

There He Is

**40 Days of Presence
for the Season of Lent**

A Devotional

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A Brief Page of Introduction

Where is God?

It's the plaintive cry of a dying world, because the need for divine intervention is all around. On the international scale in this new year, we've witnessed war violence, terror attacks and 220,000 killed by a wave of water. On the personal level, many have undergone their own tragedies of injury, terminal disease, death and more. Given the grief one can witness and experience, it is easy for many to conclude that this world is God-forsaken. It's not, of course, for that would truly be hell. The search for God is still on.

There will be those who hold that there is no God. In that case, there is simply no hope. There will be those who believe that God is whatever you believe Him to be. In that case, they look for help from their imagination, and they will find no deliverance from real enemies. There will be those who believe that God is as close as our feeling that He is. This means, of course, that when you are most despairing, He will feel far away and no help at all. Some will say that God is in heaven; and as long as we can reach out to Him for strength, He will deliver. But heaven is a long, long reach. We don't need a God to reach out to; we need one who gathers us to Himself as a hen gathers her chicks. Some will say, "He's here, in my heart." There is truth to this, but the heart is deceitful above all things (Jer. 17:9); therefore, we can never be sure we have found Him there, or if our hearts are playing tricks. And some will say that it's a silly question to start with: "Where is God? He's everywhere, of course." But while God is indeed omni-present, He is not present everywhere for you, with grace and comfort. The Bible declares a better answer, one that is the lifeblood of the Church.

In current times, Lutheran doctrine and practice are unappealing to many, criticized as ineffective, unattractive and ordinary. Even many Lutherans seem apologetic for their doctrine and worship because it seems so banal and unspectacular. "We do it because we've always done it this way," is a common statement, sometimes of derision, sometimes resignation. Frankly, "we've always done it this way" is a lousy excuse to keep doing anything, and the purpose of this study is present the simply, joyful truth that dominates Lutheran theology: Christ has died for the sins of the world, and now He remains present with His people in His means of grace. That's where God is.

In midweek Lenten sermons, pastors have a traditional choice: they can preach on the season, or a series that instructs the congregation on important doctrines of Scripture. This devotional seeks to do both. As we make our way through the 40 days of Lent, we'll witness the Lord's presence with His people through Scripture and into today. You may find that some oft-criticized aspects of the Christian faith are truly great blessings and how things are supposed to be. Each day will build on the previous; hang in there if you don't find application right away. By the end, I pray, you will find the comfort of how truly near the Lord is to His people. To you.

Although not every devotion will seem to have a Lenten theme, the presence of God with grace throughout history hinges on one day, Good Friday: because, above all, there He is on the cross so that He might bring forgiveness to you.

February 9, 2005 (Ash Wednesday)

Garden and Golgotha

Read: Genesis 3:1-15 (If you have time, Rom. 5:14-21)

And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. (Gen. 3:8)

They seem so different, Eden and Golgotha. On the one hand, you have a paradise created by God so that He pronounces it “good;” and when the Lord calls something “good,” it means that it's perfect, holy, without flaw. On the other hand, you have a hill called “the place of the skull.” Criminals are executed there; and on Good Friday, man shows his complete rejection of the Lord by putting Him to death on a cross. It's Adam and Eve in the garden, an angry mob on the hill. It's a perfect portrait of life vs. a dirge of death. At Eden, the first Adam falls into sin and brings death into all the world. At Golgotha, the second Adam dies to redeem the world from sin. In many ways, the two scenes are polar opposites.

However, the two have a vital commonality: in both places, God is there. Really there. The one true God is not one to leave us saying, “He's here somewhere;” but for His people, He gives them something to point to, to say, “There He is.” In Genesis 3, He is walking in the garden; He has come to visit Adam and Eve; and, if they were still without sin, they could walk with the glorious Lord and look upon His face. As it is, He walks through Eden, giving the sinful couple the opportunity to hide their faces, lest they look on His holiness and die on the spot in their unrighteousness; for no sinner can look on the face of God and live (Ex. 33:20).

Likewise, God is on Golgotha: one can point and say, “There He is,” because He is there for all to see. The Creator of heaven and earth is hanging on the cross to die for the sins of the world. He is undoing what Adam did, and it's astonishing. Rather than turn His back or annihilate His rebellious creation at the Fall, the Lord straightaway promises to crush the devil's head and redeem His people (Gen. 3:15). He keeps His promise on Good Friday: there He is, on the cross.

As you spend the next 40 days (plus Sundays) preparing for Easter, remember your twin birthright as a Christian. First, the Lord, your Savior, goes to the cross and wins your salvation, and this is solely His doing. You are saved wholly by His work, not any of yours. Second, as He has through history, your Savior constantly accompanies His people so that they know of His presence. He is not content to remain “out there somewhere,” nor does He require you to feel Him only in your heart. So that you might be sure of your salvation, the Lord promises to be present in means so that you can say with hope and joy, “There He is—and He's there with grace and mercy for me.” It was true at Eden and Golgotha. It's true for you, too.

Prayers: *Throughout this season of Lent, you are encouraged to make use of Martin Luther's orders for morning or evening prayer as appropriate, as found in the Small Catechism.*

“Thus in the Old Testament
faces of the Lord were
the pillar of fire,
the cloud,
and the mercy seat;

in the New Testament,
Baptism,
the Lord's Supper,
the ministry of the Word, and the like.

By means of these
God shows us,
as by a visible sign,
that He is with us,
takes care of us,
and is favorably inclined toward us.”

—Martin Luther (AE 1:309)

Thursday, February 10

Read: Exodus 3:1-14 (If you have time, Ex. 4:1-23)

The Burning Bush*So He said, "I will certainly be with you." (Ex. 3:12)*

It was more than a burning bush. The fact that it was burning, but not consumed, was curious enough. But there was something greater about what Moses saw: it was what he was afraid to see. Did you catch it in verse 4? "God called to him from the midst of the bush." The Lord wasn't perched in heaven, doing a ventriloquist act with the bush as His puppet. He was there, concealing His glory in a shrub. His presence made the ground holy, and Moses was afraid to look at the bush, lest he see the face of God (Ex. 3:6). If he wanted, Moses could point to the bush, albeit eyes shut, and say, "There He is."

Although the Lord's holy presence inspired fear in Moses, He was not there to do him harm. Instead, God announced that He was going to use Moses as His instrument to deliver His people from slavery in Egypt. They had been enslaved for 400 years; but they were still the Lord's firstborn son (Ex. 4:22), and God would not forsake His people. When sending Moses, the Lord gave him words to say; or, better, the Lord gave him *His Word* to say. He also gave Moses His name—Yahweh, "I AM," so that Moses would go as the Lord's ambassador, under His protection. Even so, Moses wasn't keen on the idea of returning to Egypt; there were people there who wanted to kill him, and he wasn't a very good speaker. Despite the reluctance of Moses, however, the Lord would still use him. Moses' weaknesses didn't matter—the Lord's Word did. He would bring His people out of Egypt, and Moses had the privilege of being an instrument of His use.

One more thing: the Lord declared to Moses, "I will certainly be with you." Keep that in mind for tomorrow's devotion.

Whether or not your "To Do" list includes liberating people from tyranny today (and, if you're in the military, it just might), you have these promises from God. You are His instrument by which He seeks to serve those around you, be it staff sergeant, school teacher or retail clerk. The Lord does not send you alone, but gives you His Word; and by His Word, you know that you go as His beloved child. Where you suffer weakness, His grace is sufficient. Where you sin, His forgiveness cleanses you.

You can be sure that you are not forsaken. Why? For one thing, look at the cross and say, "There He is, for me." Not only that, but as He did for Moses, He gives you His name. He gives it to you personally at the font: "(Your Name), I baptize *you* in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." You see, you have better than a burning bush to announce God's presence; spectacular as it was, that shrub didn't forgive sins. But you've received God's grace by water and the Word. How do you know you're not forsaken? Remember your Baptism: There He is, for you.

Friday, February 11

Read: Exodus 14:(10-18)19-31

The Pillar of Cloud and Fire*And the Angel of God, who went before the camp of Israel, moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud went from before them and stood behind them. (Ex. 4:19)*

"I will certainly be with you," the Lord promised Moses (Ex. 3:12); and remember, your Lord is a "here I AM" God when delivering grace, so that you can be sure of His presence for your salvation. The Lord most certainly went with Moses to Egypt, working plague after plague to demonstrate the folly of resisting His Word. He Himself went through Egypt and took the lives of the firstborn in the tenth plague, while His people were protected by the blood of the lamb at the Passover. But when it came time to lead His people out of Egypt, they could point to Him. There He was, in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Again, God did not remain in heaven, towing a cloud around to guide Israel. He was present in that pillar of cloud and fire, cloaking His glory as He led His people. When Pharaoh's army drew near, the Lord moved between it and Israel to protect His people. The following day, He led the Israelites on dry ground across the Red Sea; then, when Pharaoh and his army pursued to do them harm, God closed up the waters and washed them away.

St. Paul writes, "Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea..." (I Cor. 10:1-2). (If you need a verse to prove that "baptize" doesn't always mean "immerse," this is a good one; Moses and the people stayed dry, while only Pharaoh and his army were immersed!) The Lord was present in the cloud, and used water that day to save His people and drown their would-be murderers. There He was.

Once again in today's devotion, we point to the cross and say, "There He is." There, on the cross, is the Lord at work to redeem us; there, He's the fulfillment of Passover as the Lamb who is slain to take away the sin of the world. And each of us looks to the font and says, "There He is, for me!" There, He drowns an enemy far crueler than Pharaoh: He destroys your old sinful nature that would drag you to hell forever.

You still have enemies that seek your life. As the Israelites inexplicably longed at times to go back to Egypt and be slaves, so you will seek a return to the slavery of sin. Death still pursues, seeking to use disease and affliction to make you forsake your hope in Christ. Therefore, as surely as the Lord went before the Israelites in the wilderness in the cloud, so also He accompanies you by His Word. He tells you that, because your Old Adam is drowned in Baptism, you are His beloved, firstborn child. And because you are His firstborn, death for you is like the Red Sea—a formidable barrier that He will use to deliver you to everlasting life, when you will see Him in His glory. That's what makes Holy Baptism such a great comfort: you can look back at that day and say, "There He was, making me His own forever; and so I am His today."

Saturday, February 12

The Lord's Supper at Sinai

Read: Exodus 24:1-18 (If you have more time, Ex. 19:16-25)

So they saw God, and they ate and drank. (Ex. 24:11)

As promised, the Lord led Israel to Mt. Sinai, present in the pillar of cloud and fire all the time. At Mt. Sinai, the Lord descended onto the top of the mountain with darkness, quake, lightning, thunder and trumpet; and except for Moses, no one was allowed on the mountain, lest they see God and die (Ex. 19:21). God was present with His people, close enough that they could point to the cloud and say, "There He is;" but not too close.

Then comes Exodus 24. The Lord commanded Moses and seventy-three men to ascend the mountain and worship Him. Before they went, however, look what happened in the camp. Moses read the Word of God to the people, who confessed it to be true and right. Then, sacrifices were offered; Moses took half the blood and poured half of it on the altar, presenting it to God. He then took the other half and gave it to the people; he sprinkled it on them and said, "This is the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you according to all these words." (Ex. 24:8) The Lord had gathered His people and spoken His Word to them; the blood of the sacrifices sealed the covenant.

It was only after the blood of the covenant was shed that Moses and the others climbed up Sinai. There, they saw God. There, they ate and drank. Still very much on earth, they had a foretaste of heaven as they dined in the presence of God. There He was.

