, the tactics, and the final victory. So what? So today you can have peace and joy in the middle of this messy war.

What about joy? Well, the angels exist, in party, simply to praise God and celebrate His victory. “Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them” (12.12a). So, whenever you and the rest of God’s Church on earth sing God’s praise for Who He is and what He does, you join the angles and the archangels and all the company of heaven in the heavenly song celebrating Christ’s victory over sin, death, and the devil. In fact, we sang that song today: “This is the feast of victory for our God. Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.” Lord, give us joy today in your victory that we may join the angels in their never ending song of praise.
What about peace? What kind of beings are these angels? Angels are not cute, chubby babies. Angels are not very special people in our lives. Angels are not what we turn into after we die because humans are humans and angels are angels. Instead, the angels are spiritual creatures God made to exist without a physical body. Humans have both a soul and a body. Angels are only spirits. But sometimes, God lets human eyes see invisible angels. And every time that happens in the Bible, people are afraid. And every time a human creature is afraid of an angel in the Bible, they say, “Fear not!” Why are people afraid of angels? Because angels are warriors that God sends to fight for us. This is good news. It’s good news that angels are fearsome warriors. God’s enemies are also very scary. I don’t watch horror movies because they’re too real! But God uses His powerful angels to protect us and fight for us and this is a source of peace. “God will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways” (Psalm 91.11). They may not stop every bad thing from happening, but they do stop bad things from happening every day. More than we know. So, in what way do they guard you in all your ways? They guard your heart. The devil wants you to stop trusting in God, that He loves you, and that He is your heavenly Father. God sends angels to protect you so you can keep trusting in God. God knows that we’re not strong enough to fight the devil alone. So, He doesn’t leave us all alone. God commands His angels and this is a source of peace.

So, you cannot stand back today and watch and comment about a war with clear battle lines out there somewhere. The lines are drawn right through the middle of your soul. God has brought the war to you, invaded your old nature with a new one in Baptism. On your own, you do not have what it takes to fight and win. But God sent His Son to win the victory for you and He still sends His holy angels to fight with you. You cannot know all that these angels have done to protect you, but you can know that they are there and that they’re powerful. In light of this, you have an amazing situation. In the midst of this messy war, you can actually have peace and joy. We are those children who simply know that while this world is very scary the heavenly Father is with us.

_In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen._