



FIRST LUTHERAN MARTYRS AND LUTHER'S FIRST HYMN

We like to think there's no truth outside ourselves, that we can each make our own truth. We say things like "Follow the science" or "It's just a fact," but what we really mean is that everyone else should adopt the reality we've decided upon. We think we're God. Think of other things we say: "Perception is reality." "The medium is the message." "There's no such thing as bad publicity." We are all hard-core spin doctors. We obsess over "fake news." We create social media portraits of ourselves so wildly out of touch with reality that they drive our neighbours and "friends" to despair.

As we learn from the preacher in Ecclesiastes (1:9), *"There is nothing new under the sun."* Nebuchadnezzar tried to create his own gods in the third chapter of Daniel. He even tried to incinerate Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego for not buying into his delusion. In the last chapter of Matthew (28:12-14), the chief priests pay the guards to spread disinformation about Jesus' resurrection. They gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers and said, *"Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.' And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble."*

There was plenty of "fake news" in Martin Luther's day too. In fact, his very first hymn was written and sung to cast light on the shadows of a lie being spread about the martyrdom of two young men for believing the Gospel, the first Lutheran martyrs.

Five hundred years ago, on July 1, 1523, Heinrich Voes and Johann Esch were burned at the stake in Brussels for refusing to deny the Gospel being proclaimed by the Reformation, the truth that we are saved from our sins by grace, through faith, for Christ's sake alone. They, like Luther, were Augustinian monks, but unlike Luther, they had no powerful prince to protect them from the murderous rage of their adversaries.

Not content to have murdered these boys for their faith, the enemies of the Gospel also began to spread the rumour that these martyrs had denied the faith in their last moments on earth. In response, Luther turned to the most powerful social media platform of the day to shed some light on the subject. He wrote a ballad praising these martyrs and upholding their confession of faith. By late summer or early fall, the song had gone "viral" and opened Luther's eyes to the power of song to overcome the shadows of deception.

From this first hymn would come "A Mighty Fortress," his hymn versions of the chief parts of the catechism, our culture of singing the Divine Service as a congregation, and so much more. If you want to read the text of Luther's first hymn, you can find it in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, volume 53, beginning on page 211 (ask to borrow pastor's copy). It is a powerful poetic testimony to the faith of these martyrs. The hymn is called "A New Song Here Shall Be Begun."

"Fake news" is a shadow dispelled by the faintest light. Just think of Luther's most famous hymn, in which we sing of the devil that "one little word can fell him." And still we cling to the lies and the spin and the delusion that we can decide for ourselves what is true.

What drives us to this dishonesty? Fear, ease, convenience? We're motivated by forces more powerful than that. Guilt is what makes liars of us all. We know what we have done and left undone, and, more painfully still, we know why. We know the facts of our sinfulness. They are an ever-present gnawing shame within us. They will not, cannot, be ignored. Like the blood of Abel, they demand an answer.

Sometimes, we deal with our sins by spinning them. Lying isn't really a sin, especially the little white ones I tell. Lust isn't a sin; I'm not really *doing* anything with it; no one's getting hurt by what I think. Selfishness and self-centeredness are really self-care... and what could possibly be wrong with that? Impiety and even blasphemy aren't really all that bad. I mean, does God really care what I say in the middle of a world that's boiling over with pollution and violence and rampant inhumanity?

Which leads to the other way in which we deal with our sins. We tell ourselves that they are real, yes, but they're small - and in all the big ways, we're doing good. I may be selfish and dismissive when it comes to my family members, but I have a low carbon footprint. I may be negligent of my husband or wife, but I do much volunteer work. I may let friends run headlong into hell without bothering to share the Gospel with them, but I vote the right way during every election.

Both kinds of shadows leave us in the dark - the kind that spins our sins as virtues and the kind that let us imagine that we're okay because we're good enough in some areas of our life as if we were aggregated bits of a puzzle and not whole people with integrated body, mind, and soul. Both paths lead us toward a life of hopelessness, uselessness, and loveless desperation. This is what Jesus tells us in John 8:44: *"You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and*

does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies." The lies and shadows are not good enough.

God wants more for us than the fictions we spin in our own imagination. He wants us to have life and to have it to the full. The authorities in Brussels burnt Heinrich and Johann alive because they feared that the Gospel would change their carefully constructed little world of lies. They didn't understand that the Gospel doesn't change the *world*. It changes the *people* in the world. The world remains the same fallen place, even after Jesus' resurrection.

We remain sinners, guilty of having broken every commandment. We try to trick ourselves into believing that we are either saints who don't really sin or sinners who may or may not ever get our sins under control. Those are both lies, and they reveal our lack of imagination. We can't create a new reality. Only the Creator can do that; this is the reality He creates. We are both sinners and saints at the same time. Who among us would imagine that for themselves? No one I know.

Jesus says that our sins are real and that they must be atoned for. They deserve death, and someone must die for them. But Christ takes our place on the cross and pays for our sins with His own innocent life. He doesn't undo our sins. He pays for them. We remain sinners. But because He has redeemed us, we are also saints. That is the truth that we could not create or even imagine for ourselves.

That is the truth for which Heinrich and Johann were murdered. That is the truth that Luther insists we sing about. That is the truth that sets us free. That is why Jesus says to us, to the people who lied about His resurrection, to the murderers in Brussels, to King Nebuchadnezzar, and to all people everywhere, *"If you abide in My Word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"* (John 8:31-32).

And from what are we set free? In the long run, we are set free from damnation and eternal separation from God and His people. But Jesus' death on the cross sets us free here in this world too.

We deny our sinfulness, but the truth is, Christ forgives us, which sets us free to live new lives.

We are set free from lives of deception and despair. It is horrible to go through the world knowing that you have to be someone else in order to be at peace. We deny it. We lie about our ability to do it. We pretend that we are already free, but that lie shackles us, and Christ won't let us remain chained. He distributes His forgiveness to us through His Word and Sacraments.

The grace we receive through these means changes us. St. Paul describes it this way in the third chapter of his Letter to the Colossians: *"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God"* (3:12-16).

These are the graces with which we are dressed in Holy Baptism. These are the truths created for us in Pastoral Absolution. These are the strengths given to us with Christ's body and blood during Holy Communion. This is what we have become in Christ. This is the faith that gives us hope and offers hope to the rest of the world. We can't help but sing when the news is this good. We can't help but tell the truth when it is this liberating. One of the ways we tell the truth is by telling the stories of the saints who've gone before us. Saints like Heinrich and Johann.

The lives of the saints show us how different our lives can be. They show us that hardship is a part of everyone's life, but that misery doesn't have to be. Isn't that the heart of the Beatitudes? They show us that we can love one another without thinking we are earning anything by doing so. They show us that God will attest to the righteousness He creates long after the world has forgotten its own lesser champions. They show us the creative and often shockingly simple ways to spread the Gospel just by telling the truth. They show us how a life, lived in the real world with Jesus as our Saviour, differs from a life lived in the real world on our own. St. John says it this way in 1 John 3:2: *"Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is."*

Truth and beauty come into our lives by God's grace. They are His gift to us in Jesus Christ. This is the refrain of the entire Book of Psalms. This is the new song of the psalmist: *"Oh sing to the Lord a new song"* Psalm 96:1. *"Sing to him a new song"* Psalm 33:3. *"He put a new song in my mouth"* Psalm 40:3. *"I will sing a new song to you, O God"* Psalm 144:9. *"Oh sing to the Lord a new song"* Psalm 98:1. This is the New Song Here Begun by Luther, and this is the song that will never grow old, sung forever by the saints in glory.

We are sinners, yes. But we are also saints! Redeemed by Christ on the cross. Everyone who has lived and died in the faith has made this confession, the same confession Heinrich and Johann made unto death. We are justified by grace through faith for Christ's sake alone. This is the faith we confess when we gather to receive the body and blood of Christ that forgives our sins, strengthens our faith, and fosters our fervent love for one another, a love that tells no lies, trusts no "fake news," a love that replaces shadows with song.

MARY, MARY, QUITE CONTRARY¹

Whatever are Lutherans to make of Mary?

Looking around at the contrary approaches to Mary that other church traditions take, it's easy to be confused. At times, it seems that Christians in the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches elevate Mary almost to the status of a goddess. They pray to her, sing hymns to glorify her and even commend their souls into her keeping at death. On the other hand, many Protestant Christians believe her to be "just like us" - nothing special. That surely is not right either. After all, who among us has been visited by an archangel and been declared highly favoured by God? Who among us has conceived a child by the power of the Holy Spirit and given birth to the long-promised Saviour, the eternal Son of God? Nothing about this screams "just like us." So, is there a third way? Yes.

Before we can identify that third way, however, it is important to understand that the contrary teachings about Mary we see all around us today have their roots not in the Bible but in some *extra-biblical traditions that arose in the history of the Church*.

Mary in the Early Church

There was no apparent devotion to the Virgin Mary in the Church's early years. There was, however, a growing theological reflection upon Mary's role in the salvation narrative. She was frequently depicted in sermons as a "new Eve," and her faithful obedience to the angel's message was seen as a counterpoint to Eve's disobedience. In the art of the catacombs, she was often depicted praying, her hands raised in pious supplication. The idea of her perpetual virginity was also beginning to take firm root in the minds of the faithful, but there was still plenty of room for diverging opinions on this question.

Reflection on Mary grew with intensity as the Church began to hammer out the language of the two natures in Christ. By the third great ecumenical council, held at Ephesus in 431, Mary was very much a topic of

discussion. Was she just the mother of the human Jesus or the very Mother of God (*Theotokos*, God-bearer)? The Church came down solidly on the latter interpretation. By this, the Church Fathers were not saying or implying that Mary was eternal or divine in her own right. Nonetheless, they affirmed that calling Mary the Mother of God was biblical. After all, as Isaiah had foretold in chapter 7, she is the mother of Immanuel, God-with-us. She conceived and bore in her womb and fed at her breasts God the Son, eternally begotten of His Father but born in time of His mother, from whom He received a human nature by the miraculous working of the Holy Spirit.

Mary in the Middle Ages

As time passed, the traditions surrounding the Virgin and her place in Christian devotion and piety continued to expand, and these practices gradually moved from private piety and speculation into public worship. Beginning with the churches of the eastern half of the empire but later spreading also into the West, prayers and hymns began to be offered to Mary in various liturgies. The picture that took firm hold in the hearts of the faithful during the High Middle Ages was of Christ as a stern and forbidding Judge who needed to be appeased and made kind toward us. His mother was thought to be the one for the job. Mother Mary thus became a refuge for sinners, who fled to her and begged her to implore her Son on their behalf - to "pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death," as Catholics repeat to this day in the Rosary. Hand in hand with the invocation of the Virgin came the teaching that she was granted by her Son an early resurrection and enthroned at His side as the Queen of Heaven. This tradition of Mary's Assumption came to be celebrated on August 15th. The notion that Mary was conceived without original sin arose, though not with some significant opposition.

Reform and Reaction

During the Reformation, Lutherans and Protestants alike sought to critique and rein in the unscriptural elements of medieval devotion to Mary. Some of the more radical reformers even destroyed all statuary and pictures of Mary (and of the other saints and even of Christ Himself) and pretty much scrubbed her from their piety entirely. "She's just like us," was their thought. "Nothing special about her." It's sadly true that this more radical approach came to influence later generations of Lutherans. Just ask yourself: Among all St. Peter and St. Paul and even St. James Lutheran churches, have you ever noticed a St. Mary Lutheran Church in your neighbourhood?

¹ Study presented at the November Women's Guild

However, The Lutheran approach, as witnessed in the Book of Concord, differed from that of those more radical reformers. While acknowledging and eliminating the abuses attached to devotion to Mary and the other saints, early Lutherans still envisioned a place in the Church of the Augsburg Confession for a positive remembrance of all the saints, including the Virgin Mary. Thus, Lutherans continued to celebrate the memory of the Virgin Mary in the chief feasts associated with her: Annunciation, Visitation, Purification and, of course, Christmas. The non-biblical feast of the Assumption was largely discontinued in Lutheran use. All invocation of the Virgin or any other saint was set completely aside; Lutherans prayed, as we still do, to the Triune God alone. All nonsense about saintly merit was discarded by the Lutheran reformers without question, even as they continued to honour Mary in a biblical way.

A Lutheran View of Mary

How, then, should Lutherans view Mary today? Through the Bible, of course!

In the Gospels, we learn that this young virgin, betrothed to a carpenter named Joseph, was a descendant of King David. Before the betrothed couple came together, the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would conceive and bear a Son and call His name Jesus. In great faith, Mary responded to the angel's words: *"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word"* (Luke 1:38).

After the angel left her, Mary made her way into the hill country of Judea and arrived at the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth. As Mary called out a greeting, John the Baptist in Elizabeth's womb leapt for joy, and Elizabeth cried out in amazement: *"Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ... And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord"* (Luke 1:42-45). Shortly thereafter, Mary herself prophesied: *"For behold, from now on, all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me"* (Luke 1:48-49). It has thus been a pious custom ever since - and one that Lutherans can certainly embrace - for Christians to speak of Mary as "the Blessed Virgin."

Mary speaks of people calling her blessed not because she is great or has done great things but because God, her Saviour, *has done great things for her*. Elizabeth specifically calls Mary blessed because she believed what God said, in contrast to her husband Zechariah, who doubted the angel's words and was stricken with nine months of muteness! Many years after the events in

Luke 1, a woman would cry out to Jesus: *"Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts at which you nursed!"* To which He replied: *"Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"* (Luke 11:27-28). In saying this, Jesus was not disrespecting His mother, but He was making sure we don't miss out on what made His mother truly blessed: not merely that she was privileged to give birth to Him, but rather, that her deepest blessedness came when God spoke His promise to her and she believed it - and not only believed it but kept and *"treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart"* (Luke 2:19; 2:51).

All of this means that Mary is the virgin mother foretold in Isaiah 7:14. She is the Mother of Immanuel, the Mother of God-with-us. This, of course, is not saying that she is divine, eternal, or anything like that. We confess instead that this truly human creature, who freely admitted herself in need of a Saviour (Luke 1:47), was chosen by God's grace to become the mother of the Eternal Word. She really is the Mother of God. God the Eternal Word took on flesh in her womb, nursed at her breasts and was swaddled in the warmth of her embrace.

Mary is not, then, "contrary" to our confession. As Lutherans, we remember her and thank God for her life. We find our own faith strengthened when we ponder the way God's grace worked in her. We certainly want to imitate her joyous "yes" to the will of God and her holding tight to the words and promises she heard.

Fittingly, Mary's last recorded words in the Bible are, *"Do whatever He tells you"* (John 2:5). In this, Mary sets a fine example for us to follow - one that invites us all to trust in her Son's love and join the psalmist in crying out: *"Not to us, O Lord! Not to us but to Your name be glory"* (Psalm 115:1).

ADVENT DECREASING THAT CHRISTMAS MAY INCREASE

Advent is here, and Christmas is approaching. It's very easy for us to overlook Advent because of Christmas. This is a bit unfortunate in a way, and in another way it is actually very fitting.

It is unfortunate, because the significance of Christmas is not really grasped fully without Advent. Advent is a season of repentance and comfort in anticipation of the Word becoming flesh. Advent means "coming." Jesus came. He comes, and He is coming. He came in the flesh. He continues to come in the flesh through His Supper as His Word is proclaimed among us by His Spirit. And He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. Advent gives us the awareness that we are standing before our God who comes to draw near to us. We learn from John the Baptist to repent of our sins and make straight the way

of the Lord. Advent is therefore a very important season for us to observe so that we might appreciate the significance of Christmas. Christmas is about God claiming our own flesh and blood as His own in order to redeem us from sin and death. Advent teaches us about our weaknesses, and it directs us to take great comfort in the Son of God becoming flesh to serve us and give His life as a ransom for us.

On the other hand, it is fitting that Advent doesn't receive as much attention as Christmas. In Advent we devote two Gospel lessons to John the Baptist. John was the forerunner to Christ who preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He pointed to Christ as the one who brings that forgiveness by taking away the sin of the world (John 1:29). He prepared the way for the Lord by preaching repentance. Repentance consists of a broken and contrite spirit, which God does not despise (Ps 51:17). This broken heart is the heart that Christ honours and adorns with the joy of His birth, death, and resurrection.

All of John's ministry, and indeed all of Advent, is about preparing us for Christmas, in which God claims our flesh and blood as His most treasured possession, so dear to Him that He suffers His own wrath to redeem it from sin and hell. This is why John said, *"He must increase, but I must decrease"* (John 3:30). John the Baptist would sooner have us not even remember him, but only remember Christ. This is why he called himself a voice, just as Isaiah prophesied (Is 40:3). The Word, which he proclaimed, and the baptism which he preached, find their fulfilment on the cross of Christ where He fulfilled all righteousness (Matt 3:15). Just as our Lord said, *"I have a baptism to undergo"* (Luke 12:50), a baptism of fire in which God's wrath was satisfied for us. Therefore, because of the Christ whom John proclaimed, our baptism is a baptism into His death and resurrection (Rom 6:4).

Thus, everything that John did decreased so that Christ would increase and fulfil our salvation. And this brings us to why it is fitting that Advent is overshadowed by Christmas. John must decrease, and Christ must increase. Likewise, Advent must decrease, and Christmas must increase.

We don't learn repentance for the sake of repentance. We learn repentance for the sake of the joy of Christ, the incarnate Son of God, who fills our broken hearts with the cheer of Christmas, the cheer of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life and salvation.

So, on the one hand, don't neglect Advent. Come to church during this blessed season. But on the other hand, let Advent prepare you for Christmas. As it decreases, look forward to Christmas in which the Sun of Righteousness increases your confidence before God.

A COMMUNITY OF JOY

Someone once said, "Pastor, I wouldn't join that church of yours for anything. They're all a bunch of hypocrites!" I responded, "True. And there's always room for one more."

Despite its weaknesses, shortcomings, mistakes, and sins (and in many ways precisely because of such things), the Church is a community of joy. The secret to living a good-news life in a bad-news world is learning both to lay down our burdens upon Christ and the gathered community (the Church) and, in turn, to take up the burdens of others gathered there. Luther stated it brilliantly. He once said, *"Whoever is in despair, distressed by a sin-stricken conscience or terrified by death or carrying some other burden upon his heart, if he would be rid of them all, let him go joyfully to the sacrament of the altar and lay down his woe in the midst of the community and seek help from the entire company of the spiritual body - just as a citizen whose property has suffered damage or misfortune at the hands of his enemies makes complaint to his town council and fellow citizens and asks them for help. The immeasurable grace and mercy of God are given us in this sacrament to the end that we might put from us all misery and tribulation and lay it upon the community, and especially on Christ. Then we may with joy find strength and comfort..."* (Luther's Works, 35:53).

There's always room for another sinner in church. It's true that "no man is an island," and doubly true that we are not meant as Christians to face this life alone. That's because the Church is a body, the "body of Christ," as the New Testament repeatedly affirms (Ephesians 4:1ff). The Word of God comes from outside of us. Christ acted and continues to act outside of us, for us. The Word of God confronts us with a reality quite at odds with anything we may stir up within ourselves.

"Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery" (Hebrews 2:14-15). Christ's Incarnation and Passion are the ultimate "communal events." He took on the flesh of all humankind, the ultimate participation in the lives of others. Even when faith comes by an individual reading the text of the Scriptures, such faith is not the result of an individual's self-chosen interaction with a document that conveys historical events. The text of the Scriptures puts us face to face with a person, Jesus Christ, the very Word of God (John 1:1). To confront the Bible is to confront Christ. *"The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joint and if marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account"* (Hebrews 4:12-13). Encountering Jesus is, at the same time, the pull toward His body. That body is a community of believers who gather locally to receive His gifts continually in the Word of the Gospel preached by one called by the community to be absolved and to receive His

body and blood.

THE BENEDICTION

Sometimes in worship, people leave before the service is complete. When this happens, they miss out on receiving a wonderful blessing from our Father. The last words of worship are: *"The LORD bless you and keep you! The LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you! The LORD look on you with favour and give you peace!"* These are words taken directly from Numbers 6:25-26.

In the worship life of the Israelites, the LORD wanted to be known as a gracious and merciful God. Therefore He gave the priests the words of the Aaronic benediction, or blessing. Because the words of this benediction so clearly present God as the God of free and faithful grace, this blessing is also gladly used in the New Testament era, as we do today when we close our worship services.

In referring to Himself, God here uses the special name that He has chosen for Himself, and therefore each letter of the word LORD is capitalised. Through this name, the LORD presents himself to us as the *"compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin"* (Exodus 34:6-7). As such a compassionate and gracious God, the LORD reaches out to us to bless us.

Because the word LORD is repeated three times, we also perceive a reference to the Trinity. Though we, as creatures, are limited in our ability to probe the depths of the Trinity, we can appreciate the truth that the triune God acts on our behalf. As each of the divine persons carries out His work, the triune God reaches out to bless all those who believe in the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ. All three are involved in our salvation.

The first phrase refers especially to the work of God the Father. The blessing from the Father includes all aspects of our life. Wherever we look, we can see how the LORD blesses us through the physical and material possessions that He gives us. Luther's explanation to the First Article of the Creed summarises these blessings very concisely, noting that the Lord *"gave me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my mind and all my abilities ... richly and daily providing clothing and shoes, food and drink, property and home, spouse and children, land, cattle, and all I own."*

We need only look about in our homes! Look at the food and furniture, the children and cars, dishes and dresses, the suits and sofas, and even the electricity mysteriously present in the wall sockets. Count the many ways in which the LORD blesses us with temporal gifts. Just as surely the LORD blesses us with talents and abilities. With mind and hand, we can indeed make a living. With the same mind and hands, we can serve him.

Further, our heavenly Father blesses and keeps us as He answers our requests when we pray in the Lord's Prayer,

"Lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil." How often the Lord keeps us by preventing problems and dangers from overwhelming us! How zealously the LORD works to keep us from going to those places where we shall be tempted to sin! Yet, on the other hand, how loving the LORD is when He allows tests to come into our lives, for He promises that He will also make a way of escape and that all things will work together for good to those who love him. Ultimately the richest way in which the LORD blesses us is that He keeps us faithful to the gospel to the end of our lives. It is also His blessing that He will deliver us from this present evil world into the perfection of His glory in heaven. All these blessings the Lord gladly includes in the benediction: *"The LORD bless you and keep you."*

The second phrase of the benediction addresses the fact that human beings are sinful. By birth man is in rebellion against God. The only hope for such rebels lies in the fact that God is gracious to us. How clearly we see God's love for us in the work of our Redeemer, Jesus Christ. Using Luther's explanation of the Second Article of the Creed, we note that God is gracious to us in Jesus, who *"has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. All this he did that I should be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness."* That is God's grace - God's undeserved kindness to us. It is grace in Christ. For in Christ, God shows His love to us - a deep, profound love that loves us also when we deserve it least because of our sin. In such love God makes His face shine upon us. Just as the face of a proud, new mother radiates love, so God looks at us, covering all our sins with the perfect redemption that Christ has purchased for us. All these blessings the Lord gladly includes in the benediction: *"The LORD make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you."*

In the third phrase of the benediction, we see the work of the third person of the Trinity: God the Holy Spirit. The phrase *"The LORD look on you with favour and give you peace!"* indicates that the LORD gladly looks upon each of us as individuals. By contrast, how sad it would be if God would turn His back on any of us, ignore us, and leave us to the lot that we deserve. How wonderful this work of the Holy Spirit! He turns rebels into His children by leading them to faith in Christ Jesus! He makes the blind to see by leading them to Christ, the Light of the world. As the Giver of Life, He gives life to those who are dead in trespasses and sin. Every believer is a miracle of the Holy Spirit! It is He who has *"called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith"* (Luther's Catechism, Third Article). In the miracle of conversion, the Holy Spirit gives us peace because we know that through Christ we are reconciled to God. We also know with the

certainty of faith that as long as we are right with God through Christ, everything in our life will also work out right for us. The believer enjoys a peace that stands up in the fiercest trials - yes, even in the face of death. What peace there is to know that whether we live or whether we die, we are the LORD's. Anchored in this faith, we can exclaim with Saint Paul: *"Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Romans 8:38-39). Angels proclaimed this peace at the first Christmas Eve: *"Peace on earth, good will to man."* *Jesus promised the peace from the Holy Spirit when he said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you"* (John 14:27). Your pastor prays that you may enjoy this peace each time after the sermon when he uses these words: *"And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 4:7).

What marvellous blessings the LORD gives to every believer! His divine power and love stand behind each of the words in the benediction: *"So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them."* The name of God was indeed on the Israelites, for in the name Israel is the meaning "man of God." In the New Testament, that name is also on us as we claim the name Christian, which really means that we are followers of Christ. Of such believers the LORD gladly says, *"I shall bless them."* This promise makes the benediction far more than mere words or a pious wish. The LORD stands behind each word. As the triune God, He gladly grants these blessings to each of us. So why would anyone want to miss hearing them?

JESUS CHRIST

Christianity is a faith - a faith that is based on the activity of God in history. The writer to the Hebrews began his letter, *"God has long ago spoken at many times and in many ways to our fathers by the prophets, but has in these last days spoken to us by His Son"* (1:1-2). This was God's unique intervention into history for the salvation of man. Jesus was born at Bethlehem in Judea during the reign of Caesar Augustus. He was executed during the reign of Tiberius some thirty years later. His crime in the eyes of the Romans was apparently that He called Himself a king. The grave did not hold Jesus. He arose "on the third day" and appeared to His followers. This was the foundation of the Christian faith.

Jesus spent His life working in one province of the Roman Empire, a "worldwide" state covering the area surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. Jesus lived during a crucial period of this empire's history. Caesar Augustus's reign was the beginning of the imperial period. As Rome slowly encompassed the Mediterranean, the old city-state governmental and social structures broke down, and Italy

was plunged into a century of civil and social war. It was Augustus who brought peace and justice out of this chaos. And it was precisely at this time - a long-sought-after period of peace - that Jesus taught. Peter characterised Jesus' activities in the short phrase *"He went about doing good"* (Acts 10:38). If He went about visiting the socially disinherited as well as people of influence. He also taught whoever was willing to listen. Jesus' language was not learned but rather evidenced the quality of abandon. He did not generally quote other sources as authority, and when He did, He had no scruples about suggesting that Moses said certain things only because the people would not have accepted the whole counsel of God. One poet has characterised His language as "gigantesque." Jesus could call His followers *"the salt of the earth"* (Matthew 5:13) and refer to Himself as *"the door"* (John 10:9). He told the man whose eye caused him to sin to *"tear it out"* (Matthew 5:29). He reprovved people who were so concerned with the speck in their neighbour's eye that they didn't see the log protruding out of their own; He rebuked teachers whose lives seemed as pure as the whitewash on a tomb but whose true, inner qualities could better be likened to *"dead people's bones"* (Matthew 23:27).

It wasn't merely the way Jesus said things that struck people but also what He said. Mark summarised His preaching: *"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel"* (Mark 1:15). "Repent!" Jesus insisted that the people to whom He was speaking were hiding from God's presence. Instead of listening to what God had really said - *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind... You shall love your neighbour as yourself"* (Matthew 22:37, 39) - they were following the rules by which they interpreted this Law of God to suit their own convenience. They defined the meaning of "love" and "neighbour" to the point where they could claim to be doing the Law. Jesus distinguished between what the people had been taught and what God had actually commanded. He called them from hiding behind their own systems of morality into the living presence of God with the word "Repent." But at the same time, He announced that the kingdom of God was present in His person. The prophets had said that in His own time, God would descend and reign among men. This reign, Jesus claimed, was being inaugurated in Himself. This is the Gospel, the Good News, to which Mark referred.

His disciples spread this message of *"Repent and believe in the Gospel" wherever they went in the Roman Empire and beyond, always insisting that they behold "His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth"* (John 1:14). The letters of Paul, Peter, John, and James breathed this message. They confidently preached, "There is forgiveness with God," since Jesus Christ fought the forces of darkness and won! *"In Christ God was*

reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Corinthians 5:19). It was the message of victory over death through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead that summarised their mission to men. Easter was the great feast day of the early Christians because it was on this day that they celebrated their victory over death.

TRUE FALSE DOCTRINE

Married men often struggle to say the right things to their wives. What they say may be altogether correct and truthful, but it still comes out entirely wrong. I am sure that more than one husband has pleaded with his upset wife, "What did I say?" Marriage is not the only relationship that can be deeply affected by saying truthful things that don't turn out to be helpful. This dilemma often confronts parish pastors.

False doctrine may be entirely truthful, just preached at the wrong time, to the wrong person, and under the wrong circumstances. The Devil does his best work when he misapplies the truth. Out-and-out immorality or gross false doctrine are easy to spot. If your pastor begins to suggest in his sermons that sexual relations outside of marriage are good and then begins to campaign to lead retreats with teenage girls, you have a pretty good idea of what the problem is. If your preacher begins to reject the divinity of Jesus by denying that Christ knows all things, the average layman can lay his finger on the predicament. It is much more difficult to spot and combat it when your pastor begins to proclaim that Jesus is the example that we are to follow in our lives, because the Bible teaches precisely this (1 Tim. 1:16, 1 Peter 2:21). Jesus is our example of holiness, righteousness, and perfect patience.

But where does such a proclamation leave us? It leaves us feeling defeated and depressed because we recognise immediately that we do not live up to the standard set by the eternal Son of God. This is especially oppressive when we are struggling with trials in our lives, at times when we feel our faith is under attack by the Devil, the world, and our sinful flesh. We shall never stand up to the impossible standard of Christ. All of this is perfectly true. Christ is our example. We must follow His example. We fail. We are sinners. Christ damns sinners. Therefore, I am damned. According to the gospel, this is truthful false doctrine.

The Bible also portrays Christ as the friend of sinners who has nothing but overabundant compassion for them. This Christ must be presented in all His sweetness and mercy to sinners burdened by their sins and struggling with their personal trials. This is why dividing the word of truth is such a difficult art and why such intensive training and long practice must go into the making of a parish pastor who cares for souls; it is so easy to say the right thing that is absolutely wrong. Those who are struggling with their sin must hear of the Christ who dies as a substitute for sinners

rather than our example. When Christ, as an example, is preached to struggling sinners, such preaching is true false doctrine.

FROM THE PASTOR

The past couple of months have been extremely busy. A wonderful Reformation Day service was held at Trinity Marburg, followed by the annual Children's Sunday School picnic. It's always good to have these fellowship days, as fellowship among brothers and sisters in Christ is vitally important for the health of the church.

The following week, on All Saints' Day, the church at Trinity Oakey was filled with worshippers who attended the confirmation day service of four young women who renewed their baptismal promise to remain faithful to Jesus. Trinity, Lauren, Justine, and Gemma, don't put your Catechisms away! Keep studying it along with your Bibles. Many people believe that confirmation is graduation from all further study of God's Word. But this is false. We never stop learning all through our lives.

As one confirmation class graduates, another one has begun below the Range, and early into the new year, another class will begin on the Downs. It's always enjoyable to teach these young Christians the way of salvation!

Our Women's Guild held a wonderful breakup at Lowood. About 26 were in attendance, and it was also nice to see some men come along to partake in our study and then to come to our breakup lunch, which was held at Hotel Lowood.

I have carried out a couple of trips south lately, and in these trips, I called upon Clarence Priebbenow. He did ask me to pass on his greetings to everyone, so please take this as an acknowledgement of his greeting.

Our student Patrick continues to meet with me most weeks for classes. He is also continuing classes via Zoom with the Walther Theological Seminary. All the details of his classes are in the Seminary Committee meeting minutes. If you haven't seen a copy, ask pastor for one or go to the member's section on the AELC website.

I am in the process of putting together a cost package for travelling to the USA to meet members of the ULMA and visit the Ark Encounter and the Creation Museum. I am planning dates around the first two weeks of August. As I write this, the biggest cost will be the airfares, which are about \$2600 return per person. I shall have more details of the cost of the trip early in the New Year.

I must apologise that I haven't been able to do as much visiting lately - there is simply so much happening that I run out of time. Still, I carry out as much as possible. If you know of anyone who would appreciate a visit, please let me know.

May you all have a holy and blessed Advent and Christmas, and a wonderful New Year!