The same privilege is yours, because the Sacrifice of the New Covenant has been made for you. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has shed His blood for you, for your salvation. On the one hand, God has accepted this sacrifice for your sins. On the other, the risen Jesus says to you, "Take and drink, this cup is the New Testament in my blood, which is shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins." While you do not see the Lord in His glory as Moses and the elders did on Sinai, make no mistake: in Holy Communion, there He is. Your Savior is truly, body-and-blood present to forgive your sins. He does not orchestrate this meal from heaven, but visits you with forgiveness, strength and peace.

As this first short week of Lent concludes, here is cause for reflection and the ongoing theme of this devotional: consistently, throughout Scripture, the Lord remains present with His people. He is not far away, but very near. As you make your way in this season between Christmas and Easter, it is cause for great wonder that the Lord became flesh to dwell among us (Jn. 1:14); and it is an even greater wonder that He offers that flesh and sheds His blood on the cross for your sins. But He is still with you now, just as present in His means of grace. He speaks His Word to you as surely as He did to Moses. He washes you clean of your sins in Holy Baptism, as surely as He led Israel across the Red Sea. And He gives you His body and blood—the same body and blood that lay in the manger, hung on the cross, and rose again—to forgive your sins and keep you as His beloved child.

Sunday, February 13 (The 1st Sunday in Lent)

The Temptation

Read: Matthew 4:1-11 (If you have time, read Lev. 16:4-22)

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. (Matt. 4:1)

The Sundays between Ash Wednesday and Easter are not part of the forty days; they are Sundays *in* Lent, but not *of* Lent. Even as we observe a penitential season, we take a break each Sunday morning to rejoice in our crucified and risen Lord. So in this devotional, we'll take a break from the sequence of devotions and look at the [series A] Gospel lesson for the day.

Whenever I prepare a sermon on the Gospel lesson, a common joy in each is this: there He is. Whatever Jesus is doing in the Gospel lesson, He is present, become flesh, and dwelling among us. And whatever He is doing, He is doing for us.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus undergoes temptation in the wilderness. Between Egypt and the Promised Land, the children of Israel were in the wilderness. The Lord was with them in the cloud, providing for them: He sent manna, provided water as needed, and ensured that their sandals and garments didn't wear out—for forty years! Still, the people consistently gave into temptation and murmured against Him. During that time, the Lord instituted the annual Day of Atonement. On that day, two goats were chosen: one was sacrificed, its blood presented to God. After the sacrifice, the high priest would lay his hands on the other and confess the sins of the people on it; then this scapegoat was led into the wilderness, never to be seen again. Thus the people were assured that their sins were taken far from them.

All of this pointed to Jesus. The first goat is obvious, for its blood was shed for the sins of the people, even as Jesus was sacrificed at the cross for the sins of the world. But the scapegoat also points to Jesus. At the start of His public ministry, He was baptized in the Jordan; there, He took on the burden of man's sin. Immediately, He *was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness*; and there, He resisted every last one of Satan's temptations.

As you read of His temptation in the wilderness, remember: there He is, for you. Israel went into the wilderness and succumbed to temptation again and again. So do you. Not a day goes by where you and I do not sin in this wilderness, as we await the promised land of heaven. Therefore, Jesus went into the wilderness and did what Israel—and we—couldn't do. On the way to the cross, bearing the sin of the world, He obeyed His Father perfectly and refused all temptation. Why? For you, to give you credit for His perfect obedience even as He died for your disobedience.

As we approach our Lord Jesus in private prayer or Divine Service, we do so with this glad comfort: *For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.* (Heb. 4:15-16) What joy! Because Jesus resisted temptation for you, you can be certain He hears your prayers and works all things for your good.

Monday, February 14

Tabernacle and Temple

Read: Exodus 40:18-38 (If you have time, 1 Kings 8:1-16)

Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. (Ex. 40:34)

There He is, drawing nearer.

The Lord led His people through the wilderness in that glorious pillar of cloud. They could point to the Lord, hidden there, but the Lord drew nearer. He commanded that the Israelites build a tabernacle—a tent of meeting, and He gave them exact specifications that take up the last six chapters of Exodus. God was so exacting for a reason: the tabernacle of meeting was not a place for people to meet one another, but a place for man to meet God. This tabernacle would be the Lord's house on earth. Thus, when the tabernacle was completed, the glory of the Lord filled the tent because the Lord was moving in. His chamber was called the Holy of Holies (or Most Holy Place), and His throne was the mercy seat on top of the Ark of the Covenant. If you have time, take a moment and see how the book of Exodus ends: the people are still in the wilderness, but with the comfort that the Lord is very present with them throughout the journey (Ex. 40:36-38). How do they know? Because they can see His home, overshadowed by His glory: there He is, tenting with them in the middle of the camp.

Later on, when the Promised Land is conquered, there's no need for a movable tabernacle anymore, and King Solomon has the privilege of building a stationary temple. The detail is incredible, once again because this is to be God's dwelling place on earth. What happens when the temple is dedicated and the Ark of the Covenant—the Lord's throne—is set in place? The cloud appears and fills the temple (1 Kgs. 8:10) as the Lord takes up His residence in Jerusalem. There He is.

Consistently throughout the Old Testament, the Lord remains present with His people so that they can point to where He is. They cannot see His glory, but they know that He is there. The Lord is not an absent God, far away and hoping for the people to seek Him out; rather, He remains near to His people so that they might hear His Word and be sure of His mercy.

We'll get to the birth of Christ in a few days; but to whet your appetite and show the connection, here's John 1:14: *“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”* Among other great news in this verse, the word “dwell” in Greek literally means “tented” or “tabernacled.” The Lord, who was near to His people in the tabernacle of the Old Testament, drew even nearer by “tenting” with them in human flesh. Why? To be their Savior, full of grace and truth.

That Savior is your Savior, and He does not remain far from you today. The Word who became flesh still visits you by His Word today, still washes you in Baptism and feeds you His body and blood in His Supper. Until heaven, you are in the wilderness; but you can point to these means of grace and say, “I am not forsaken. The Lord is with me, and there He is.”

Tuesday, February 15

Two Foci

Read Exodus 27:1-8 and Hebrews 8:1-2

You shall make an altar of acacia wood (Ex. 27:1).

On any given day in the wilderness, the tabernacle is a busy place as priests attend to their God-given duties. There are different furnishings that each have purpose and meaning, though we don't have time for them in a study this brief. However, if you take the tabernacle and the courtyard and cut the area down the middle, and look at the center of each half, you find the essentials, the two foci of the tabernacle. One focus is, of course, the Most Holy Place or Holy of Holies; that's where the Lord lives with His people. It is His presence there that makes the tabernacle the Lord's house.

Outside of the tabernacle, in the courtyard, is the other focus of the tabernacle: it is the altar of burnt offerings. Animals are sacrificed, presented to the Lord according to His command.

These are the two foci of the tabernacle—/sacrifice and the Lord's presence/. The sacrifice is made on the altar outside the tabernacle; and because the blood of the helpless animal is shed, the Lord declares His people forgiven. What is the purpose of these two centerpieces? It isn't just a temporary religion set-up to tide over the Israelites until the Savior appears, but far more: both highlights are there to point to the Savior, to testify of Jesus.

The Most Holy Place is the site of God's presence; and once finished, the Lord overshadows it in a cloud of glory, then enters in. He is there for His people. Nine months before Jesus' birth, the angel announces to Mary that the Holy Spirit will /overshadow/ her (Lk. 1:35), and she will give birth to the Son of God. (We'll speak more of this miracle a little later when we speak of the Annunciation.) In Christ, the Lord draws even nearer to His people than a room separated by curtained walls; He becomes flesh and dwells among them.

The altar and sacrifices point to Jesus, too. He will shed His blood to sacrifice Himself for your sins.

On the Day of Atonement, the altar and Most Holy Place are especially connected, for the high priest sacrifices a bull on the altar and carries its blood into the Lord's presence. This, too, points to Jesus: as Hebrews 8 points out, the risen Jesus has now entered the Most Holy Place of heaven and presented His sacrificial blood to His Father in heaven. Therefore, God the Father pronounces you forgiven. This is the heart of the Gospel: Christ has sacrificed Himself for your sin.

We sometimes fail to see much connection between the Old Testament and the New. But from Genesis on, the Scriptures are the story of God's presence with His people for forgiveness, and the story continues for you even now.

Wednesday, February 16

Isaiah's Vision

Read Isaiah 6:1-13 and 7:14 (And, if time permits, the prophecies below)

And one cried to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!" (Is. 6:3)

Even while the Israelites turn more and more to idols in the Old Testament, the Lord still remains for His people. He sends prophets to proclaim His Word, and He stays at the temple, present with mercy.

One of the prophets whom God sends is Isaiah, and Isaiah has a vision of the Lord in the temple. The Most Holy Place is a cube of only about thirty feet per side; yet in the vision, it seems much bigger. God is high and lifted up, above Him are two seraphim who cry out, **“Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth; heaven and earth are full of Thy glory!”** It is as if Isaiah walks into this finite room and finds infinite heaven therein, as if heaven and earth come together because God is present. There He is.

Isaiah is terrified because he has seen the Lord and declares himself a dead man for it; however, the Lord is not in the temple to destroy, but to have mercy. A seraph flies to Isaiah and touches a hot coal to his mouth, declaring him forgiven and holy.

Plus, the Lord will draw closer to His people. Through Isaiah, He prophesies, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel” (Is. 7:14). The promised Savior is on the way, but He will not be just another man; He will be *Immanuel*, which means **“God with us.”** God will come so near as to become man in order to save man. He won't be “with us” in some abstract way; people will be able to point to Him and say, “There He is!”

As Israel continues its path to death in the Old Testament, the Lord faithfully keeps repeating His promises. In the flesh, the Savior will perform all sorts of miracles, making the blind see, the deaf hear, the mute sing and the lame leap for joy (Is. 35:5-6). He will be born in Bethlehem so that He can stand and feed His flock (Mic. 5:2-5a). He will come to the temple (rebuilt after its destruction by the Babylonians, and nowhere near as magnificent) and make it more glorious than the first (Haggai 2:6-9), because He will be there in flesh. He will ride into Jerusalem on a donkey (Zech 9:9-10; God on a donkey?!). But it will not be all glorious to the eye: Immanuel will look extremely ordinary and unremarkable (Is. 53:2); and then He'll be stricken, smitten, afflicted and killed for the sins of man (Is. 53:3-12).

One more prophecy: as the Old Testament ends and the Scriptures fall silent for 500 years, the Lord declares through Malachi, “And the Lord, whom you seek, Will suddenly come to His temple, Even the Messenger of the covenant, In whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,' Says the LORD of hosts” (Mal. 3:1).

“He is coming,” says the Lord. It is the hope of God's people throughout the ages that they can point and say, “There He is. There's our Savior.” In His means of grace, it is true for you, too: there will never be a time where the Lord will abandon you.

Thursday, February 17

The Fiery Furnace

Read Daniel 3:1-30

"Look!" he answered, "I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God" (Dan. 3:25).

The temple would not always stand in Jerusalem; because of the idolatry of Israel, the Babylonians leveled the Lord's house in 527 B.C. as they destroyed the city and led the Israelites into captivity. This hardly means that they were able to defeat the Lord: Ezekiel had a vision in which the Lord and His glory departed from the temple because of the sin of the people (Ezek. 10:18). They didn't want Him around, so He obliged. Thus, the temple still looked like the Lord's house, but it was no longer. This should serve as a somber warning today that a church may look like a church, but not be the Church.

There was no temple in Babylon, but the Lord still drew near to His faithful people. Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego refused to worship the idol that King Nebuchadnezzar built; and for their faithfulness to God, they were bound and sentenced to death in the fiery furnace. Their guards perished from the heat as they were thrown in, and the trio's death was humanly certain. But, when the king looked into the furnace, he saw otherwise: there were four men, not three. They were free, not bound. And the fourth man looked like the Son of God. Even though Israel's sin had taken the people far from the temple, the Lord would not forsake His children. There He was, walking through fire with three of His sons.

Ancient Babylon is modern-day Iraq; and in the desert sands there, one sees a strange sight. It's a natural gas torch from fumes that seep up through the ground, and it's been burning now for at least 3000 years. Local tradition makes this place the location Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace; we'll never know for sure. But it's there, and it's still burning.

Here is the astonishing, joyful truth: for the soldier stationed in Kirkuk or Fallujah; for the local Armenian Christians there; and for the believer in Northridge, New York; the Lord is with them. The Lord is thus with you. He is as with you in His means of grace as He was with the three in the furnace. Rather than rare razzle-dazzle, He makes use of common things like words and water, bread and wine: for where on earth is man found where there is not words and water? Where on earth is man found where bread and wine cannot be obtained? No, the Lord does not restrict Himself to one temple in Jerusalem or make His presence rare. He remains constantly available to His beloved people, be they in Iraq or America, crib or deathbed.

Chances seem slim that you'll face a literal fiery furnace, but you will still have your share of fiery trial (I Pet. 4:12). Such times will beat you down and seek to reduce you to misery and doubt. But the Son of God walks with you, as near as His means of grace. He has the final Word, and His Word for you is forgiveness and eternal life.

Friday, February 18

The Annunciation and Incarnation

Read Luke 1:26-38

And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" (Lk. 1:28)

She's a young girl in a backwoods town, far away from the temple in Jerusalem. We know nothing of her parents, and Mary may in fact be orphaned. And it's to this girl that the angel appears and says, "Rejoice, highly favored one, **the Lord is with you**; blessed are you among women." These words trouble Mary, evidently more than the angel's appearance. Perhaps it is that God highly favors her; then again, perhaps it's that statement that God is present with her. How can that be? She's in backwater Nazareth, not anywhere near the temple where the Lord dwells with His people. The angel answers, announcing God's Word that this virgin will give birth to the Son of God. (Because of the angel's announcement, this is called the Annunciation; it's a church holiday, celebrated March 25—exactly nine months before Christmas.) When the angel said, "The Lord is with you," it was a "there He is!" statement of presence: God is now a tiny cell or two clinging to the wall of Mary's womb.

Now, note the angel's explanation when Mary asks how a virgin can give birth: "And the angel answered and said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.'" (Lk 1:35) "The power of the Highest will *overshadow* you," said the angel. That's what the cloud did over the tabernacle and temple when God came to be present there. Now, God is present in and with Mary; in fact, she is now the temple of the Lord because the Lord dwells in her for the good of His people.

So the Lord becomes incarnate, or in flesh; and for this we give great thanks to God by faith. But note how it all looks: a young woman in a small town claims to be a virgin, pregnant with God's Son by the work of the Holy Ghost. It seems unbelievable—especially to unbelief, and many still attack Mary's virtue today. This is consistent throughout Scripture. Doubtless there were some who looked at the pillar of cloud and dismissed it as strange weather, not the Lord's leading. Doubtless there were many who looked at the tabernacle and temple and saw only buildings, dismissing God's presence there as superstition. Clearly, many looked at the Savior on the cross, while He was redeeming the world from sin, and saw a dying criminal getting what He deserved, nothing more. To the eyes, God's works of mercy will always seem ordinary at best, scandalous at worst. To most today (and sadly to many within Christendom), the means of grace appear to be quaint rituals and only symbols, nothing more. But by these means of grace, the Lord is just as with you as He was with Mary as He developed in her womb and suckled at her breast. No matter what the world thinks of you, because Jesus is present with mercy, you are highly favored by God, both now and forever.

Saturday, February 19

Merry Christmas

Read: Luke 2:1-20

And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. (Lk. 2:9)

The birth of Jesus certainly isn't one to inspire by appearances. The Son of God isn't born in a Jerusalem palace and laid in a comfortable crib. He's born in that stop-on-the-way town of Bethlehem and laid in a manger because there's no room in the inn. As the Newborn lies swaddled, adapting to life outside the warm womb, by all appearances He's just one more baby born in poverty. He certainly does *not* look like the Creator of heaven and earth.

But according to the Word of God, this Child of humble birth is Immanuel, God with us. There He is, diapered in a manger.

There is some glory that night—witnessed not by kings but by lowly shepherds in the fields. An angel of the Lord appears to them, and the glory of the Lord shines around them. Why the glory? God's glory is only apparent when He is present, and so it is here: God is present in a manger close by, and so His glory shines on the fields outside of town.

The angel announces to the shepherds, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." (Lk. 2:10-12). "Unto *you*," says the angel: the Savior is born even for these lowly, outcast shepherd-types. In fact, these shepherds are the first gathered by God to see their Savior in the flesh!

It is then that the hosts of angels arrive and sing, "**Glory be to God on high, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.**" The Savior is born to bring peace between God and man by His death for sin. He's born with a good will, a righteous nature that will accomplish His Father's plan for man's salvation. He will complete the work of salvation on His own; therefore all glory belongs to God.

Having heard the Word, the shepherds believe and make haste to go to where God is to be found. That's what faith does—it desires and rejoices to be in the presence of God. By their eyes, they see a vulnerable newborn; by faith, they trust that those tiny fingers and toes belong to God Himself. Then they depart, spreading the Word and evangelizing those whom they meet. Those who hear wonder—some likely dismiss the news (who listens to shepherds anyway?), while others believe that the Savior is born.

As we move further into Lent, there is one thing more astonishing than the Word becoming flesh: the Word made flesh permits His body to be nailed to a cross, His blood shed for the sins of the world. That's why He's incarnate—to take our place in life and death, to share with us His resurrection. The world will always look in the manger and see a baby, nothing more; it will look at the cross and see only tragedy at best. But like the shepherds, you've heard the Word: there He is, present to have mercy on you.

Sunday, February 20 (The 2nd Sunday in Lent)

Read: John 4:5-26

Living Water

But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.” (Jn. 4:21)

There He is, speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well. And as we turn our attention to the Gospel lesson for this Sunday, remember: whatever Jesus is doing, He is also doing for you.

From some popular points of view at the time, the woman has a few things against her. She's a woman at a time when some intellectual groups are discussing whether or not women have souls. She's a Samaritan, the unpopular neighbors next to Judea. And she's gone through five husbands before electing to live with a sixth man outside of marriage. Without knowing more about her situation, one can imagine the shambles of her life. In the meantime, surely she's not going to win any citizenship awards from family magazines anytime soon; nor has she earned the right or the righteousness to come into the presence of God.

But Immanuel, God-with-us, has come to her, and Jesus speaks His Word to her with surgical precision. He tells her that He can give her living water so that she never thirsts again; in other words, He announces that He is present to give her forgiveness and righteousness, to give her eternal life.

The troubled woman leaps at the offer, even if she isn't completely clear on what it is. She believes the Word this stranger speaks, and she trusts that He'll give her the gift. However, there's a problem not yet addressed.

"Go, call your husband," says Jesus, and the woman's cagey answer indicates she's aware of her sin: "I have no husband." Technically true since she hasn't bothered to marry #6, but she's trying to fool Jesus into thinking maybe she's single or a widow. But the Lord won't let her keep the lie, because her clinging to the lie will keep her from holding to His grace; so He tells her about her five husbands and sixth man. In other words, He preaches Law specific to her: He shows her how much she needs His gift of living water—not to save her trips to the well, but to cleanse her of sin and guilt.

Now, look where the conversation turns, because it takes us to the theme of this devotional: she identifies Jesus as a prophet and speaks of worship, how Samaritans worship on one mountain while Jews worship at the temple in Jerusalem. Is this living water from a Jewish prophet really for her, a Samaritan? Jesus responds that the time has come when people will worship God at neither place only, but in spirit and truth will worship Him elsewhere. Why? Because God isn't just in the temple; He's speaking to her. When she asks if He is the Christ, He says "I who speak to you am He." Literally in the Greek, He says "I AM, who is speaking to you." He identifies Himself as the Lord who spoke to Moses from the burning bush, and who now is seeking her personally to be His beloved, forgiven child.

There He is, speaking His Law to the woman, present to speak His Gospel and forgive. In His Word and Sacraments, there He is for you.

Monday, February 21

Read: Luke 2:21-38

Suddenly...

*Now when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord.
(Lk. 2:22)*

Eight days after Jesus is born, His parents keep the Law and circumcise Him. Or, rather, the Infant Immanuel keeps the Law for you, shedding His blood as your Redeemer.

Forty days after He's born, His parents obey the Law again and take Him to Jerusalem—to the temple—in order to present Him to the Lord. The poor couple arrives on the temple grounds to offer the poor man's sacrifice—a pair of turtledoves instead of a lamb, as the Law prescribes (Lev. 12:2-8).

Now, did you catch the fulfillment of prophecy there? Just like Malachi prophesied (Mal. 3:1), the Lord Himself has come suddenly to His temple. It's a magnificent day, awaited for centuries!—and nobody really notices. Once again, the Lord's arrival in mercy isn't glorious. It looks like a poor couple with a little baby, and the bustling business of the temple doesn't miss a beat.

A couple of people notice, one of them a man named Simeon. Told by the Holy Spirit that he would see the Savior before he died, he's been waiting, and today's the day. Whether or not Simeon was expecting an infant, he isn't going by appearances. Therefore, he cradles the Baby in his arms and says, "**Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy Word; for mine eyes have seen the salvation which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people, a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel.**" (Lk. 2:29-32). I've pondered before where Simeon looks as he says these things. Is he gazing up toward heaven? Does he turn toward the Holy of Holies and the throne of God in the temple? The Bible doesn't say, but there's another possibility: he's talking to the Child. Simeon isn't just praying about the Baby; in reality, he's praying to the Baby—because there He is. No matter appearances, the helpless Infant in His hands is the Lord of life who numbers his days, provides for all of his needs and gives him eternal life. And while the world doesn't even notice Him, He's holding the world together.

So there He is, and Simeon knows it to be true by faith; and he also knows that the pattern will continue: the Savior will continue to go about His work of saving, and the world will want nothing to do with Him. In fact, prophecies Simeon, the work of Jesus will be spoken against as He brings about the rise and fall of many in Israel. Before His final triumph, Mary's heart will be pierced, too.

It remains the same for you and me: the Lord is present with His people in His Word and Sacraments, those humble means of grace by which He gives eternal life. Until His return in glory, the world will rush on by; but for those who believe in Him, He gives grace and truth and life.

Tuesday, February 22

The Baptism of Jesus

Read: Matthew 3:1-17 (If you have time, John 1:29-34)

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Mt. 3:1-2)

When Malachi prophesied that the Lord would come, he also declared that Elijah would come first (Mal. 3:1; 4:5) to prepare the way. This Elijah was John the Baptist, who even dressed like Elijah (2 Kgs. 1:8) as he preached to the crowds in the wilderness. John's entire preaching can be summed up in one sentence: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

"Repent," said John, calling upon the people to turn from their sin and misconceptions of a messiah, so that they would be ready when the Messiah appeared. And then, "the kingdom of heaven is at hand," he proclaimed. Why? The kingdom of heaven was at hand because the King was at hand. God in flesh was coming to the Jordan River.

So Jesus came to be baptized by John, over John's objections. After all, why would the sinless Son of God need to be baptized like all those sinners? Because the Son of God had become flesh to take their place; so He was baptized just like them on the way to the cross. To confirm that the King was there, His Father anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and declared from heaven, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased."

Where is He? There He is, coming out of the Jordan.

In St. John's Gospel, there's little attention given to Jesus' actual baptism; instead, John highlights another facet of the day. John the Baptist, who has been preaching that the King is coming, now directs the attention of all to a man in the crowd and cries out, "Behold **the Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world!**" (Jn. 1:29). Once again, there He is, standing among the people He's come to save—so ordinary-looking that John the Baptist has to point Him out. Immanuel is living up to His name.

But John has added another name: the Lamb of God. Strange name for a King and Conqueror. Lambs aren't good for much, except for sacrificing...or dinner...which is exactly what John is getting at. Way back in Egypt, as the Lord sought to free His people from Pharaoh, the tenth plague was the death of the firstborn. The Israelites were spared that night because they slaughtered the Passover Lamb, spread its blood on parts of the door, and then ate the rest of it as a meal. When the Lord Himself came through to carry out the judgment, He passed over the houses of Israel.

As John points out the Savior, he also declares how Jesus will save. Like the Passover Lamb, He will be sacrificed. Like that Lamb, His blood will be shed to save the lives of His people. And, as the eternal Passover Lamb, His body and blood will be given as a meal to His people, to strengthen and preserve them in the one true faith. It won't look like much to the world; but then again, a lot of Egyptians thought the Israelites were crazy for spreading blood on their doors. Until the next day.

Look at the Jordan: there He is, the Lamb of God, baptized for you...on His way to the cross for you.

Wednesday, February 23

Ten Lepers

Read: Luke 17:11-19

And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, returned, and with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on his face at His feet, giving Him thanks. And he was a Samaritan. (Lk. 17:15-16)

There He is, on His way to Jerusalem and His cross. He's passing along the border between Galilee and Samaria.

Along the way, ten lepers have banded together, for there are few worse living fates. The lepers have an incurable disease that is slowly disintegrating their bodies; it's a slow, agonizing death, but that's only part of the agony. Because the illness is so contagious, the law requires them to leave family and home behind and live where nobody else does. In fact, the law requires them to shout warnings at passersby, lest they get too close and risk catching leprosy themselves. Between the hideous course of the disease and the ostracizing that it brings, leprosy is a horrible analogy of death and hell.

When Jesus draws near, the shouting starts—but it's not the warning to stay away as prescribed by law. Instead, the lepers shout, "Jesus, Master, **have mercy upon us!**" (Lk. 17:13) Though isolated, they've still heard the Word about the Savior; and having heard the Word, they believe He can cure them. And now, Immanuel is God-with-them. The Lord is present with these lepers, and He can heal them with a Word. It sounds silly, but it's important to note that the lepers are shouting "have mercy" because Jesus is there. They're not shouting it when He's not around.

Jesus has mercy upon them, and tells them to go and show themselves to the priests; this is required by law before they can return their homes and families. Ten start running away, but one returns and falls at Jesus' feet to worship: the priests will be there later, but better for now is the present Son of God. This is Christian worship, the presence of God for mercy.

Each time I read through this story, I marvel at the generous mercy of the Lord. He gives healing to all ten, no strings attached; in fact, when nine don't even express thanks, He doesn't take the gift of healing back. He doesn't demand their worship, but seeks to give them all good.

So it is today. Jesus desires to give all good gifts to all people. He gives food and shelter, and no one refuses. Most fail to say thanks, and many will even give thanks to other gods, instead; but the Lord keeps giving. Likewise, He offers grace and salvation to all people; but while everyone snatches up the temporary gifts for this life, so many want nothing to do with His gifts for eternal life. Some have claimed that Jesus is an exclusive sort of Savior, that He only died for some. Not so: He died for all, and desires that all be saved. The difference between a believer and unbeliever is that the unbeliever runs away before Jesus is done giving!

But you know better. There He is, present to heal the lepers. There He is on the cross for the sins of the world. There He is, in His means of grace, to have mercy upon you now and forever.

Thursday, February 24

Read: Luke 10:38-42

Mary and Martha

"But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her." (Lk. 10:42)

It sounds like so many stories of siblings: one does the work while the other goofs off. It's the sister Martha who invites Jesus home for a meal, and there's plenty of work to do. For such an important guest, Martha plans to put on an appropriate meal, so she has many things to occupy her mind and time. Many hands make light work, and it sure would be helpful if sister Mary got busy.

But Mary's not working. Ever since Jesus arrived, she's been sitting at His feet like good students do, listening to every word of His teaching. For a "work-before-play" girl like Martha, Mary's behavior is exasperating—so much so that she actually complains to the Guest! "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone?" she demands. "Therefore tell her to help me." Martha's probably concluded that Mary isn't going to listen to her; but when this Jesus tells her.... He's just talking to her, after all.

Except that Jesus doesn't admonish Mary. He admonishes Martha instead: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her." Martha's wrong for doing all the work? Mary's right to just sit there? This is *not* a Bible story parents count on to teach siblings that they should both pitch in to clean up the basement. There's a good reason for this: this story is not about working together. In fact, it's about Christian worship. Why?

Because there He is. The Son of God is present, teaching His Word. As He speaks His Word, He is freely giving out mercy and grace, faith and eternal life. Martha can cook up a ten-course meal and make sure that the visit is as perfect as possible; but none of her works of hustling and bustling, worrying and cooking will get her a bit of forgiveness. On the other hand, Mary knows the one thing needful: her Savior is present, speaking His life-giving Word, and she's going to soak up every syllable while He's there.

Note, by the way, that Jesus doesn't forbid Martha from sitting down, too. She's more than welcome to join them; I somehow suspect that, when their Guest has fed 5,000 with five loaves and two fish, dinner isn't a problem.

In the Church today, there are two prevailing ideas about worship. One says that the purpose of worship is for people to get together and offer their worship and praise to God. Music speaks of their acts and intentions of love for Jesus, and participation in worship is about *doing* something—a testimony, a skit, a dance, etc. This is what Martha does when Jesus is near.

The other idea of worship is Divine Service, which says that worship is not about what we do. Rather, what matters is that Jesus is present in His means of grace—as present now as He was with Mary and Martha. In that case, we have the privilege of doing what Mary did: we hear, we take and eat, we drink. We receive from Jesus Himself the one thing needful.

Friday, February 25

Read: Matthew 21:1-16

Palms and Hosannas

Then the multitudes who went before and those who followed cried out, saying: "Hosanna to the Son of David! 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!' Hosanna in the highest!" (Mt:21:9)

There He is, riding into Jerusalem on a colt, the foal of a donkey. A borrowed donkey, no less, which gives one reason to pause. The Son of God is so fully human that He has need of the animal to take Him into the city; yet He remains fully divine so that all things, donkey included, really belong to Him. But Jesus isn't ruling by force and power, taking what He wants; He comes in mercy, with grace and truth. So He borrows a donkey and fulfills prophecy when He rides into Jerusalem (Zech. 9:9).

Unlike His birth when most of Bethlehem slept and didn't care, it seems the whole city is turned out. It's Passover time, and many pilgrims have come to celebrate Passover and sacrifice their lamb, but all of that is forgotten for now. They gather along the Lord's route, casting coats and palms on the road so that even the donkey's hooves need not touch the dirt. They wave more palms in the air and cry out, "Hosanna to the Son of David! **Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!**"

"Hosanna," they cry—"Save now!" They identify Him as the Messiah, the Son of David who comes in the Lord's name. Forget the lambs and sacrifice—the King is here! Let Him take His crown and robe, His staff and throne. Let Him save the people, and let Him do it now!

Ah, but Jesus comes in mercy, not force and power. He comes at Passover because He is the Lamb to be sacrificed. The celebration of this day will be short-lived. By Friday, He'll wear a royal purple robe and a crown, though the robe will be forced on by jeering soldiers who jam the plaited thorns on His brow. They'll take the staff they've placed in His hand and beat Him with it; and when they lift Him up on His throne, they'll nail Him to it to make sure He can't come down.

Where are the Palm Sunday crowds then? They're either shouting, "Crucify Him!", or saying, "We thought He was the Savior."

Whatever they think doesn't change who He is. He is the Savior, and the cross means that He's answered the Hosannas they've prayed. On Calvary, He's saving them now. He's delivering the world from sin—again, by mercy and sacrifice, not force and power. He offers Himself up as the final Passover Lamb, sacrificed so that the Lord will pass over your sin.

The birth of Immanuel looked wholly unremarkable; His triumphal entry into Jerusalem looks like a guy on a donkey in a happy crowd. His death looks remarkably repelling. When the Lord works in service and mercy, His work often appears ordinary or unattractive. But no matter what eyes see at Golgotha, there He is, saving now. And likewise, in those ordinary looking means of grace, there He is, saving you.

Saturday, February 26

Read: Luke 22:7-20

The Last Supper

And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me. Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you" (Lk. 22:19-20).

The time has come for the Passover [Lamb] to be killed; but before He dies, Jesus desires to eat this Last Supper with His disciples. The Lord who needed to borrow a donkey now needs the loan of a room. But this is how our Savior works, through means: He uses people as His instruments, and gives His gifts in things we can point to.

The disciples have been with Jesus for about three years now; and in recent months, He has predicted His suffering and death several times. Things seem to be building to a climax in Jerusalem, and Jesus' death is less than a day away.

Whether or not the disciples realize, here is a question that needs to be answered this night: the Lord has been present with His people throughout history, be it walking in Eden, the burning bush, the pillar of cloud, tabernacle or temple. For the past three decades, He has also been present with His people in the flesh. That flesh is about to be nailed to the cross; then Jesus will rise from the dead and ascend into heaven. So, in the future, *how will the Lord be present with His people?* Where can they say, "There He is!?" Jesus answers. Before His death, He gives His last will and [new] testament.

He takes bread and gives thanks, breaks it and gives it to them, saying, **"Take and eat; this is My body which is given for you. This do in remembrance of Me." Then He takes the cup and says, "Drink ye all of it: this cup is the new testament in My blood, which is shed for you, for the remission of sins. This do, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of Me."** So it will be until Jesus returns in glory: He is present with His people in the Communion where He visits with forgiveness. The bread is His body and the wine is His blood, just as He said.

Many Christians today believe that it's just symbolic bread and wine, that Jesus really meant, "This bread *represents* My body...this wine *represents* My blood." They may not know, but this argument is largely based upon an old principle that says, "The finite is not capable of containing the infinite." Thus, bread and wine can't contain the infinite Lord. This may be good physics, but bad theology. Throughout the Scriptures, the infinite Lord fits Himself into a burning bush, a cloud, a 30'x30'x30' Holy of Holies...even a human body. What would prevent Him from being present in bread and wine, for the forgiveness of sins? It is possible, because He says it is true; and as the angel explained the mystery of infinite God in a finite unborn baby to Mary, "With God all things are possible" (Lk. 1:37).

As we'll discuss in coming days, what a comfort you have as a Christian, for the Lord is not far away. There He is, at the altar, given for you.

Sunday, February 27 (The 3rd Sunday in Lent)

Read: John 9:1-41

The Pool of Siloam

And Jesus said to him, "You have both seen Him and it is He who is talking with you." (Jn. 9:37)

It's Sunday, so we'll look at the Gospel lesson for today. Don't forget! Whatever else happens, Jesus is present and having mercy. And whatever He is doing, He is also doing for you. This time, it's a man born blind; and everyone assumes this is a special curse. Maybe it was his parents, or maybe the man before he was born; but somebody did something so that God is punishing the man. (This is Old Adam at work: if the man's blind because of some special sin, it means that we're better than he is because we can see. This leads to the further temptation that, since they're especially cursed, we shouldn't have to help the disabled. The sins just grow from there, until society wants to "care" for them because their quality of life isn't as good as the rest of us.) Jesus puts an end to the sinful speculation, saying that the man is blind so that the works of God might be revealed in Him.

So there He is, present with the blind man. This time, He doesn't just speak to heal; instead, he mixes spit and dirt and puts it on the man's eyes, telling him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. (For those who believe bread and wine to be too humble for the Lord's work, here He is using the means of mud. One assumes, too, that the blind man doesn't look all that dignified with his face covered in dirt on the way to the pool.) The man washes off the clay, and he can see—but he can't see Jesus, because Jesus isn't at the pool. So far, the man knows Jesus' name, has heard His Word and been in His presence, and that's enough to heal him. But the man still hasn't seen His Savior.

Nevertheless, when people ask him, he tells what he knows: a man named Jesus put mud on his eyes, and now he can see. He's happy to keep on telling it, and he gets to repeat the story to the Pharisees. They're angry—incensed to the point of wanting to fault Jesus for mixing mud on the Sabbath; but hoping for more, they ask the man to repeat his story once again. I smile when I hear the man's response: "I told you already, and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become His disciples?" (Jn. 9:27) The man doesn't care to spend more time talking to the Pharisees...but if they want to hear the Word about Jesus so that they can believe in Him, too, then he's happy to keep evangelizing!

As unbelievers are prone to do, the Pharisees dismiss this righteous man as a sinner, believing themselves more holy than him. As the text concludes, though, Jesus presents himself to the man, and the man sees His Savior.

Whatever Jesus does, He is doing for you, too. As He healed the man of his blindness, He will heal you of all your afflictions on the Last Day. In the meantime, you have much in common with the once-blind man. Your Savior has come to be present with you by His means of grace, and has spoken His healing Word of Gospel to forgive all your sins, to open your eyes to see His grace. You haven't seen Him yet, but you will; and even now, He's with you.

Monday, February 28

Read: Luke 23:1-47

The Passion of the Christ

And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise." (Lk. 23:43)

There He is, and it doesn't make sense. If God in diapers and lying in a manger was incongruous, the idea of God on a cross is simply insane. Man is mortal, God is immortal, and yet Immanuel breathes His last and gives up His spirit while the crowds survive to jeer another day.

It makes even less sense, considering His trial. Jesus stands before Pilate, a puny human ruler who only has authority because Jesus has given it to him. Throughout the trial, Judge Pilate pronounces Jesus "not guilty" not once, but three times! (Lk. 23:4, 14, 22) After that Pilate sentences the innocent man to be scourged and crucified. Once the death sentence is completed, the centurion in charge declares again that they've killed an innocent man (Lk. 23:47). The crowds shouting for His crucifixion maintain that He deserves to die for blasphemy, for claiming to be the Son of God; except that, since He is the Son of God, it's not blasphemy. Behold this most despicable moment in human history: man puts God to death *because* God is innocent!

And why does God the Father permit this travesty? Because He declares His Son guilty. As St. Paul would later write, *For [God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him* (2 Cor. 5:21). Indeed, this is why Jesus has drawn so near as to take on flesh and blood. To give more commands or to make sure the rain falls, He could have remained in heaven or remote on a mountaintop. But to be the Savior, He had to have a body and blood so that His body could be nailed to the cross and His blood shed. The Son has become man to suffer God's wrath for the sin of man.

And what is Jesus doing as He suffers the wrath of God and man? Jesus is doing what He does wherever He is: He is saving. Even as He suffers hell on that cross for the sins of all man, He is still present for salvation. On the next cross over is a robber, a man who deserves his fate after a life of predatory crime, and who certainly can do nothing now to earn God's favor. But Jesus is present there; and as He dies for the sins of the world, Jesus speaks specifically, personally to this repentant sinner. He says, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

Jesus life ends on the cross as it began in Bethlehem. He was born in humble circumstances to save the world, yet the angel made sure to tell the shepherds specifically, "Unto *you* (not just others) is born the Savior." Here, on Calvary in the midst of humiliating circumstances and agony, the present Lord Jesus specifically assures the dying robber that He's not just dying for the sins of an abstract world, but this death will bring that specific man into Paradise, heaven, forever.

The reality of mankind putting Jesus to death, and of Jesus dying for all of mankind, is phenomenal. But rejoice all the more in this: He is there on the cross not just for "everybody;" but He is there for you.

Tuesday, March 1

Read: John 20:19-31

The Resurrection

Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, "Peace be with you." (Jn. 20:19b)

What are the disciples to do? It's Sunday evening, and they're huddled in a locked room for fear of the Jews. The fear is legitimate: Jesus was scourged, crucified, killed just three days back, and those who led the charge are known to be thorough in dealing with problems. Not only that, but the Roman authorities cooperated, even carried out Jesus' unjust death; so the disciples can't count on protection from them, either. Now, some of the women have come with a crazy story that they've seen an angel who told them Jesus is alive again; and Peter and John have even seen the empty tomb. It's tough to believe.

But even if it's true, is it good news for the disciples? Their last memories of Jesus before His arrest are these: they pledged loyalty to Him, no matter what, even to death; and then they kept falling asleep in the Garden while He prayed His agonized prayer. Even in the last hours that Jesus was with them, the disciples were trusting in their own bravado on the one hand, then demonstrating an inability even to keep their eyes open on the other. Then they ran away. So even if Jesus is risen, is this good news for the disciples? The One who has even defeated death could well appear and say, "In My hour of greatest need, you abandoned Me. That was strike three, and you're out for eternity."

So, as far as the disciples know (aided by Old Adam), the Jews are out to get them. The Romans are out to get them. And Jesus, if He really is alive, may well be out to get them, too.

Whatever the torturous thoughts of the disciples, Jesus is suddenly standing in their midst. The doors are locked, but there He is—body and all. A ghost? No. He shows them His hands and His side. There He is, fully risen from the dead.

And what are His first words to His wayward disciples? Not, "I'm gonna get you now." Not, "You're fired." His first words are "**Peace be with you.**" Jesus went to the cross precisely because of sins like trusting oneself, doubt, worry and every other transgression. Having died to take all those sins away, He isn't risen to hold them against the disciples. Instead, He announces that all of their sins are removed. As the angels announced "Peace on earth" at the Savior's birth, Jesus assures the disciples that they now have peace with God. Their sins are taken away.

Thomas isn't there, and he doesn't believe the disciples; a week later, Jesus will appear to gather Thomas back in. We still speak of "doubting Thomas" today, but don't miss what Jesus says to him: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (Jn. 20:29). That would be you. You haven't seen the Savior, but He is still with you. He is as near to you as His Word, so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name (Jn. 20:31).

Wednesday, March 2

Read: Luke 24:13-35

The Road to Emmaus

He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. (Lk. 24:30)

Two men are walking back to Emmaus, two of the many who had made their pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover. They're sober and subdued as they walk and talk, reviewing the recent events in Jerusalem.

A third man joins them, perhaps another pilgrim on the way home, and inquires about their conversation. They're amazed: is this the only man who doesn't know what's happened in Jerusalem? Cleopas vents the news: Jesus of Nazareth...mighty in deed...condemned and crucified...it was hoped He would redeem Israel. Sure, some women reported that He was risen, but they're not buying it. Sad.

If Cleopas is expecting a sympathetic ear, he's in for a surprise. The stranger responds, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?" And then, rather than lapse into self-pity or shattered dreams, the stranger walks them through the Scripture to demonstrate that things have gone exactly the way God intended for the salvation of the world. The rebuke is enough to make their hearts burn within them.

They reach the village; and as the preacher makes to go farther down the road, they ask him to abide with them there. He consents, and the meal is prepared. Strangely, though, the guest becomes the host. It is he who takes the bread, blesses and breaks it, gives it to them...and vanishes.

It wasn't just a man. It was the Man. Jesus has walked them home and convinced them of His resurrection. So much for staying home: Cleopas and his friend hoof it back to Jerusalem to tell the others as fast as they can.

As you meditate upon this story, consider this: risen from the dead, how does Jesus deal with people? We had the example of the disciples yesterday; there, Jesus came to be present with them. He spoke His Word to declare forgiveness and peace. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus invites Himself into the conversation of two distraught followers. He speaks His Law to rebuke them for their doubt, and He preaches His Gospel to strengthen their faith. Not only that, but He gathers them to a meal where He Himself is the Host. The language of that dinner is very reminiscent of Holy Communion: He takes bread, blesses, breaks and gives it. Whether or not He is celebrating the Sacrament or not, I'll leave to the many journal articles on the subject. What is clear is this: the Lord Jesus is present (body, blood and all!) with His people there, forgiving their sins, strengthening faith and giving hope.

Where is He today? The same Lord, still risen from the dead, still deals with His people as He did with those in Emmaus: He visits them, fully present with them, speaking His Word and hosting His Supper. True, He has ascended into heaven (we'll discuss that tomorrow); but even as the Lord in heaven led His people out of Egypt in a cloud, He comes to them today.

Thursday, March 3

Read: Matthew 28:18-20 (If you like, read Acts 1:1-11)

The Great Commission and Ascension

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen. (Mt. 28:19-20)

Prior to His departure via the cross, Jesus gave His disciples His will and new testament, the gift of Holy Communion; and by that Supper, He remains present with His Church even today and until He returns in glory. Risen from the dead in Matthew 28, Jesus is about to ascend into heaven (into a cloud!), and His disciples will see Him no more. What does He say to them now? His final words are found in Matthew 28:19-20, often called the Great Commission. Most often when this text is mentioned, it is to declare the Church's mission, what we Christians are supposed to be doing. However, there is greater cause for joy here: look what the Lord promises to do!

Wherever they are going, the disciples are to make disciples—how? They are to baptize people in the name of the triune God. And they are to teach them to hold on to everything Jesus has commanded: in other words, they are to tell people the Word, bid them faithfulness to it. Disciples are made by Baptism and by the Word of God—no surprise there. But look what Jesus says next: "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." There is no reason to divorce this sentence from the one before it: Jesus is saying that He will be present with His people always by means of His Word and Holy Baptism.

This is perfectly in keeping with the rest of the Gospels. Wherever Jesus is, He makes disciples as people believe and follow. And if disciples are made by Word and Baptism, then Jesus is present in Word and Baptism, making more disciples.

The mysterious-sounding first chapter of John's Gospel helps us here, too. "In the beginning was the Word...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." (Jn. 1:1,14) In a mystery beyond our comprehension, Jesus does not just speak the Word of God: He is the Word of God made flesh. (Both Scripture and Christ have much in common: both seem to come from solely human origins, yet are from God; and both are rejected by man in favor of man's sinful will.) When the Word of God is preached today, the Word made flesh is present there also.

Likewise, Romans 6:4 declares that Jesus shares His death and resurrection with us in Holy Baptism. And if He shares His death and resurrection with you, then you also have His eternal life.

So, just before Jesus departs from His disciples, first by crucifixion and then by resurrection, He establishes the new temple until He returns in glory. He will be present with His people in His Word and Sacraments. There, in His means of grace, He is with you even to the end of the age.

Really? Or is this just a Lutheran pastor putting some spin on Scripture? Tomorrow, we'll see what the first Christians did in the book of Acts.

