

FROM His Fullness
We Have Received



A Lenten Devotion on Spirituality

Based upon the book

“Grace Upon Grace: Spirituality for Today”

By Dr. John Kleinig



www.steadfastlutherans.org/parish

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A Lenten Devotion

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More information on the book which these devotions follow:

“Grace Upon Grace: Spirituality for Today” by John Kleinig

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The Resurrection of Our Lord

Easter Sunday

March 27, 2016

Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20:28-29)

Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed, Alleluia! Today is the day we hear the Word of Christ about His victory over death. When He said "It is Finished." He meant it. His Word and Work is trustworthy and certain.

That said, we don't see it. Christ defeated death, but it still darkens our lives, creating sorrow and much anxiety. Christ forgives sin, but we continue to struggle. Christ gives holiness, but we just don't manage to see it in our lives.

This is an exercise in your spirituality, similar to the struggle of Thomas. Do you go by what you see, or by what you have heard? Christ has spoken about you. You have been baptized into His death and resurrection. You are in Him. You are holy and set apart, a treasured possession of the One who conquered death.

As that treasured possession you live out the life God has given you. The devil sees your reality better than you do, that is why he attacks and accuses. Often times folks will see it too, even though you may not. Even at the Last Day Christians will not fully understand just how much good God had done through them. From what we receive, we live, bearing Christ in the world around us.

Live by faith in what God has said about Christ and about what Christ has done for you. He is the root of your spirituality and He will also grow the fruit of it as well. Your spiritual life is rooted in the reception of the grace of God in Christ Jesus.

Lord Jesus Christ, in Your resurrection You show Yourself to be victorious over all things, even death. Help me to live my Christian life by faith and not by sight. Help me to always stay connected to the way in which You bless us today, the Word and Sacraments that I may bear Your name in my daily life. Amen.

*For the
Evangelical Lutheran Church
wherever she may be found*

And for the Glory of God

Lent — A time for Spirituality

For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. John 1:16

Lent is a season of repentance. This means the hearing of the Law and our sin. It also means an emphasis on denying the flesh, which some people exercise during Lent by “giving things up”. This Lenten devotion will be focusing on spirituality. It is a pretty popular Word nowadays, but it largely has to do with a regimen of works and often is very self-centered. The spirituality you will hear about in this devotion will be about receptive spirituality, that is a spirituality that is founded upon what we receive from God first and foremost.

We are going to read about how the Mystery of Christ is the beginning of our Spirituality. We receive from Him everything we have, most especially our spiritual life. We are going to read about what He uses to make us spiritual people — three things — meditation, prayer, and temptation (struggle).

First Christ makes us spiritual through meditation. This is not some sort of eastern mystical or western philosophical exercise. Meditation is chewing on the Word of God, over and over. It is letting the Word of God dwell in you richly, for that Word of God is the root of all Christian Spirituality. So Meditation is the hearing, repeating, reading, listening, and study of the Word of God. God the Holy Spirit uses this Word to make us spiritual.

We also become spiritual through prayer. This is not the self-help prayers that so much of our culture tries to embrace. It is prayer rooted in the fruit of Meditation, the Word of God. It is prayer that is to the Father through the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a constant failure to do it properly and looking to Christ for forgiveness and renewal in our spiritual lives. It is the voice of faith.

Lastly, God uses a struggle to make us spiritual. Face it, in mystic meditation and spirituality there is just no “reality” to it. It’s pie in the sky stuff. Christian spirituality takes Meditation and Prayer and places it into real life in a fallen world. There is going to be struggle with the world around you, and even more there will be deep struggle within you. It is this struggle which draws you closer to Christ, Who is your only strength and victory.

Holy Saturday

March 26, 2016

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (Romans 12:1)

The life of a Christian is a holy one of sacrifice, of making offering to the Triune God who has created, redeemed, and sanctified the Christian. This life is the one He gives you in your day to day vocations, or callings. These callings are holy things, given by God. Each vocation present opportunities for “offerings”.

Each of these offerings has their root in Christ and what He has done. As we celebrate His rest in the tomb on this holy day, we remember how His work for our salvation comes to us and how we bear that into the world.

We make offerings of hospitality, receiving the greatest feast of hospitality in the Lord’s Supper. From that Supper we go out into the world around us with Christ in us, His forgiveness covering our sins, His gift of faith strengthened, and our love for others strengthened by this gift of His love for us.

This love brings us to the offering of holy callings. The vocations previously mentioned render service to God through the neighbor. The neighbor is not the end of these offerings, but God is. Through our neighbors, God exercises us in righteous living and makes us a living sacrifice unto Him.

The last offering is that of holy spirituality. Much of this devotion has focused on this. This is receptive spirituality, receiving from Christ everything we need for spiritual living. Holiness — from Christ. Righteousness — from Christ. These things come to us in Word and Sacrament. Hearing the Word and receiving the Sacrament of the Altar as a baptized child of God is a holy way, a holy life lived in the Way of Christ. In these receive from His hand grace upon grace.

*Lord Jesus Christ, by Your grace make me a living sacrifice to Your glory.
Amen.*

Good Friday

March 25, 2016

Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. (John 17:17)

The Small Catechism divides the church into two types of members, preachers and hearers. Hearing is an extremely important part of Christian spirituality. Not just any hearing, but hearing the Word of God. This includes everything that is spoken or written that is in agreement with the Word of God as well.

It's a little bit boring to think that Words are so important. In our every-day life words seem to have less and less meaning as the years go by, but in the Church the Word has always been and will always be primary. The Word makes things holy (1 Tim 4:4-5). Its what makes baptism "Holy Baptism". It is what makes communion "Holy Communion". Without the Word, it's just water or bread and wine. But with the Word we have exactly what the Word says about these great and precious gifts of God.

This is not just limited to the things in the Church and her services, but it includes your daily lives as well. Those things are made holy by the Word of God. Family, government, employment all are set up as holy works because God's Word sets them up that way. Each day is a day to be made holy by the Word of God and prayer.

Today, Good Friday, is "good" because of what we hear the Word of God say to us about today. Today, our Lord Jesus Christ was crucified, died, and was buried. Today, the fully sacrifice of the Lamb of God was accomplished in order that sins would be forgiven and that sinners could be reckoned as saints by faith in Christ. The day is not about re-enacting the drama or having the right emotions, it is like other days – a day meant for the hearing of God's Word. Reenactments and so forth cannot make holy, but God's Word can and does make holy. So go to church today and hear the Word of the Lord, the Word of Christ crucified for you and for your salvation.

*Lord Jesus Christ help me to cherish Your Word
and gladly hear and learn it. Remind me to make each day holy
by including Your Word in it. Help me this day to faithfully hear the Word
about how you love us in being crucified for us. Amen.*

This Lent promises to show you how Christian Spirituality actually looks. It is a spirituality that is receptive, receiving from Christ. It is a Spirituality that is never divorced from Jesus or His Word. It is a Spirituality which fits into the reality that we live in, not one that requires us to live in an imaginary world around us believing lies about ourselves and who we are.

Come and be a part of the services, use the devotion. If you are really interested read the book that all of this is based upon. For we have received grace upon grace.

Blessed Lent,

Rev. Joshua Scheer

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These devotions were designed to be read with "Grace upon Grace: Spirituality for Today"

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Maundy Thursday

March 24, 2016

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you. (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8)

Holiness is a troubling thing for sinners. God is holy. Christ is holy. We are not in and of ourselves holy. God declares us righteous when we believe that for Christ's sake He has forgiven our sins. That is where our holiness comes from. It is not ours, but Christ's. We receive it by faith in Him.

This is the key to the Christian spiritual life. We receive from God in the ways that He comes to us. So we go to church, hear His Word, eat and drink Christ's Body and Blood. We have daily devotions using the Word of God. We pray on the basis of that same Word of God. This is the holy way that God has given to us in our baptism. But we will never make a holiness for ourselves. Holiness is much deeper than works or morals. The holiness we have is Christ's, a mystery to us, but something we have because we receive it from God.

Today is Maundy Thursday. Tonight no doubt there will be services to celebrate this day of Holy Week, the night when our Lord Jesus Christ was betrayed, the night when we remember and hopefully receive the new Passover, immensely more important than any once a year Jewish feast — the New Testament of Jesus in His blood. Tonight, your spirituality will be fed. Christ's holiness will be delivered to you.

Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for being holy. Help me to share in Your holiness by ever believing in You. Prepare me to hear Your Word and receive the Sacrament of the Altar this night. Amen.

Holy Wednesday

March 23, 2016

*Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil,
and he will flee from you. (James 4:7)*

That verse sums up spiritual warfare nicely. The problem of course nice doesn't mean neat. The struggles, the temptations we face as Christians are both simple and complex, easy and hard. This of course if because we carry along with our new Man created in baptism the Old Adam, corrupted by Sin and bent on all sorts of evil.

“Resist” is a rather passive way to describe battle, because of course as you have heard throughout the devotion of our passive or receptive spirituality. Resisting the devil does have some doing, but it isn't maybe as glorious as our Old Adam would like.

We resist the devil each day of our lives. We resist by attending Divine Service faithfully. Christ fights for us there and feeds us there as well. There we receive refreshment for the week to come. We resist the devil in daily devotions. The Word of God and prayer sanctify our days. We resist the devil by trusting God's grace and living in it. God's grace is a remedy for the devil's accusations. We resist by living under Christ's authority. His authority is plain in all of our vocations. We resist the devil by praying, especially by praying the Lord's Prayer and letting it shape our other prayers. We pray for ourselves and for others in their vocations as well, especially those who are prime targets for the devil.

In all of these things that we can do, it is important to know that God is the one working through it all. His Spirit motivates our new Man born of water and the Same Spirit to do all sorts of good, including the good work of resisting the devil. We resist in the ways God gives us, trusting in Him to provide us all that we need to resist. He has baptized you, He who has done that will also give you all good things.

*Lord Jesus, help me to resist the devil. Keep gathering me together with
all your saints at church each week. Feed me there with your Word and
Sacrament. Help me pray and have daily devotions. Keep Your grace front
and center in my life. Keep me in Your Word. Amen.*

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Ash Wednesday

February 10, 2016

Praise the LORD! Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who greatly delights in his commandments! His offspring will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed. Wealth and riches are in his house, and his righteousness endures forever. (Psalm 112:1-3)

Our focus during the season of Lent this year is on spirituality. This is the subject for our midweek services, sermons, and devotions. At first glance, it might seem as though we have simply yielded to the interests of the world around us. Just visit any local bookstore, and you'll see what great attention the world pays to spirituality!

But the spirituality of the Christian, and in particular the Lutheran, is nothing like the spirituality of the world. For the spirituality of the world is something that is self-generated, which is why it is always pursued, but never actually achieved. The spirituality of the Christian, however, is entirely received from God.

This is evident when we remember exactly what spirit is behind the spirituality. Behind the spirituality of the world is the human spirit, which is "deceitful above all things, and desperately sick." (Jeremiah 17:9) But the Spirit to which Christian spirituality refers is the Holy Spirit, Who has "called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith."

Thus Christian spirituality is receptive spirituality. We all receive grace upon grace from God's fullness. When we attend the Divine Service, when we hear the Word of God, when we receive the Sacrament of Jesus' true Body and Blood, we are strengthened in our spirituality: that is, as the post-Communion collect states, "in faith toward [God] and in fervent love toward one another." May the almighty God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless your Lenten spirituality.

O God, grant that I seek my spiritual wellbeing nowhere except in Your Holy Spirit, Who comes to me in Your Word; through Jesus Christ, my Lord. Amen.

Holy Tuesday

March 22, 2016

It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him, (Mark 14:1)

Dr. Luther sometimes after experiencing the attacks of the devil mock the same devil by calling him the "comforter of the faithful". By saying this he meant to stress how God uses even temptations and the works of the devil for the good of His chosen ones (Romans 8:28). The devil's temptations and accusations are proof that you are a child of God.

The devil does not need to attack his own. They are securely on board with his works, his ways, and his rule. He hates Christians. He will attack them. And God uses those attacks to help us, to strengthen us, and even to encourage us.

The "problem of evil" is put into a different perspective when we see it this way. It is the same as when we look at the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ. The text points out to the Holy Week plotting and planning to kill Jesus. And yet, being children of the devil, the ones who plot and plan are ultimately going to make the greatest good happen – the death of Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world.

Dr. Luther would often joke about thanking the devil for reminding him of his many sins. The reminder of sin for the Christian is also a reminder of forgiveness of sins, for that sin has been bore by Christ Jesus.

As we struggle in this life, and as the devil attacks us – don't let his attack drive you away from Christ, but toward Him. Christ has given the means for you to have a good conscience. He has given absolution. He has given Holy Baptism. He has given His Supper.

Lord Jesus, thank you for baptizing me. Thank you for claiming me as Your own. Help to me see the temptations and attacks from the devil as things that can help point me to you. Help me stay firm in faith with a conscience made clean by Your forgiveness. Amen.

Holy Monday

March 21, 2016

Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. (Ephesians 6:13)

The most clear section of Scripture on spiritual warfare is Ephesians 6:10-20. This is where we get the “Armor of God” that we see donned on quilts, plaques, and tapestries in stores and in our homes. But there is something dreadfully wrong with how many people view spiritual warfare. They often view it as an offensive battle with us being spiritual dynamos who are going to beat down demons and the devil altogether in our fighting.

But St. Paul doesn’t have that pictured at all as he being a prisoner under Roman guard writes this section. In fact, he stresses something many times in this section. Stand firm. Not “go get em”, but instead a command to stand firm in one place. This is not nearly as exciting as going out to campaign against the devil, but it what God has said. Remember that our spirituality is not built on passions and ecstasy, even when the battle rages. Christ has already won the battle, the devil is already mortally wounded.

Guard duty. That is where we find ourselves. Lookouts. A task that was tedious and boring in St. Paul’s day. Almost certainly the times on guard duty were spent without incident. So our Christian “guard duty” is also often tedious and uneventful. So our lives, lived out in hearing God’s Word, praying for ourselves and those around us, resisting temptation, confessing our sins, and receiving gifts like the Lord’s Supper seems rather plain and uneventful. But its there that God would have us stand firm, for we are guarding holy ground wherever God puts us.

Lastly, we rely not on ourselves or our devices in this battle, but upon what Christ has given us. We fight where He puts us. We fight with the weapons He gives us. We stand firm in the armor He provides for us. We fight in prayer. We pray always and for all sorts of people, especially those near the front lines who look after our souls, our pastors.

Lord Jesus, help me to stand firm in this life and faith. Amen.

Thursday after Ash Wednesday

February 11, 2016

My soul clings to the dust; give me life according to your word! When I told of my ways, you answered me; teach me your statutes! Make me understand the way of your precepts, and I will meditate on your wondrous works. My soul melts away for sorrow; strengthen me according to your word! Put false ways far from me and graciously teach me your law! I have chosen the way of faithfulness; I set your rules before me. (Psalm 119:25-30)

If true Christian spirituality is a matter of receiving grace upon grace from God’s fullness, then the only way to practice this spirituality is to study theology, that is, the Word of God. In Psalm 119, the Holy Spirit through King David teaches us the proper way to study theology.

First, we are to study theology with prayer. In 1 Corinthians 1, the Apostle Paul calls the preaching of the word of the cross folly to the world. For this reason, our study of that Word must begin with prayer. Thus David prays “Teach me, O Lord.” So we too ought to pray that God would send us His Holy Spirit to enlighten us and give us understanding.

Second, we are to study theology with meditation. This is not “clearing one’s mind of all thought,” as in pagan religions, but rather filling one’s mind with nothing but God’s Word. This is done by reading and rereading the Scriptures with close attention, and then reflecting on those words. For God only gives us His Holy Spirit through His Word.

Finally, we are to study theology with trial and temptation. Throughout the Psalms, David cries out to the Lord for salvation from his enemies. The assaults of the devil drove him to God alone for help. So we too rightly know God’s Word when it is our only comfort and help in time of need. Prayer, meditation, temptation – by these the Holy Spirit through the Word strengthens us and our spiritual lives.

Teach me, O Lord, and grant me a desire for Your Word, that I may stand firm in the hour of trial and temptation; through Jesus Christ, my Lord. Amen.

Friday after Ash Wednesday

February 12, 2016

*Incline your ear, O LORD, and answer me, for I am poor and needy.
Preserve my life, for I am godly; save your servant, who trusts in you –
you are my God. Be gracious to me, O Lord, for to you do I cry all the day.
Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, do I lift up my soul.*

*For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love
to all who call upon you. Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer; listen to my
plea for grace. In the day of my trouble I call upon you, for you answer me.*

(Psalm 86:1-7)

When we consider the proper way to study theology, two out of three make sense. Prayer before, during, and after studying the Word of God seems understandable, and meditation on the Word seems good, right, and salutary. But temptation? That which is meant by the devil to drive us away from God and His Word? How is that proper for the study of theology?

When Martin Luther wrote of this temptation, he called it “the touchstone which teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God’s Word is, wisdom beyond all wisdom.” Just as a touchstone is used to determine the purity of gold, temptation is used by God to test our spirituality. As the Apostle Peter writes, “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 1:6-7)

When Satan attacks us, he does so to destroy our faith and to draw us from God. However, just the opposite can happen: our faith is strengthened and we are driven back to God and His Word as our only refuge in the hour of temptation. Temptation leads us to confess our own weakness, and thus to seek God’s help in prayer and meditation on His Word.

*O Lord, hear my prayer in the hour of temptation. Protect me by the strength
of Your Word alone; through Jesus Christ, my Lord. Amen.*

Palm Sunday

March 20, 2016

*Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds
of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood
throughout the world. (1 Peter 5:9)*

The weapons of our warfare are different than what many folks. They are not weapons in the sense of the worldly wars we see go on. The weapons of a spiritual war are spiritual.

First of all, the chief weapon we have as Christians is the Name of Jesus. Not like some magical incantation to be used superstitiously, but the Name which is above all names and to which all will bow. It is the Name into which we are baptized. It is the Name who has spoken His Word and has both commanded us to pray and promised to hear prayers that are prayed in His Name.

We fight and pray in His Name by believing in Him. St. Peter in the verse above encourages Christians to resist the devil by standing firm in faith. This means firmly trusting Christ but also trusting what Christ said of Himself. His Word and His Doctrine are key weapons of this war.

We also have another weapon, which was used also by Christ – prayer. Christ fought by praying. In His Name and with His Word, we too are invited to fight by praying as well. He still prays for us, and we pray for not only ourselves but also for others in this fight. We are not alone. Christ is with us, and we are all in this together.

This is why a Christian who is alone is in a dangerous place. Christ would have us gather together, not as a social club, but that His Spirit would work through Word and Sacrament to help us. That we, along with Him would pray believing in Him and even using the prayer which He taught us to pray. It is a key weapon we have in the battle we face in this life. That’s why the prayers in the Small Catechism also include praying the Lord’s Prayer throughout the day for ourselves and for others. And when we pray that prayer, we never do so alone – for Christ prays with us and the whole Church of God does as well.

Our Father Who art in heaven . . .

The Fifth Saturday in Lent

March 19, 2016

Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

(Romans 13:11-14)

St. Paul encourages us to put on the armor or Light. Jesus Christ is the light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome. There is a battle going on, one in which you are involved. But you are not on your own, nor will you win the battle by the strength of your own spirituality.

Instead, Christian spirituality conducts warfare while being clothed in Christ. His blood covers us and protects us. The armor of His light covers us. In your baptism you put on Christ. He protects and shields us with the gifts He provides. The temptation for many is to think of their own abilities in regards to spiritual things — that its just fine for Jesus to save, but now in this fight its you versus the evil in the world. That's a quick recipe for disaster. Spiritual warfare is similar to salvation. Jesus guards and protects us, and the only power or authority we have in the matter is what He has said or done.

In fact, it is always a matter of authority. The devil hates God. He wants rebellion against authority. So if that same devil can get you to think the battle is yours to win or lose he has you right where he wants you. Instead, the battle belongs to the Lord, and you fight under His authority. Submission to Christ's authority is essential in spiritual matters. This means not only His Word, but also to His timing as well. It means listening to His Word, guarding and keeping it, but also enduring all things knowing fully Who it is who fights for you.

Lord Jesus Christ, save me from rebelling against You.

Keep me humble and faithful to you in both good and bad times.

Amen.

Saturday after Ash Wednesday

February 13, 2016

Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance.

(1 Timothy 4:7-9)

Receptive spirituality does not mean inaction on the part of the Christian. Spiritual laziness is not a mark of true Lutheranism! Instead, Christians should occupy themselves with training for godliness, as the Apostle Paul commends to Timothy. This is true, godly piety.

Piety is often treated as a negative thing, both outside and inside the Church. Unbelievers regard the pious as those who consider themselves “holier-than-thou,” and Christians are suspicious that any piety is really just an attempt to earn salvation by works.

True, godly piety is neither. Rather, it is simply following Jesus and doing what he has given us to do. It is being baptized, attending the Divine Service regularly, receiving the Lord's Supper often, hearing and reading the Scriptures daily, praying for ourselves and others without ceasing, resisting temptation, and loving the neighbors that God has placed in our lives whenever and wherever we are given opportunity to do so. This piety, this godliness, is of value both for this present life and also for the life to come.

Such spirituality is not only a matter of the soul but also the body as well. With our voices we pray, with our ears we hear, with our mouths we confess, with our hands and feet and minds we serve. We do so not to earn our salvation, for that has already been earned by Christ on the cross. Rather, we use our bodies and souls because we have been redeemed in body and soul by the offering of Jesus' body and soul once for all.

O Lord, strengthen me in body and soul to believe in You above all things and to love my neighbor as myself; through Jesus Christ, my Lord. Amen.

First Sunday in Lent

February 14, 2016

And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside. And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" And Jesus said to him, "Go your way; your faith has made you well." And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him on the way. (Mark 10:46-47, 52)

The last words written by Martin Luther were simple: "We are beggars. That is true." Throughout his ministry, our Lord Jesus encountered many beggars — some who were beggars for many years, some who were reduced to begging on behalf of a loved one. In each case, these beggars cried out to the Lord Jesus in faith and asked for His mercy, and in each case, the Lord Jesus answered their petition and granted them salvation.

It is no coincidence that the Divine Service begins with a beggar's prayer: "Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy." For we are indeed beggars. There is nothing within us that we can offer God to earn His favor. We have no spiritual wealth in and of ourselves that would make us self-sufficient. As the Apostle Paul asks the Corinthians, "What do you have that you did not receive?" (1 Corinthians 4:7) The answer is nothing. Everything is received by grace alone from God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, Who humbled Himself unto death for us.

However, the mystery of our salvation is that we, who are beggars, are also rich in the Holy Spirit. We cry out as beggars, "Lord, have mercy," and God answers our prayer by making us sons and heirs of the kingdom of heaven. Thus after the Kyrie, the prayer of the beggar, the Divine Service continues with the Gloria in Excelsis, the song of the angels: "Glory to God in the highest!" For we are beggars, this is true, but we are also beloved sons, with whom God is well pleased.

Lord, have mercy upon us. Christ, have mercy upon us.

Lord, have mercy upon us. Amen.

The Fifth Friday in Lent

March 18, 2016

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:7-9)

The devil loves your garbage. He loves the sins that you have done. He will deal with them in two ways — have you hide them for a time and then when the situation is ripe he will dig them up to accuse and attack you. This will make you feel guilty or angry. This is how he works.

Christ would not have you ruled by the devil. That's why He claimed you in Holy Baptism as His own child. That's why He gives you the Word of God, to dwell in it, so that you not only know that you have sins, but also to know and trust in how He deals with those sins. The Law, like you know it in the Ten Commandments is useful to know those sins which you have done. The Gospel is of everlasting importance to know what Christ has done for you so that those sins are forgiven.

The devil wants us to secretly hold onto our sins. Jesus doesn't. Our Lord desires that we realize that He came to destroy the work of the devil. He came to remove sin and its evil byproducts. He removed it for you in His own suffering and death. He took the wages of sin away from you. He doesn't just leave you without sins, but He then gives you something greater — His righteousness. This righteousness you receive when you believe in Him. His righteousness makes you holy in the sight of God. Jesus hates your garbage but loves to take it away from you.

Lord Jesus Christ, help me to see the danger of secret sins. Help me to believe your word and confess my sins knowing that you are faithful and just to not only forgive me but also to cleanse me from all unrighteousness. Amen.

The Fifth Thursday in Lent

March 17, 2016

Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. (1 Peter 5:8)

Ignorance is not bliss when it comes to Spiritual things. Ignorance is dangerous and damning. Peter encourages the whole Church to be sober-minded and watchful, or vigilant. Almost every book of the Scriptures includes words of warning about false teaching or temptations of the devil. That devil can make bad things appear good and can take God's things and twist them into looking bad to the ignorant.

So how do we keep sober-minded? First, this is a warning against all sorts of spirituality that is based upon passion and ecstasy, ruling and judging the "spirit" by the way you feel. Instead, being sober-minded means to be rooted in God's Word by the power of the Holy Spirit. We will prize the Word and what it does to us.

Part of our sobriety is that we are vigilant. This means that we examine ourselves according to God's Word and see the ways in which our consciences may be damaged through our sins. We see our sins plainly when we look at our thoughts, words, and deeds according to the Ten Commandments. This gives us reason to seek out our Lord's forgiveness, especially in absolution or the Lord's Supper. This self-examination is meant to draw us closer to Christ.

Another way in which we may practice vigilance is to fast and pray. Fasting is not to be done to get a "greater reward", but instead the benefit of fasting is in the denial of the flesh. Man does not live by bread alone Jesus said. Fasting helps teach us this. It is a part of discipline and self-control, which are virtues for the Christian.

Being aware of our situation will help us see the greatness of Christ and our need for His presence in our lives through the Word and Sacraments. To go it alone is ignorant and foolish. No one can make it alone. Christ alone keeps us along the way through His Spirit.

Lord Jesus Christ, help me be sober and vigilant. By the power of Your Spirit lead me to greater self-control and discipline. Amen.

First Monday in Lent

February 15, 2016

For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. (Hebrews 9:13-14)

To sum it up in a single word, Christian spirituality is about the conscience. The conscience is a judge of right and wrong, using information from various sources to judge one's actions, thoughts, and words.

A Christian's conscience is unique in that it is specifically informed by the Word of God, and in particular the Law, which is applied to the Christian's vocation in the home, workplace, society, and church. When informed by God's Word, the conscience is able to judge rightly, curbing sinful behavior towards the neighbor, leading the Christian to confess his sins to God, and being comforted by the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins — that for Christ's sake we are received into God's favor when we believe.

Christian spirituality is therefore concerned with living before God and others with a good, clean conscience. This comes only from Christ's atoning death on the cross. Therefore the things that give us faith in Christ and strengthen it are essential to having a good and clean conscience: Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the Word of God.

A conscience that is good and clean applies the forgiveness of sins to the self. Thus the Christian lives in Christ's forgiveness, is freed from the past, and lets the Word of God determine what is true rather than past experiences or sins. The Christian is therefore bold and confident to approach God in faith and to approach his neighbor in love.

*Almighty God, before You I plead guilty of all sins,
yet I believe that you have forgiven me all my sins for Jesus' sake,
Who died for me. My conscience is now clean before You.
Amen.*

First Tuesday in Lent

February 16, 2016

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.

(1 Timothy 3:16)

When the Apostle Paul writes of the Christian faith, he calls it a mystery. This is not the same thing as a secret. A secret is something that can be known and understood, but is not yet revealed. A mystery is something that cannot be understood, even once it has been revealed. The Christian faith is a mystery, one that has been revealed in the Scriptures, yet remains beyond human comprehension.

The mystery of the Christian faith is multifaceted: it includes the Incarnation of Christ, the salvation of the Gentiles, and the presence of the Risen Jesus with His people. By faith, we enter into this mystery. Jesus Christ took on our human flesh and blood and redeemed us by His crucifixion. We, whether Jew or Gentile, are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. He is present among us now in His Word and Sacraments.

There are two aspects to the mystery of the Christian faith in our lives. On the one hand, because we share in this mystery, we receive all of God's gifts through Jesus Christ, our Lord. As the Apostle Paul puts it, God the Father "has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 1:3) Everything that was won by Christ on the cross is received by us now through faith. On the other hand, because we share in this mystery, we have access to God the Father by the Holy Spirit through the Son. As we confess in the Small Catechism, we are free to come before our Heavenly Father "with all boldness and confidence." All this is through Jesus Christ our Lord. He brings God the Father to us, just as He brings us to God the Father.

*Heavenly Father, through Your Son Jesus Christ You have made me
Your dear child. Because of Him I can come before You in any need
and find grace to help. Amen.*

The Fifth Wednesday in Lent

March 16, 2016

"The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved." (Luke 8:12)

It can be very hard when in suffering or persecution to understand just who is being attacked. We often think the attack is personal, against us, but in reality the work of the Devil is more sinister than just attacking our person. He attacks the only thing which can save us, the thing which God works through to help us, to comfort us, to serve us, to remind us, and to encourage us. The devil attacks the Word of God.

The Word is what the devil attacked at the beginning, "did God really say...". It is his one tactic. If he can rob that Word of God from you he doesn't need to damage you, because without the Word we are already lost. This is why the devil will even use good things to try to rob away the Word, not just outright temptations, but things like family, friends, spouses, and so forth can become reasons to let go of God's Word. That makes the devil happy, and it even might make you personally happy for a time as well, but it robs you of eternal life.

God's Word is our lifeline. It is the basis for His gifts of the Sacraments. It is the target of faith, holding onto the promises of God, which are only found in that Word. Without the Word, we are lost forever. This is why in any level of "Spiritual Warfare" it is absolutely key to remember how the devil will try to get you to leave God's Word behind and trust another word. It could be an outwardly evil word, it could be a very nice word, it could be a very reasonable word, it could be a word which makes you feel happy – but it is the devil's word because it seeks to rob you of the only Word which gives life – the Word of God.

*Lord Jesus Christ, keep me in Your Word. Help me to read, mark, learn,
and inwardly digest the very thing that gives me life. Defend me against all
temptations away from Your Word. Amen.*

The Fifth Tuesday in Lent

March 15, 2016

“Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.” (Ephesians 4:25-27)

The devil will do whatever it takes to destroy your faith in Christ. Sometimes this means just open rebellion to God’s Word, but most of the time it means working another way, a far more insidious way — through the people God puts around you. When sinners sin against each other it brings great temptation for anger and hatred, grudges, backbiting, and all sort of things. This only gets worse when we add “Christian” to the name of the offending person. It’s one thing to have a pagan sin against you, we might even expect that, but it’s a much worse thing to have a Christian do so. Think about this in relation to your congregation or pastor. The potential for great offense is there, offense great enough to be used by the devil to destroy much.

This is why St. Paul warns us about our anger and how we will want use it sinfully. Instead of bearing burdens or forgiving wrongs as we have been forgiven, we would often rather use those wrongs against us as provocation for all sorts of mischief against each other. The devil likes that. He works to make it happen, reading your signs and watching reactions to stir up more and more the anger and feuding into all sorts of sinful behavior. Often this means stirring others up as well. St. Paul would have us instead speak the truth to the one who has offended us (see also Matthew 18). He encourages us to not let our anger take root, for it will spread like a cancer if it does, and a root of bitterness defiles many.

Instead, we should combat this remembering first our sins against God and our neighbor and see what sort of God we have in Christ Jesus, who loves us and forgives us. Let that be the model for handling your anger.

Lord Jesus Christ, help me deal with those who sin against me with love and forgiveness. Do not let my anger become hatred and unforgiveness. Help me remember Your love, grace, and forgiveness in all situations. Amen.

First Wednesday in Lent

February 17, 2016

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:4-5)

Through faith in Jesus, we are not only made children of God and heirs of the kingdom of heaven, we are also made members of His royal priesthood. This does not mean that we are all pastors; rather, we are all given the privileges and responsibilities held by Israel’s priests in the Old Testament. First, the priests were called to stand before God in worship and intercede on behalf of the people. Second, they were called to stand before the people as those who represented God.

As Christians, we have access to God the Father through His Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. In our access to Him, we bring not only our needs, but the needs of others. This is why the Prayer of the Church in the Divine Service often begins with, “Let us pray for the whole Church of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs.” Throughout the week, as we encounter people in our homes, workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods, and as we discover their needs, we collect them all and bring them before our Father in prayer.

Likewise, as Christians, the Lord accompanies us wherever we go. The Apostle Paul writes, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20) Whenever and wherever we love and serve our neighbor, there God is blessing the world through us, and He is glorified in our bodies. Before God and before the world, we are indeed a royal priesthood, praying and serving, as Christ has called us to do.

Father in heaven, hear the prayers of your royal priesthood, and strengthen them to serve as you call them to do; through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

First Thursday in Lent

February 18, 2016

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

(2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

Usually when we think of the glories of God and His heaven, we think of lightness and air. No doubt this is influenced by the countless depictions of heaven as a sky filled with clouds. The Apostle Paul, however, has a different idea: he writes of God's glory having "an eternal weight."

While this might seem strange to us, the idea of God's glory having an eternal weight should serve as a tremendous comfort to us who live each day under the weight of a fallen world and a fallen human nature. As we bear the burdens of affliction, perplexity, persecution, and more, we do not lose hope, for as Paul wrote elsewhere: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." (Romans 8:18) The weight of glory awaiting us in eternity far surpasses the weight of affliction we endure now.

We have such hope because our Lord Jesus has borne the burden of our sin and guilt for us. He carried that burden to Golgotha, where He suffered and died for the whole world. The weight of sin has been taken from us and paid by Christ. Though we still bear the weight of suffering now, it is only slight and momentary, writes Paul, and it serves a divine and blessed purpose: it is preparing an eternal weight of glory for us beyond all comparison.

Until that day, hope in the Lord, for He promises, "Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

Lord Jesus Christ, as I live in this fallen world under the weight of affliction, grant me faith to look ahead to the eternal weight of glory you have prepared for me. Amen.

The Fifth Monday in Lent

March 14, 2016

"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6:12)

The battle that goes on in this world is not seen. It is hidden. St. Paul says that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, even though that comes naturally to us. Still, the greater battle is one fought between the devil and the Church of Christ, the Christians whom the devil tries to steal away the Word of God from.

Revelation 12 pictures this battle. The devil is unable to destroy Christ, but he still comes after Christ's body on earth, the Church. He tempts to sin and then accuses the sinner. He lies about God and tries to get us believing his lies. He messes with our conscience to make us guilty beyond grace. These are his weapons in this hidden battle going on.

We are not left helpless or defenseless in this hidden battle. This is why we pray. This is why we study the Word of God. This is why we attend church services. God is our help. He listens to prayer and answers it. He speaks His Word and does amazing things through it. He sends other Christians to help us. He sends preachers to preach to us. He provides reminders of our own Baptism. He gives the Lord's Supper for our blessing and benefit. All of these things help us in this hidden battle. He makes us stand firm in the faith that was once delivered to the saints so that we can resist the devil and make him flee from us. He provides us the very words and things of forgiveness to give us a good conscience, so that we might help others with that same good conscience. All this He does because He loves, He cares. The battle is His and Christ Jesus is already victorious.

Lord Jesus, help us to face the battle before us in this life. Help us to hear Your Word. Grant us Your Spirit to lead godly lives and believe in Your forgiveness. Help us to bear with each other. Amen.

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

March 13, 2016

“This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith,” (1 Timothy 1:18-19)

We are a spiritual people. We are also not neutral in a spiritual battle. Scripture encourages us to fight the good fight of faith. In fact, that is how the devil is defeated, when people believe the Word of God. This is why he tries so hard to rob us of that Word, so that our faith would trust other things like works. This spiritual war is going on, but not in the fantastical tales that some may portray. It is much more mundane and common than the glorious picture of crusades against the devil that may pass through our minds.

The enemy is the devil. He is a liar, thief, and murderer from the beginning. He can manifest as an angel of light (hence why we test even “angelic” things against the Word). He hates Christ. He hates the Church. He hates you. He will do whatever he can to hurt you.

The battle for you began in your baptism. There God claimed you as His own and the devil marked you as an enemy. The good news is that Baptism assures us victory in Christ Jesus’ death and resurrection. The difficult part is this life that we live in this fallen world. So we like Timothy hold onto two great tools we have — faith and a good conscience. Faith to know the truth of Christ vs. the lies of the devil. A good conscience knowing that because of Christ we are reckoned as righteous and holy ones before God in heaven, instead of how the devil would portray us as sinners who couldn’t possibly be forgiven or as ones so righteous in our-selves that we don’t need Christ. We have faith because God gave it to us. That faith trusts the Word of God, its teachings (doctrine). We have a good conscience because of what God does for us in His Word and Sacraments (which we learn from in the Word). These things help us in this spiritual fight.

Lord Jesus, help me keep faith and a good conscience that I might fight the good fight wherever you put me. Amen.

The First Friday in Lent

February 19, 2016

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (Colossians 3:1-4)

The old saying goes, “Some people are too heavenly-minded to be of any earthly good.” If that’s true, then it would seem that the Apostle Paul is counseling Christians to do just that — to forget about all those things that happen here in this world and direct our attention solely to the heavenly realm.

But Paul does just the opposite in the rest of the Epistle to the Colossians. After urging them to set their minds on things above, not things on earth, he then exhorts them to avoid sin and to live in godly love for the neighbor. He writes about how wives and husbands, children and fathers, slaves and masters ought to live in their earthly vocation. In short, Paul urges the Colossian Christians to be heavenly-minded, in order that they would be of earthly good!

So it is for us. If Christ intended our heavenly-mindedness to be opposed to earthly goodness, He would have taken us immediately to heaven after being baptized. Instead, after baptism and coming to faith, He sends us out into the world — into the home, the workplace, the society — to love and serve as wives and husbands, children and parents, employees and employers. As those who believe and are baptized, we are now of the highest earthly good, loving others as Christ has first loved us. Thus Christian spirituality is not a matter of getting lost in the heavens, but of hearing God’s Word and serving our neighbor here on earth.

Heavenly Father, in Your Word and Sacrament

*You give me the gifts of heaven. Grant that, as I receive Your gifts,
I go where You have called me to love and serve others;
through Jesus Christ, my Lord. Amen.*

The First Saturday in Lent

February 20, 2016

[Solomon said,] “Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?” It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. And God said to him, “Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that no other king shall compare with you, all your days.”

(1 Kings 3:9-13)

When young Solomon was made king after his father David, the Lord appeared to him in a dream and told him to ask for a gift. In response, Solomon asked for “a hearing heart” (translated “an understanding mind” in English). God was well pleased with this answer, that Solomon had asked for discernment for hearing what is right, and so He gave him that gift and more.

Every Christian should share Solomon’s prayer for a hearing heart. Whether hearing the Word of God in the Divine Service or reading the Scriptures in daily devotions, we need the gift of the Holy Spirit in order to hear and discern God’s truth, for without the Spirit our hearts are corrupted by sin and incapable of believing in Christ or coming to Him.

Our Father in Heaven will certainly hear and answer our prayer for a hearing heart, as He did for Solomon long ago: “How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:13) Through His Word, God gives us His Holy Spirit to open our hearts, that we would truly hear and discern what is right: the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

“Lord, open now my heart to hear, and through Your Word to me draw near; let me Your Word e’er pure retain; let me Your child and heir remain.
Amen.” (LSB 908:1)

The Fourth Saturday in Lent

March 12, 2016

“In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.” (John 16:23-24)

Joy is the last fruit of an active prayer life. One of the greatest spiritual disciplines we can have as Christians is to be in prayer. Congregational prayer, family devotions, mealtime prayers, personal prayers, quick prayers, prayers for others and for ourselves. All of it good for us.

Joy is a byproduct of prayer. It comes because prayer is founded both in the command and promises of Christ. Praying reminds us of His gracious Word, especially since our prayers are filled with the very Words of Scripture and prayed in trust that Scripture is true when it teaches us that Christ hears our prayers. We speak to the One who has redeemed us with His innocent suffering and death. What a joy to be able to take all things to Him! This should be enough to motivate us to pray, but it often doesn’t. So many things distract our prayers and make it seem like other things are just plain more important. Repent. Pray. It is not a sprint we are involved in but a marathon. It is a long haul of discipline and sober thinking about the things of God and care for each other. Prayer is a great gift from God.

So the Word commands prayer, but even more promises the prayer to be heard because of Christ Jesus. Start by praying with the congregation. Then with the family. Then by yourself at the beginning and ending of the day. Mealtimes. Other times. All times.

Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for the gift of prayer. Help me to pray. Give me the Words by the work of Your Spirit. Ground them in Your Word. Help my joy be full as in You it always is. Amen.

The Fourth Friday in Lent

March 11, 2016

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

“So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 7:7-12)

This verse ends with what is termed the Golden Rule. Look at the verses that come before it. What is the greatest good thing you can do for someone else? You can pray for them. You can commend them to God’s care and keeping, for the will of God is always good.

This is over and against all of the moralistic and ethical ways in which this verse gets used. Prayer is doing good for your neighbor. Much of the problems in this world are caused by lack of prayer. When we are tempted to be angry with each other, we often forget to pray for one another and then all hell breaks loose. Lack of prayer is related to criticism. The more prayer, the less criticism and complaint. This is because prayer brings compassion and love for those we pray for. It is the finest good work to commend another person to God’s perfect care and keeping. We know that. Doing that crushes our self-righteous and bitter ways of trying to deal with them here on this earth.

Today, pray for yourself and others. Pray especially for those who give you reason to complain or be critical. Commend it to God’s care and keeping. Leave it there.

Lord Jesus, thank you for the gift of prayer. Help me to pray more in my life. Help me to commend others to you in prayer that I may have more compassion and care for them. Help me to apply the “golden rule” in my prayers. Amen.

The Second Sunday in Lent

February 21, 2016

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Christian meditation is not a matter of looking inward, as in so many pagan religions, but a matter of looking to Jesus. Moreover, when we look to Jesus by meditation on His Word, we are not imagining or fantasizing about Him, but believing what He has said: “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20) Christian meditation is based on the truth that the risen Lord Jesus Christ is truly yet mysteriously present with His Church in His Word and Sacraments, just as He promised.

It is also based on the truth that the Scriptures on which we meditate are not the words of men, but the living and active Word of God. (Hebrews 4:12) It is life-giving because it is inspired by the Holy Spirit. Therefore it is powerful to do what Jesus says. When He declares our sins forgiven in His Word, they actually are. When He speaks life to us, it is given. When He bestows salvation on us, we receive it. The Lord says, “[My Word] shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” (Isaiah 55:11)

Finally, Christian meditation is based on the Gospel itself: we are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone as taught in Scripture alone. Apart from this justification, we cannot meditate rightly on God’s Word, for we lack a clean conscience. But with a clean conscience, we gladly and frequently meditate on the Word, for we believe that in it our Lord Jesus is with us and by it He gives us all the blessings of heaven.

Praise to You alone, O Lord Jesus, for You are with me in Your Word, which is living and active and declares me righteous for Your sake alone. Amen.

The Second Monday in Lent

February 22, 2016

Jesus said to the Jews who had believed Him, "If you abide in My Word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (John 8:31-32)

"You are what you eat." This simple phrase is used to remind people that what they take into their bodies will certainly affect what their bodies look like. Eating unhealthy foods tends to result in unhealthy bodies; eating healthy foods tends to result in healthy bodies. The Christian is aware that he is more than only his body; he has an eternal spirit which also must be fed. With what are you feeding your spirit?

To ask it another way, where do you go to get food for your soul? Do you gorge yourself on easy platitudes and simplistic self-help advice that never gets to our core needs of the forgiveness of sins and salvation? Are you simply eating what everyone else is eating, that is, the reigning hedonism of the day? Do you come back again and again to the same old junk food, simply because it's comfortable?

You are what you eat. Feed yourself on the world and you'll look like the world. But be fed on the sure and certain inerrant Word of God, and you will be conformed to your Savior. St. John says that the words the Holy Spirit caused him to write were "written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name" (St. John 20:31). God the Holy Spirit sees to it that you hear the Word of God. He makes sure there are pastors to preach His Word, and He opens your heart to receive it gladly in faith. In that Word, He gives you the strength and faith to receive His promises of life and salvation. It is a rich feast for the saints to remain in their Lord Jesus Christ, and nothing else can make us wise unto salvation.

*Lord Jesus Christ, send Your Holy Spirit
that I may hear Your Word eagerly and often,
so that I may be set free from sin and death and remain in Your truth.
Amen.*

The Fourth Thursday in Lent

March 10, 2016

"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it." (John 14:12-14)

Can you imagine something that allows you to do greater things than the miracles of Jesus? There is something absolutely amazing in prayer, that God works through us for the good of others.

This is the beauty of daily prayer, that we become co-workers with God. We are already His own by right of baptism, but He invites our prayers and promises to work in answering them. He will do as He promises. This is why we can see the verse above and expect that yes, God will do greater things. We may never know what great things happened because of our prayers. The result is often hidden away as God works using all things to the benefit and blessing of His own people. But still we hear the promise and we pray, trusting that God is at work.

From our prayers, we can rise for other works knowing they are commended to God and the trust that God will use whatever is done for His good and gracious will. When we fail to pray the opposite can come true, that we tell God that we have it under our control, which is of course false and the root of all kinds of trouble in our lives. If that's the case, repent. Christ still listens to prayers and answers them.

*Lord Jesus, thank you for the gift of prayer. Help me to pray as I should.
Help me to trust that You do great things through them even if I don't see it.
Help me to pray based upon faith in Your Words rather than the expectation
to see results. Amen.*

The Fourth Wednesday in Lent

March 9, 2016

“Have faith in God. Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

Whether it’s in the hospital or on TV or in a book, many people will speak about “the power of prayer.” Now, prayer does not have any power of its own, but the power of prayer is the privilege of petitioning the Lord God with our complaints, laments, sufferings, worries, and fears. In other words, the “power of prayer” lay in the fact that the prayer is heard and answered by God.

In this, Jesus has a few commands to give regarding how we are to pray. First of all, there is a presupposition that we will be praying. Secondly, when we pray we are not to doubt. Whenever prayer is depicted in television or film, it is often used as a last-ditch effort after everything else has failed and it is usually portrayed as an effort that is unlikely to work. This should not be so! When we Christians pray, we pray with boldness and in the confidence that our prayer is heard by the Father on account of Christ. It is not a matter of playing the odds or wishful thinking — your prayer is heard by the very same God who created all things and who has redeemed you by the blood of Jesus! Lastly, there is the command that we forgive one another, that our Father in heaven would also forgive us.

○ Father who created all things, through the blood of Your Son Jesus we are able to pray to you and know with all confidence that our prayers are heard for His sake. Through the power of Your Holy Spirit, teach us to pray and increase our faith, that we would live lives of constant prayer. Amen.

The Second Tuesday in Lent

February 23, 2016

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth, for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak, and He will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for He will take what is mine and declare it to you.

(John 16:13-14)

Dear Christian, see in these words what sort of a loving Savior you have in Jesus Christ. For He does not simply give you a short list of works for you to do and bid you “good luck”. Rather, it’s the opposite! He accomplishes your salvation entirely without any work of yours. He delivers that salvation to you freely by grace through faith. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ — and both faith and the Word of Christ are blessed gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit takes what belongs to Christ and gives it to you! And not just once or twice, but for your entire life. As a sinful person you are prone to wander and so the Holy Spirit continues to keep you in a life of repentance and faith by making sure you hear God’s Word. And by keeping you in God’s Word, the Holy Spirit sees to it that you remain in Christ’s promises of life and salvation.

○ Jesus Christ, my only Lord and Savior from sin and death, by the power of Your Holy Spirit working through the Word which You promised, preserve me from wandering from the faith and strengthen my faith daily, that I may believe Your Word and by believing inherit eternal life. Amen.

The Second Wednesday in Lent

February 24, 2016

Now the parable is this: *The seed is the word of God. The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.*

(Luke 8:11-15)

Every eastern mystic and New Age guru seems to have their own form of meditation to teach to unsuspecting Westerners. They always sound profound, but there is a common element: meditation is done by emptying the mind. This is not the way of the Christian! We Christians do meditate, to be sure, but our meditation runs exactly the opposite: we fill our minds with the Word of God.

The difference between the two could not be any greater. Meditation by emptying the mind leaves a person by himself, alone, with nothing to hold on to. But Christian meditation, that is, being filled with the Word of God, delivers not only information about Christ but actually delivers Christ Himself! Far from being alone, then, the Christian who takes hold of the Word, meditates on it, and prays with it will find that every day he grows in wisdom and in faith. And so, dear Christian, please meditate, but do it by filling yourself with the Word of God!

Dear Heavenly Father, by the Word of Your dear Son, Jesus Christ, you empower us to endure the hardships of life, to grow in wisdom, and to bear good fruit. Keep us in the promises of that Word, that we would receive the blessings you promise. Amen.

The Fourth Tuesday in Lent

March 8, 2016

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

Sometimes we get ideas in our head about whether or not to take a complaint to the Lord in prayer. We don't want to be thought of as whiners; we don't want to trouble God, who has enough to do in providing for the needs of the whole world. We know that our coworker has a husband with cancer, our cousins are facing foreclosure, our neighbors are having their house repossessed, and a former classmate is in prison, so we think our burdens are too small to take them in prayer to the Almighty God.

But understand what your God thinks of you – if your burdens are not too small for you, they're not too small for Him. He loves you and knows your burdens, both the really big ones and the really little ones. We actually have a good example of this in the psalms themselves. One of the most common features of the psalms is that the psalmist is lamenting things from his own life to God. Consider Psalm 42: "I say to God, my rock: 'Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?' As with a deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me all the day long, 'Where is your God?'"

You have a God who delights in hearing your prayers for the sake of Jesus. You have a God who listens and answers. You even have a God who inspired these examples of complaint as a pattern for you to learn how to pray. So be bold; take your complaints to the Lord in prayer and know for certain that He hears and gives you all you need.

Dear Heavenly Father, as Your Son taught the disciples to pray by giving them the Lord's Prayer, teach me also through the Psalms how to pray, that I would learn to take all my burdens and cares to You. Amen.

The Fourth Monday in Lent

March 7, 2016

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD! O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy! (Psalm 130:1-2)

What a comforting and assuring message as we walk through this valley of the shadow of death. How can we say that we prosper in this world when we succumb to temptation, when the wicked prosper, and when we look in the mirror we see a monster rather than an angel of light? Prosperity is a placebo gospel, not the real deal that brings light no matter how dark our day may be.

Many times in our life we have events that cause us to question our heavenly Father's love toward us. We have illnesses, divorce, abortion, poverty, divisions, and sometimes simple things like being stuck in traffic or dropping a bag of groceries one foot from the counter. Because we have the false assumption that we are supposed to be sinless and perfect, we bottle up any aggression we have toward God and pretend that we are pious perfect disciples. We forget that we are children of our heavenly Father that are adopted out of the bondage of the devil. We forget that we are sinful and unclean. This is not a license to be angry with God all the time, but rather is the reality that we are fallen and will have many times where we look up to heaven and cry out, "Why God? Why me? Why now?" When we bottle that up it is nothing more than an opportunity for the devil to invest in our false righteousness and bring that anger out at a more opportune time.

Let us not bottle anything up, but rather cry out to our heavenly Father in all our anxiety, all our frustrations, all our doubt, and all our anger, for this is not a sign of unbelief, but of genuine faith. Only faith cries out to the Father. Only the baptized, those adopted by grace, can cry out in every time of trouble and depend on their Father to hear them. Let us not look for our prosperity, but rather look to the promises of Christ when he says that He will never leave us nor forsake us and in that find peace in every time of trouble.

Abide with us dear Savior in every trial and tribulation. Forgive us when we doubt and absolve our anger. Be merciful to us and spare us when we question and strengthen us in the face of the world's false promises, in Jesus name we pray, Amen.

The Second Thursday in Lent

February 25, 2016

"No one after lighting a lamp covers it with a jar or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light.

For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light. Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away." (Luke 8:16-18)

In the Gospels, Jesus talks a lot about light. Light scatters darkness. Light illuminates the path. Light brings wisdom and knowledge. Darkness is the realm of evil, unbelief, hidden sins, and death. Once light, even a small amount of it, enters a space it fills it up from corner to corner. The darkness is banished, leaving only light.

When Jesus Christ, the light of the world, comes into the world, He banishes darkness forever. When Jesus is in the world, demons scatter. Sins are forgiven. Evil schemes are thwarted. Blindness, deafness, and leprosy are healed. The dead are raised. The oppressed are set free.

Therefore, we who possess Christ by keeping His Word do not hide Him and His Word deep inside. Rather, we adorn our lips with holy speech, sanctified by the Word of God. Those who see us will see Christ in us, and His light will shine forth in this otherwise darkened world because He has placed His light on us and in us.

Lord Jesus Christ, with us abide, for 'round us falls the eventide. Nor let Thy Word, that heav'nly light, for us be ever veiled in night. (Nicolaus Selnecker)

The Second Friday in Lent

February 26, 2016

Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. (Romans 13:11-12)

Just because our eyes are open, it doesn't mean that we are truly awake. After a long night of studying, or working, or being kept up by newborn children, we often find ourselves shuffling through the day, eyes open but mind switched off. A whole reality goes by us and we don't recognize it because we are, in reality, asleep. We are oblivious to the world around us because our senses haven't been awakened for it.

Once they are opened, however, we discover that the world is a complex place, with conflict and drama and people we weren't aware of before. In fact, there is a great cosmic battle being waged all around you, and yet you cannot see it. While Christ and His angels would like you to live, Satan and his fallen angels wish your death. Of course, we cannot see this. We go about our lives, blissfully unaware that anyone could be in our corner against death and hell. Having been awakened by the Holy Spirit, we now see by faith the unseen realities of God.

And more than this, having the Word of God, we now rightly see even the part of the world that is seen. Now we see sin as the terrible corruption it truly is. Having been awakened by God to see the world rightly, we see Christ's presence among us as He promised. We also begin to see the many ways in which God intervenes in our lives and provides for us every day.

Dear Father in Heaven, awaken us from spiritual sleep, that we may see you in our life and see the continual presence of Your Son, Jesus Christ, among us. Amen.

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 6, 2016

But you do see, for you note mischief and vexation, that you may take it into your hands; to you the helpless commits himself; you have been the helper of the fatherless. (Psalm 10:14)

"Only those who are really helpless can truly pray, just as only those who have been helped by God in answer to their prayers really praise God" (183). One who is strong does not depend on anyone for assistance. Only those who are weak, disabled, and crippled cry out for help. The weak cry out for help, not because they are lazy, but because they do not have any ability to help themselves. Our spiritual disability is not a mere cut on our forearm, but a crippling of every bone in our body. We have the deep inbred corruption of our nature and we are cursed with an evil inclination. We are disabled, helpless in matters pertaining to our salvation.

Because of this disability, this weakness, this helplessness, we cry out for help. We cry out, not because we have been enlightened by our reason to reach out to God, but rather the Holy Spirit has worked in us a dependency on our Heavenly Father to help us in every distress. We cry out because that is our only option. We cry out for help because we need help, we need forgiveness, we need life in Christ.

This cry is only produced because our Father in heaven promised to hear us. He gives us the assurance of the Holy Spirit and promises to hear our petitions. He answers our prayers for forgiveness, life, and salvation by giving us His only begotten Son as our atoning sacrifice. Because Jesus died and is risen, we can cry out to the Father and have the assurance that He hears us and answers us.

May our Lord, Jesus the Christ, continue to help us in our adversity, forgive us our anxieties, and carry us through every trial and temptation that comes our way until He calls us to Himself in heaven, Amen.

The Third Saturday in Lent

March 5, 2016

*For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him.
He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.
On God rests my salvation and my glory; my mighty rock, my refuge is God.
(Psalm 65:5-7)*

“We don’t generate anything by ourselves from our own spiritual resources, but simply rely on Jesus for everything. It is enough for us just to be with Jesus and to enjoy His presence with us” (178).

Our prayers are not produced by the shallowness of our hearts or emotion, but rather flow from the deep well that is God’s Holy Word. Outside of receiving the Word of the Lord, our hearts are not havens of truth and purity, but rather playgrounds for the devil and the world. For us to petition our Father and find rest in His answers, we need to be in His Word, resting in the reception of the means of the Holy Spirit.

This happens in the Divine Service. If we desire to have a rich and peaceful prayer life, or a healthy prayer life, we must not look to how many words we can utter, but rather should be comforted by all the Words that our Father speaks to us. Prayer is not so much then about speaking, but about hearing the voice of Christ Jesus in the proclamation of the Gospel. In the reception of the Gospel we have absolute rest, peace that the world cannot give or take away from us. We receive this Word in the Divine Service and in our devotional life that flows from the font, pulpit, and altar.

May our Lord, Jesus the Christ, give us ears that keep on hearing His voice and may He silence the devil, world, and the Old Adam that would direct us to find rest outside of Jesus’ death and resurrection. May our Lord Christ grant us rest from our labors as we come to Him in prayer. May He grant us a clean heart that clings not to our own works, but to the Work that he finished and will always finish for us. Let us listen to Jesus and in that have a rich and abundant life of prayer, Amen.

Merciful Father, grant us ears to hear and tongue to pray, praise, and give thanks to you for all the gifts you bestow upon us. Grant us the Holy Spirit that He may comfort us in the assurance of our salvation that comes only in the work of Your Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ, Amen.

The Second Saturday in Lent

February 27, 2016

*Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.”
Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works.
Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves. (John 14:8-11)*

What role could there possibly be for the imagination in the Christian Faith? As it turns out, quite a bit! The imagination is that part of us that helps us to visualize what we cannot see. The Christian Faith demands that we believe what we cannot see — this is the definition of faith. While sometimes the discussion of theology deals in abstract concepts and propositions, God’s Word makes use of imagery designed to appeal to the imagination. For example, rather than use purely abstract language to describe salvation by grace, God inspires the language of a gift. That is, He gives us an image we can know from earthly life — the giving of a present — and uses that image to help us understand something of who God is for us. For justification, the Bible often uses imagery involving a courtroom. For God’s protection and providence for us, Scripture often speaks of God as a shepherd. God’s judgment is like a fire. His Word is a light. We see the nature and disposition of the Father in Jesus Christ, His Son. With a mind full of these images, we begin to put together a clearer idea of who God is for us — through the sanctified use of our God-given gift of the imagination.

O Father in Heaven, You are spirit, and yet we have seen Your true nature and love toward us in Your Son. Sanctify and strengthen our imagination, that rather than be led into myths and idle speculation, we would use the images You have given in Your Word to see who You are for us. We ask this in the Name of Jesus Christ, by Whom we see You clearly. Amen.

The Third Sunday in Lent

February 28, 2016

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. (Psalm 1:1-3)

Everyone meditates; the question is on what do you meditate: the things of God or the things of men? The first psalm describes for us these two objects of meditation and their results. The man who meditates on the teachings of the wicked “will not stand in the judgment, nor...in the congregation of the righteous. The way of the wicked will perish.” (1:5-6) However, the man who meditates on the Word of God will prosper and bear fruit. He is counted as righteous before God.

There is no better book to teach the proper meditation on the Word of God than the Psalms. The 150 psalm together are so beneficial to us Christians because they link our Scriptural meditation with three other aspects of our spirituality. First, the psalms link our meditation to prayer. Many of the psalms either begin or end with prayer, reminding us that our meditation is always done in the presence of God. Meditation cannot be separated from prayer to God. Second, the psalms teach us to entrust ourselves to God. As we read and meditate on the psalms, our hearts are calmed to trust in the Lord through all the joys and sorrows of life. Finally, the psalms connect our personal meditation on the Scriptures with the corporate worship of the Church. From the psalms we learn that our devotions during the week flow into the Divine Service and flow out of the same.

For centuries, believers of the Old and New Testament eras have relied on the Book of Psalms to learn how to meditate on God’s Word. They do so well, because they teach us faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Lord Jesus Christ, grant that my delight may ever be in Your Word, that I would meditate on it day and night. Amen.

The Third Friday in Lent

March 4, 2016

*“In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full. . . . The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father. In that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father.”
(John 16:23-28)*

Normally, the Christian addresses his prayers to God the Father, through the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ. Of course, there is no rule that says this must be how things are done, but this is the salutary custom of Christian prayer. It’s done for a number of reasons. Firstly, this is the pattern that Jesus teaches the disciples and also the Church. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, He responded “When you pray, say this: ‘Our Father, who art in heaven...’” The origin of this pattern in the prayer the Jesus gave the Church is certainly enough to commend it!

But there is another reason as well: The Christian prays to the Father in the Name of the Son, because it is only on account of Christ’s sacrifice for the sins of the world that we can approach God at all. Thus, the Christian also prays to the Father in the name of Jesus as a reminder that it is only because of Jesus that we can access the Father in prayer at all! But notice something else, Jesus commands the disciples to pray, “Our Father,” which reminds us that Jesus not only grants us the privilege of praying to the Father, but He in fact prays alongside of us!

Dear Father in heaven, because You sent Your Son to atone for the sins of the world, we can come before You with our prayers and petitions. Teach us to pray as we should, being diligent and faithful, that we would always be reminded of Your command and promise that we should pray and that our prayers are heard, for the sake of Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Third Thursday in Lent

March 3, 2016

Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." And he said to them, "When you pray, say: "Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.

And lead us not into temptation." (Luke 11:1-4)

St. Paul admits in Romans 8:26, "We do not know what to pray for as we ought." The good news is that we are not left to our own efforts to figure out how we should pray. Jesus, our great High Priest, is our helper and teacher when it comes to prayer.

There is no better teacher of prayer than Jesus; He is the expert in prayer. Like us, Jesus learned to pray through suffering (for example, in the Garden of Gethsemane). However, unlike us, He faced every temptation of the devil without sin, living His entire life in perfect obedience to His Father. Therefore He alone is our great High Priest, who sympathizes with our weaknesses and intercedes for us.

Throughout the Gospels, and especially in the Gospel of Luke, we find Jesus praying: at His Baptism, before preaching, before calling the disciples, at the Last Supper, and more. Thus His disciples asked Him to teach them to pray. But Jesus did not give them a set of instructions or a checklist to follow. He answered this request by praying. He gave them, and us, the gift of the Lord's Prayer, emphasizing that the most important thing in prayer is faith in Him and His Word.

No, we do not know what to pray for as we ought, if we only have our own words and thoughts to rely on. But Jesus, our great High Priest, has taught us exactly what to pray for, saying, "When you pray, say this."

Father, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation. Amen.

The Third Monday in Lent

February 29, 2016

Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:30-31)

The Christian lives a life of meditation on the Word of God. There are certain practices we can utilize in order to be well prepared to receive from God. In the first place, we are well prepared to receive strength from the Lord when we are attentive to His Word. This is done physically, which is why certain postures have been encouraged for worship, study, and prayer: standing, sitting, kneeling, folding hands, closing eyes, bowing heads, etc. This is also done mentally when we set aside certain times and places for meditation on the Word. The Small Catechism, for example, encourages prayer when you wake up and when you go to sleep, along with meal times. This can be done at the table, at a prayer desk, or a family altar. These are useful practices to focus our attention on God.

In the second place, we are well prepared when meditation on His Word is done daily. There are many good devotionals and reading plans to aid you in daily study of God's Word.

In the third place, we are well prepared when we have memorized portions of God's Word in meditation. Sadly, the practice of memorization has fallen into disfavor in recent times, being considered mindless repetition. But the Holy Spirit is able to bring to mind memorized passages from God's Word at the proper time when a Bible is not handy. We only need remember how our Lord Jesus responded with the Word of God during His temptation in the wilderness to see that the memorized Scripture is a powerful thing. Thus by attentiveness, daily meditation, and memorization, we can be well prepared to receive strength and vision from God through His Word.

Heavenly Father, grant me Your strength and vision day by day as I meditate on Your Word; through Jesus Christ, my Lord. Amen.

The Third Tuesday in Lent

March 1, 2016

When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?"

And there he blessed him. (Genesis 32:25-29)

The patriarch Jacob did not win his greatest victory through his works or efforts, though he certainly tried! Rather, his greatest spiritual victory came when he was defeated by God. When Jacob learned that his brother Esau was coming for him with 400 men, he was afraid and prayed to the Lord for deliverance. That night, he wrestled with a man and lost, and only after the fact did he learn that that man was God. In the same way, we are not able to experience spiritual success, particularly in the matter of prayer, apart from defeat. In other words, God uses the cross in order to teach us to call upon Him in every need.

The devil can easily use our failures in prayer against us, undermining our faith with a sense of guilt over our inability to pray as we ought. However, our inability should not lead to inaction; instead it should lead us back to God and His Word. For there we are taught that prayer is not an obligation or duty that we must fulfill by our own reason or strength, but rather a gift given to us by our loving Father in heaven.

Despite the fact that Jacob did not prevail in his wrestling match, even that his hip was put out of socket, he did not let God go until He had blessed him. Let this be our example: when our own attempts at prayer prove lame, let us hold fast to God our Father until He blesses us, for He will.

Heavenly Father, You command me to pray and promise to hear me. Grant that I rely only on You and Your Word for strength to pray. Amen.

The Third Wednesday in Lent

March 2, 2016

[Jesus said,] "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.

No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you." (John 15:13-15)

On the night before He died on the cross, Jesus gave a tremendous honor to His disciples: He called them "friends." This is a privilege far beyond being called God's "servants," for being friends with Christ entails far more than just working for Him or even with Him in God's kingdom. It means that Jesus stands with us and for us.

In the ancient world, the friends of the king differed from his servants in two important ways. First, servants carried out the decrees of the king whether they understood them or not. Friends, however, were informed by the king as to his reasons for his decrees. In the same way, we Christians know what God is doing and why, for He tells us in His Word. Jesus tells us His Father's good and gracious will for us and for all creation; therefore we serve Him by not only doing what He commands, but also by sharing what we have first received.

Second, servants were not consulted in decision-making at all. They simply did what they were told. The friends of the king, however, were involved in the discussions leading up to the king's decisions. For us Christians, this takes place in prayer. When we pray in Jesus' name, our Father in heaven takes our word into account and listens to us. We intercede for ourselves and others, because we know God's will from His Word. This is only possible when we pray in Jesus' Name, for Jesus stands with us and for us when we bring our needs and the needs of others before His Father. Indeed, it is a great privilege and honor to be called friends of the King.

Lord Jesus, You have called me "friend." Grant that I use this friendship for the sake of others, praying for them according to Your Word. Amen.