Friday, March 4

Read: Acts 2:1-47

Pentecost and the Early Church

Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. (Acts 2:41-42)

Ten days after Jesus ascends into heaven, the disciples are gathered in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost; and, like the Passover fifty days before, the city is teeming with faithful pilgrims who have journeyed to the temple. While they are gathered together, there's the sound a loud, rushing wind and tongues of fire appear above their heads: the Holy Spirit has arrived as promised. The disciples then proceed to preach to the crowds outside, speaking in different tongues so that each hears the Word in his own language. (Pentecost is the reversal of the Tower of Babel, Gen. 11:1-9. Where man's sin led to separate languages and division, the Gospel is proclaimed in all sorts of tongues to gather sinners to their Savior.)

Part of Peter's sermon is recorded in Acts 2, and he tailors it to the audience: his hearers are the true believers, the ones who would journey from home to Jerusalem for Passover, then return 50 days later. They do so because they believe that God will someday send the Christ, and they know the Old Testament well. So Peter speaks of Jesus, declaring Him to be the Messiah promised by God. Then he preaches the Law: he tells these people, earnestly waiting for the Christ, that the Christ has already come—and they killed Him! The people, cut to the heart, reply, “What shall we do?” And what does Peter say? “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.”

Many hear the Word that day, and about 3000 are baptized. This is exactly how Jesus said disciples would be made in Matthew 28:19-20! Furthermore, what follows? The new disciples continue steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine—they continue to hear the Word of the Lord which He has sent the apostles to teach. And they continue in fellowship, in the breaking of bread: in other words, they continue to celebrate the Holy Communion.

While many today are prone to think that Pentecost is a rather un-Lutheran festival as the Spirit gets things going, we find it to be quite the opposite. It is true that, on a typical Sunday morning, one will not find loud rushing winds and tongues of fire during the Divine Service; hence, I have heard it concluded before that Lutherans aren't very “spiritual” or “spirit-filled.” But I'm not ready to concede the point. True, Lutherans are short on tongues of fire and loud rushing winds—but Jesus never promised to be present with grace in those phenomena. On the other hand, we still rejoice to have the Lord's Word and sacraments as the centerpieces of worship, just as they were in the early Church on Pentecost and following days. Though no more sensational than, say, a manger, it is there that Jesus is for you.

Saturday, March 5

Read: Revelation 19:1-9; 21:1-5

Heaven

Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. (Rev. 21:3)

The greatest joy of the Garden of Eden was the overt presence of God with man. His departure was the greatest curse of Paradise lost; for without the Lord of life, there is only death.

Heaven is the hope of the Christian, made both possible and certain by the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. And look at the language used to describe it in Revelation. The tree of life is there (Rev. 22:2), because heaven is the perfect paradise of Eden regained. It's described as the tabernacle of God with man (21:3), but the Lord is no longer hidden behind a curtain; in fact, there is no need for sun or moon, because the Lamb—Christ—is the light of heaven. This is the entire curse of sin fully removed: the people of God dwell in His glory forever. The Lord's holiness doesn't harm them—far from it! Because the Lord is present, “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away” (21:4).

There's another description of heaven: it's called the marriage feast of the Lamb (19:9). The Church is the Bride of Christ, for whom He has died to redeem (Eph. 5:25); we are already betrothed to Him, and the endless wedding celebration is guaranteed.

As part of my seminary education, I served a one-year vicarage in San Antonio, Texas. I was engaged to be married at the time, and my bride-to-be was teaching in the thriving metropolis of Elsberry, Missouri. It made for a long, lonely year; and for those whose AT&T stock rose from our phone use, I can only say, “You're welcome.” Twice, though, during that year, my future wife flew down to Texas for a few days, and it made a big difference. As important as it was to talk on a phone, it's far better to hold hands on a walk for a while.

This is the life of the Bride of Christ, the Church. He has betrothed her to Himself at the cost of His cross, and the wedding day is guaranteed. But in the meantime, how does the Church survive? How has it endured centuries of opposition, false doctrine, violence, war and persecution? The answer is this, only this: the Bride of Christ remains alive because her Bridegroom comes and visits her. He continually meets with her, keeping her cleansed of each spot and stain by Holy Absolution, keeping her fed and strengthened unto that wedding banquet everlasting with His holy Supper.

The Bride remains, and the gates of hell will not prevail against her, because her Bridegroom is eternally faithful and vigilant. He's already proven His fidelity by the cost of His blood. And until He returns to raise her—you!—up on the Last Day, He promises you: “Wherever two or three are gathered in My name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt. 18:20).

Sunday, March 6 (The 4th Sunday in Lent)

Read: Matt. 20:17-28

A Mother Asks a Favor

And He said to her, "What do you wish?" She said to Him, "Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom." (Matt. 20:21)

We've reached the fourth Sunday in Lent, so we return to the Gospel lesson for the day. Again, remember: whatever else is happening in this text, Jesus is present with grace and mercy; and whatever He is doing, He is doing for you.

So far in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus has told His disciples about His impending death twice, and His disciples haven't scored high on comprehension. When Jesus first told them in Matthew 16(:21-23), Peter immediately took Him aside and rebuked Him for such a notion; and whatever you think of Peter's sincerity, please understand that he was trying to prevent your redemption. Jesus told them a second time in 17:22, and the disciples were distressed. In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus tells them a third time, and the response is no better. In fact, the mother of James and John comes with a favor that simply doesn't compute: "Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom." Jesus has just announced He's going to die a horrible death, and she's looking to get her boys promoted.

Jesus responds, "You do not know what you ask," and this brings us back to one of the themes of this devotional: remember that, when the Lord is present to have mercy, His appearance is humble, far from glorious. It will be so when He is crowned as King. His crown will be made of thorns, and His scepter will be a reed used by jeering soldiers to beat Him. His throne will be a crude cross; and the sign above His head which declares Him to be "Jesus of Nazareth, *King* of the Jews" is not to pay Him honor, but to show the reason for His execution. That is how Jesus is recognized as king by man at His crucifixion.

Preachers sometimes trace phrases through books of the Bible, to see what they mean by how they're used. The mother's phrase, "one on Your right hand and the other on the left" appears one other time in the Gospel of Matthew: "Then two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and another on the left." When Zebedee's wife asks that her sons be at Jesus' left and right in His kingdom, this is not what she has in mind; and Jesus is correct when He says she doesn't know what she asks.

Jesus then speaks of the cup and baptism of suffering He must endure on the cross, telling James and John they will face similar trial. And to the other, grumbling disciples who think the power play has worked, He teaches that His kingdom is not one where the king lords it over his subjects, demanding they suffer and die for him. No, says Jesus, His kingdom is far different: "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." There He is, your Savior, almighty God in the flesh—become flesh to serve you, even to death on the cross.

Monday, March 7

Read: Ephesians 2:1-10

Two Foci, Again, for Certain Hope

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Eph. 2:8,9)

So far, we've raced through history, beginning at the Garden of Eden on Ash Wednesday, ending up in heaven for eternity last Friday. The purpose has been to rejoice that, throughout the ages, the Lord has constantly been present with His people for their good, though He has had to hide His glory in ordinary things—again for the good of His people.

We've also rejoiced that the Lord continues His doctrine and practice today: He is just as present with His people in His Word and Sacraments today, until the end. As we begin this fourth full week of Lent, we do so with an important question: so what? Or, if you like: what does this mean?

Back on February 15th, we took a look at the tabernacle and its two great centerpieces—the altar and the Most Holy Place, which meant the twin emphases of the tabernacle were sacrifice and God's presence. We also saw how that design pointed to Jesus.

Now, here's the thing: these are still the two foci of Christianity today. You have the hope of eternal life because of sacrifice and presence—Christ's sacrifice and presence. Regarding sacrifice, you have the certainty of salvation because Jesus has done all the work to give it to you: you are saved by grace, God's gift, not your works. Regarding presence, you have the certainty that Jesus gives this salvation to you perfectly, because He comes to you to do so. You hear Him say, "I baptize *you*" in Holy Baptism and "I forgive *you*" in Holy Absolution; and you hear Him say, "Take and eat, this is My body...take and drink, this is My blood...given for *you* for the forgiveness of sins" in Holy Communion.

Sacrifice and presence—these are the core of your hope. Jesus has sacrificed Himself for you, and now visits you with forgiveness and life.

Sadly, so much of Christendom has lost one focus or the other; and *the greatest service that Lutherans can provide to the rest of the Church is to proclaim both unceasingly.*

For example, let's take the general division of Christianity into Roman Catholic and Protestant. Roman Catholicism still teaches that Jesus is present in His Word and Sacraments; however, it teaches that you must earn your salvation by your good works. But if that is so, how could you ever be sure that you had done enough good works? How could you be sure that your good works were good enough?

The answer, of course, is that you could never be sure: this is what terrified Martin Luther before he found the Gospel. The Lord warns us against such notions that our works earn His love, for three reasons. First, it's not true. Second, it robs Jesus of glory, because it says that He needs our works to help Him save us. Finally, though, is a consideration often overlooked: our Lord wants us to be certain of His grace. If our works played a part, we could never be sure we'd done enough.

Tuesday, March 8

Read: Romans 10:1-13

The Second Focus for a Third Time

But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart." (Ro. 10:8).

In Romans 10, St. Paul declares that Jesus is present in His Word. You don't have to journey to heaven or the abyss to find Him, because His Word is near you; and where the Word is, so is the Word made flesh. There He is.

Yesterday, we looked at the two foci of the tabernacle and Christian hope, and we spoke of the danger of forsaking the doctrine of justification, that Christ has sacrificed Himself to save you, and His sacrifice on the cross is sufficient. This is the focus lost by the Roman Catholic Church. Aside from the few orthodox Lutherans floating around, Protestant church bodies have largely lost the other focus, the doctrine of the Real Presence of Jesus with His people. Where Lutherans give thanks that Jesus visits them in His means of grace, most Protestants teach that those means are just signs, nothing more. We mentioned this a little back on February 26th, so today we ask: what effect does this have on Protestant theology?

American Christianity has largely dispensed with the means of grace by saying, "Jesus is present—He's here in my heart." But this poses some questions that should be considered seriously. For instance, how does one know that Jesus is in his heart? We dare not dismiss lightly Jeremiah 17:9, which says, "*The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?*" Knowing what goes on in one's heart is beyond our ability. But to the question, "How do you know Jesus is in your heart?", American Christianity provides a few answers.

"Jesus is in my heart because I made the decision to follow Him," is a common response. "He's there because I accepted Him as my Savior and Lord." If that is the case, we must ask: Given the deceitfulness of the human heart, how can you be sure you accepted Jesus sincerely enough, for the right reasons? Can you be sure? Trust me on this one: if your salvation rests upon your decision, you can never be sure you did a good enough job of deciding.

"Jesus is in my heart because I feel Him there." Much of religion today is driven by emotion, and it is often implied that God is present when people feel good. This is terrible theology: each of us will be beaten down in life enough where we have no energy left to feel. And if Jesus is present because we feel good, then He must be absent when we undergo trial.

"Jesus is in my heart because I'm doing better in life." Indeed, as Christians we should grow in good works; but we are still sinners and will fall flat on our faces at times. Should we conclude that, when we have made a grave mistake and dearly need grace, that He isn't near because we've sinned?

If Jesus is present with you because of your decision, feelings or actions, then He's present because of your works; and you can never be certain that your works are good enough. But here is a far greater comfort: no matter your decision, feelings or actions the Lord promises that, wherever His Word and Sacraments are, there He is. For sure. For you.

Wednesday, March 9

Read: Isaiah 55:6-13

Are only Lutherans Going to Heaven?

So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it. (Is. 55:11)

It is worth repeating: the greatest contribution that Lutherans can make to Christianity today is to hold steadfastly to both justification by grace alone and the presence of the Lord in His Word and Sacraments. As we'll demonstrate in coming days, these are hopes that will not disappoint.

Holding to these is a challenge as we enter the 21st century. The past hundred years featured the growth of the Ecumenical Movement in Christianity. "Ecumenical" is from a Greek word that means worldwide, and Ecumenism teaches that different Christian church bodies should lay aside those doctrines which divide them in order to one, worldwide church. Since "all you have to do is believe in Jesus," other doctrines are expendable.

Confessional Lutherans reject the Ecumenical Movement, and with good reason. If we are to give up those doctrines which make us distinct from other Protestant church bodies, what must we give up for the sake of unity? For starters, the doctrines Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. This is simply not acceptable: the presence of Jesus in His means of grace is fully Scriptural, and far too great a treasure to give up for superficial unity.

So Lutherans cling to the means of grace, even though it divides them from others. Unfortunately, that faithfulness has led many to conclude that Lutherans consider themselves an exclusive club, that "Lutherans believe that only Lutherans are going to heaven." It is true? Far from it! In fact, we condemn such a teaching as a false doctrine.

Consider what we *do* teach: as we heard yesterday in Romans 10, Jesus is present where His Word is proclaimed; and as His Sacraments are physical elements endowed by His Word, He is present in them, too. In Isaiah 55, we hear the news that the Lord's Word does not return to Him empty: *wherever* the Word is proclaimed, Jesus is at work to give forgiveness and life.

Note that. Scripture does not say that Jesus is present when the Word is proclaimed in a Lutheran Church; the Lord is present wherever His Word is proclaimed. A church body may be loaded with all sorts of false and misguided teachings of man; but whenever the Word is read and proclaimed there, the Lord is still present despite the man-made stuff that is there.

More than one church body has said, "You must belong to us in order to have the hope of heaven." Therefore, salvation depends, in part, on your membership certificate. That's not a teaching of Scripture or the Lutheran Church. Wherever the Word is, there is Jesus. Wherever in the world Jesus is, He is at work to save, no matter the name on the church door.

Because Jesus is present in His means of grace wherever in the world, we don't give them up for the Ecumenical Movement. Ironically, holding to that miraculous truth of Jesus' presence in His Word and Sacraments makes Lutheran doctrine the most ecumenical (in its true sense) of all.

Thursday, March 10

Read: Hebrews 10:18-25

A Word about Worship and the Liturgy

...let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Heb. 10:22)

Worship is determined by faith: in other words, what you believe will determine how you worship. If a church teaches that we are saved by the works that we do, then the worship service will focus upon those works. Likewise, if a church teaches that we are certain we are Christians because of our feelings or behaviors, then worship will be focused upon inspiring those feelings and behaviors, so that we may be certain of salvation..

In some of the devotions in this booklet, beginning February 16, certain phrases appear in boldface. These are phrases that you hear and sing in the historic liturgy of which the Lutheran Church has made use since its inception, and which dates back into the early centuries of Christianity. We use the liturgy, but why? The answer is often, "Because we've always done it that way." As mentioned before, that's not a good enough answer to keep doing something. So why is the liturgy invaluable for worship?

Here's a clue: as a general rule, you'll find that the liturgy is used by those churches which believe that Christ is present in His Sacraments (Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox). The liturgy is rarely used in church bodies which believe the Sacraments are only symbols, nothing more. Why? *Because the liturgy ceaselessly proclaims the truth that, in Word and Sacrament, the Lord Jesus comes to visit His people.* It declares that the Bridegroom comes to tend His bride by His means of grace. It tells you, again and again, that you are not alone, but that the Lord draws near to you.

This is why, when we speak of worship, we often speak of "Divine Service:" Jesus, the divine Son of God, comes to serve us by forgiving our sins and strengthening our faith. That is why, as Hebrews 10 declares the marvelous work of salvation by Jesus, it then bids us not to forsake the gathering of believers (10:25), because there the Lord comes to serve.

Worship flows in one of three directions. In a church that has forsaken the Word, it will flow from people to people and speak of meeting physical needs and justifying lifestyles. In a church that emphasizes feelings and behavior, worship will be about man lifting his praises and showing his love to God in heaven. In Lutheran worship, in Divine Service, the flow is mostly from God to man. Jesus visits by His Word and Sacraments to forgive sins and strengthen faith.

Lutheran worship is sometimes criticized as passive, that worshipers seem to do little. I sometimes use the example of undergoing surgery: even if I am unconscious on the operating table, I'm an important part of the procedure, which is for my good. Likewise, while we respond with prayer and praise, Divine Service is first and foremost about our Savior who comes and heals us with His grace and mercy. In other words, the greatest joy of Divine Service is this: there He is, with salvation for you.

Friday, March 11

Read: Mark 4:26-29

Extraordinarily Ordinary

And He said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how. (Mk. 4:26-27)

Ordinary: synonyms include common, usual, unexceptional. It's the way things normally go.

Daily life is usually ordinary, because it usually goes about the same, normal way. Ordinarily, we gain energy by sleeping, nutrition by eating, wages by working. The Lord could just zap us from on high to leave us rested, healthy and prosperous; but He usually works through ordinary means to accomplish these things.

Here's the danger: when things are ordinary, we dismiss them as being too unexceptional for God to use. In other words, we look for God to be at work in glorious, miraculous, extraordinary ways. For example, we look at manna falling from heaven in Exodus, or Jesus feeding 5,000 with a few loaves and fish and say, "There's God! You can tell by the miracle!" But when we make the toast from the bread we purchased at the supermarket, made from the wheat in the field, we tend to forget that this, too, is God at work. It is, however, and the Lord chooses normally to work through means: instead of bread from heaven, He provides seeds that produce grain. And although it's not as spectacular, it's still miraculous; last I heard, no one had yet figured out why an inanimate seed sprouts into grain when buried in the ground. It's still the hand of God at work.

Look. God created and ordered this world. Therefore, this world will work in the way He ordered it; and as time goes on, His order seems very ordinary. So it doesn't make sense to believe that God is only at work in extraordinary things. It doesn't make sense that God would say, "Now that I've designed the world to work in this way, I'll only be working in other ways instead." Actually, it makes an awful lot of sense to look for God at work in ordinary things—the way He designed things to run normally.

This is a big temptation when it comes to religion: man tends to believe that you will find God in supernatural, spectacular, miraculous things. Therefore, God is only present where miraculous healings or recoveries are taking place, or where people are speaking odd tongues or exhibiting odd behaviors. Truly, the Lord can work such things if He wants to; but doesn't it just make sense that the Lord would provide for our souls in ordinary ways, just as He provides for our bodies? Isn't it consistent that He would use ordinary means like words and water, bread and wine to give us forgiveness of sins? That He who used something so scandalous as crucifixion to save us would forgive us and strengthen our faith in unspectacular means?

After all, in Mark 4, the Lord compares His kingdom to an ordinary seed, which grows and produces in spite of its normalcy and much to man's surprise. Because the ordinary is God's order, we rejoice all the more in His promise that in those "ordinary" means of grace, there He is.

Saturday, March 12

Re-Read: Matthew 28:18-20

Beginnings

...baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit... (Mt. 28:19)

“I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.” Those were the words when my kids were baptized at the ages of 11 and 8 days. And, being the pastor, I got to say the words and pour the water. This led to one less concern for their father, because in Holy Baptism, the Lord said to my boys, “For the sake of My only-begotten Son, you are now My beloved sons. No matter how short or long your life, in you I am well-pleased, and the kingdom of heaven is yours.” It’s peculiar blessing for pastors that they spend a lot of time with the sick and dying, for they appreciate how fragile life is. Thus I grow all the more thankful for the Lord’s certain gift of Holy Baptism.

Far too many parents today seem unconcerned about having their children baptized: “God still loves them and can save them apart from Baptism, can’t He?” seems a common question. One answer I have, honestly without being a smart aleck, is this: “God can keep your child alive without food, too; but He works through food to sustain life. If you don’t want to test the Lord when it comes to food, why would you test Him when it comes to Baptism?” That ordinary-looking sacrament is how God ordinarily gives forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. While God can and does save apart from Baptism, why deprive a child of the certainty Baptism brings?

You see, and I tell this to children even up in their nineties, in Baptism you have the certainty of God’s love. No matter your circumstances, you can say, “I know I am the Lord’s because He made me His at my Baptism.” No matter if God feels a million miles past your veil of sadness, you can say the same. You’re not forsaken, because the Lord is with you: you are certain of this because He put His name on you, personally, at your baptism.

“I baptize you...*in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.*” You’ll note that we begin Divine Service with all but the first three words of that sentence: we begin with the Invocation, “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.” It declares the God who is present to forgive, but it’s a funny start all the same: grammar-hounds like me will note that it’s not even a complete sentence.

A pastor pointed out something to me about the Invocation a while back. He told me that it is a complete sentence, after all. It begins for each of us at the font, when the pastor says, “I baptize you....” We hear the rest of the sentence in the Invocation at the start of the liturgy, and thus it connects our Baptism to the Divine Service, which renews it. The same Savior who put His name on us as He shared His death and resurrection at the font (Ro 6), now comes to visit us by His Word and Supper in His Divine Service to us.

That Invocation does more than name the triune God. It announces that Christ comes to visit His children, born again into His family at the font. There He is, to prepare them for the banquet feast of heaven.

Sunday, March 13 (The 5th Sunday in Lent)

Read: John 11:1-53

Lazarus

When Jesus heard that, He said, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it." (Jn 11:43)

This is the fifth Sunday in Lent, so we turn our attention to the Gospel lesson for the day. First things first, remember: Jesus is present. And whatever He does, He does for you.

Wherever Jesus is, the Lord of life is present. In Him is abundant life. Apart from Him, there is only death.

Lazarus, a beloved friend of Jesus, is terribly sick and will die before Jesus chooses to arrive. However, Jesus declares to His disciples that this sickness will not end in death, but will glorify the Son of God. He then begins His journey to Bethany, drawing nearer to death and cross. Where Pharisees would stay away because contact with death would make them unclean, Jesus goes purposefully to the tomb; and as He goes, He enters a region where His foes are trying to kill Him, and will eventually succeed.

Jesus arrives in Bethany, where no hope remains. Lazarus has been dead four days, the tomb is sealed, and those gathered see nothing left but grief. But now, things have changed: the Lord is present there, and He is the Resurrection and the Life. He speaks His life-giving Word, commanding, “Lazarus, come forth!” And when the Lord of life speaks, death has no choice but to let His beloved friend go.

Even as Mary and Martha rejoice, sinful man shows how backwards he has things. Caiaphas and the council meet to discuss this Savior, and Caiaphas voices their opinion: if Jesus lives, they’ll all die. If Jesus dies, they’ll all live. Let’s get rid of the Resurrection and the Life, and then we can truly live. Little does he know that, in the midst of his depravity, Caiaphas prophesies truth: Jesus’ death will win life for the world. He will rise from the dead in order to raise His people from the dead—to raise you from the dead.

This is your hope and joy: the Savior who came to Lazarus and raised him from the dead is the same Savior who visits you in His means of grace. He declares to you in His Word that your sickness does not end in death. When He visited you in Holy Baptism, He shared His death and resurrection with you; and if the Resurrection and the Life shares His resurrection with you, He also gives His life to you. By His Word, He declares that your sin cannot keep you in the grave, because Christ has defeated death’s dark bands and risen again. While you must contemplate the deterioration of your flesh and blood, in His Supper He gives you His risen, living body and blood for the forgiveness of sins.

The Savior who came to Lazarus and raised him from the dead is the same Savior who visits you in His means of grace. Your life does not end in death; for, on Judgment Day, the Resurrection and the Life will declare to you, “Come forth from your grave!” And that last enemy, death, is powerless against that Word to keep you from your Savior’s presence forever.

Monday, March 14

The Kyrie

Read Matthew 15:22-28 (If you like, Mt. 9:27-31; 20:29-34; Mark 10:46-52; Luke 17:11-19; and review the devotion on February 23)

Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" (Mt. 15:25)

The story sounds troubling at first: a woman comes to Jesus crying, "Have mercy!," and Jesus calls her a dog. Let's give it a closer look.

The woman is a Canaanite, not a Jew, but she calls Jesus "Son of David." That's a very Jewish title; and it suggests she's trying to pretend to be someone she's not: "If only I can fool this Jesus into thinking I'm Jewish like Him, then He'll help me." But this doesn't last, for Jesus' first words are, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Her gambit isn't going to work. She persists, anyway: "Lord, help me!" Once again, He seems to demur: "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs"—"dogs" being slang for "Gentile." The woman doggedly insists, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." It's then that Jesus commends her for great faith, and heals her daughter. What has happened? The woman apparently begins the encounter with the belief that she must do something, be something, before Jesus will help her. As long as she keeps believing that Jesus will help her because of some merit she has, He does not. However, with her final words, she puts it all on Him: "Fine, Lord. If I'm a dog, I'm a dog. But You're still the Savior of *all*. It doesn't matter who I am, and it doesn't matter that I have nothing to give, or am nothing that impresses. You are still You, You are still the Savior, and You can heal my daughter." That's when Jesus does.

If you read through all five texts above, you'll find a common phrase among them: "Lord, have mercy!" Those who cry out are a collection of Jew and Gentile, blind, leprosy, desperate. Their cry announces two important things about faith: first, they have nothing to trade for help, and must rely solely on the mercy of Jesus. Second, Jesus is there. Immanuel is with them, and that is why, at that particular time, they cry out, "Lord, have mercy!"

We echo that cry in the liturgy when we sing the *Kyrie* ("Kyrie Eleison" is Latin for "Lord, have mercy"), "Lord have mercy upon us." In doing so, we make an important confession of faith: we do not come in worship to barter with the Lord. Instead, we are gathered as poor, miserable sinners, as beggars who have nothing to give. But with the *Kyrie* (KEER-ee-ay), we also confess that Jesus is present in that service, ready to pour His mercy and forgiveness upon us. This mercy is, well, *solely* by His mercy, and this is a great blessing to you and me. If we had to be something, do something to earn the Lord's help, we could never be sure if we had been or done enough.

There will be Sunday mornings when you arrive for worship, beaten and battered by life, barely there. There will be times when the longest prayer your exhausted sorrow can manage is, "Lord, have mercy." There is great comfort in the *Kyrie* you sing: no matter what life has wrought, your Savior is comes in Word and Sacrament for your good. There He is, point-to-Him-present in His means of grace, with mercy. Guaranteed.

Tuesday, March 15

The Gloria in Excelsis

Re-read: Luke 2:1-20 (If you like, review the February 19 devotion)

"And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." (Lk. 2:12)

"Glory be to God on high; and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"

That's what the angels sing to the shepherds outside of Bethlehem, and with reason: the Savior is born. Christ the Lord is born in the world, for the world. Immanuel is dwelling with His people, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in the manger.

Hearing the angels, the shepherds believe the Word they've heard and make haste to Bethlehem. As we've said before, that's what faith does: it wants to be in the Savior's presence, receiving His grace. So the shepherds go and find their Savior—a baby immobilized in swaddling clothes, lying in a feedbox. He doesn't look like much; but the Word proclaimed by angels says that this is the Son of God with an infant body, blood pumped by a tiny human heart. Forget how He *appears*: this *is* the Savior.

In the liturgy, we echo the song of the angels, singing "Glory be to God on high [which in Latin is "Gloria in excelsis Deo"], and on earth peace, goodwill toward men." Just like the *Kyrie*, the *Gloria in Excelsis* is a proclamation that the Savior is present—identifiably present. As shepherds looked into the manger, we look to the means of grace. Even more specifically and joyfully, as the shepherds looked into the manger and saw their Savior with body and blood, the liturgy is building up to the Lord's Supper, where we receive that same body and blood for the forgiveness of sins.

Now, bread and wine look no more like the place of God's presence than an infant's flesh and blood; and, as we mentioned previously, many believe that bread and wine are only signs of Jesus, nothing more. But note the angel's words in Luke 2:12, for the angel calls the Baby a sign—and there is no doubt that the Lord is present there. You see, signs often indicate a presence, not an absence. An exit sign doesn't lead to a brick wall, but to a door. The sign of the Baby indicates Jesus is there, born in Bethlehem. The signs of bread and wine mean that He is there, in His Supper.

While the *Gloria in Excelsis* holds joy for all Christians, it is certainly an encouragement for those who are beaten down, depressed, made to feel of low worth. When we are brought low, the devil tempts us to believe that the Lord is nowhere near; or that He wouldn't help such fools as us; or that you're going to have to clean up your act and get better before the Lord has grace for you. The devil remains a liar and sore loser, and the *Gloria* calls his bluff. As the angel said to lowly shepherds, so it is true for you: the Savior was born *unto you, for you*. He does not remain in heaven, hoping you shape up; instead, He visits you in His Word to say, "I forgive *you*." He visits you in His Supper to say, "This body and blood are given and shed *for you*." Your Savior, who made you His in Baptism, is not far away. By Word and Sacrament, He gives you the peace and goodwill He won at the cross.

Wednesday, March 16

The Salutation

Re-read: Luke 1:26-38 (If you like, review the February 18 devotion.)

And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" (Lk. 1:28)

I hate being lonely. We all do. "People are social creatures," say sociologists; they need to be with others, and this is borne out. Watch the top-rated TV shows these days, and they're about groups of people working together. Dirty Harry is out, CSI is in; and especially in cop shows and hospital dramas, there's even a theme of working together against evil and death. It's a recognition that loneliness is a terrible curse, that isolation hurts.

It's not supposed to be like this. When God made Adam, He created Eve because in a creation that was "very good" on all other counts, it wasn't good for man to be alone; he needed a helper comparable to him. The Lord created us not only to need others, but He created us to serve others. Not only that, but the Lord desired that Adam and Eve be with each other and Him; for it is in the Lord that loneliness ends. As St. Augustine wrote, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Him.

Mankind looks to ways to connect with others, but the flaws are apparent. There's the sexualized world, where marital intimacy is violated into a one night stand to feel "close" to a stranger. There's political correctness and multiculturalism, which says we must accept all things so that we're all together. In the meantime, Christianity faces increasing criticism for allegedly dividing people and ostracizing others. All attempts to defeat loneliness apart from God lead to the isolation of hell, cut off for eternity from the living Lord and His life. And don't be fooled: the devil uses sickness, infertility, failed relationships, past sins, corruption, death and more to make you feel as lonely as possible, cut off from others and Jesus.

In this lonely world, the congregation sings the *Gloria*, proclaiming that Jesus became flesh *to dwell with us*, and that He is just as present in His means of grace for our salvation today. When that hymn concludes, the pastor declares to the people gathered, "The Lord be with you." It's an astonishing statement of presence.

Remember the angel's words to Mary: "The Lord is with you." This was not a toss-off, "How's it going" kind of greeting. It wasn't a distant, "The Lord is with you in that, if you want to be close to Him, just make the trip to the temple." It was a statement that the Lord was truly there with her; and, in fact, He was becoming flesh in her womb, on the way to birth and cross as your Savior. The Lord was most certainly "there-He-is" present with Mary.

So as the liturgy continues, the pastor declares the joy and reason of the Divine Service: "The Lord be with you." The Lord is with His people. By His means of grace, the Bridegroom comes to care for His bride. No matter the isolation and barrenness that you must endure in this life, the Lord who went to the cross is just as with you in His means of grace as He was with Mary in her womb. What a wonder to hear these words in Divine Service, surrounded by your brothers and sisters in Christ. You are not alone.

Thursday, March 17

Heaven on Earth

Read: Revelation 4:1-11 and re-read Isaiah 6:1-13

The four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!" (Rev. 4:8)

You are not alone—the Lord is with you. That promise is more sure than the things your eyes certainly see.

Isaiah's eyes saw few pleasant things. It was the final days before the Babylonians came and leveled the city, showing no mercy to man, woman or child. As had other prophets, Isaiah had the unwelcome calling of telling the people that this impending judgment was because they had forsaken the Lord. There is little loneliness in this world so acute as the one who grieves the death of a beloved; but close to it is the desolation of the true prophet who preaches life in the Lord while he watches the hearers choose death instead. One imagines that Isaiah, and the other few who remained faithful, felt very lonely as the vast majority forsook God.

But they were not God-forsaken, for the Lord is faithful to His people. In the midst of this, Isaiah had his vision in the temple. Inside that little cube-shaped room, God sat enthroned, high and lifted up as seraphim sang "Holy, holy, holy" as they flew above Him. Heaven and earth had come together; and while Isaiah was terrified of the sight, the Lord was there with grace and mercy. He forgave Isaiah for his sin, and then sent him to declare His Word. Unbelievers would hear of their unrepentant desolation, that they were about to be chopped down to a stump. But believers would hear that a seed would grow from that stump—God was faithful and the Savior was coming. They were not alone.

While Isaiah had a vision of the Lord on earth, John had a vision of the Lord enthroned in heaven (Rev. 4); because God is there, the hosts sing the same song: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty!" (Rev. 4:8)

Pr. Hermann Sasse related a legend about the origin of the Church in Russia. Prince Vladimir of Kiev sent out messengers to examine different religions; and after observing an Orthodox service in Constantinople, they returned and declared that they didn't know if they were in heaven or on earth. This, says Sasse, decided which religion would be found in Russia: Christianity did not worship God far away, but a God who came near to help His people—just as He did for Isaiah in Isaiah 6.

Exactly right! God comes to dwell with His people, and His temple is His means of grace. That is why, just before the Lord's Supper, we rejoice to sing the Sanctus (Latin for "holy"), the song of the seraphim: we sing, "Holy, holy, holy Lord God of Sabaoth! Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory!" The Lord Jesus Christ, who is enthroned in heaven after His death for you, visits you in His means of grace. In this world that has so forsaken God, you are not God-forsaken. In Divine Service, heaven and earth come together as the Lord forgives you for all of your sins. And where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.

Friday, March 18

Heaven on Earth, and God in ICU

Read: Matthew 21:1-16; if you like, review the devotion from February 25

"Hosanna to the Son of David! 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!' Hosanna in the highest!" (Mt. 21:9)

Organ music, pulpit, font and altar all say “church” to me. There's a comfort level when these are present, because then I expect to hear the Lord's Word of salvation, and hear of His presence with forgiveness. There, in Christ, heaven and earth come together; thus a Lutheran named Christian Scriver once prayed, “Let Your Supper be to me my heaven upon earth.”

There are times, however, when these sights and sounds are replaced by others. There's the incessant beep of the EKG and the sanitized smell of the ICU. There's the silence of an empty house when one has become shut-in, homebound. These are not comforting stimuli. The sterility of Intensive Care means that death is a real possibility; and the emptiness of the homebound life leaves many feeling frustrated and forsaken.

I'm not making this up: just before finishing this devotional, I stood in an ICU room at a man's bedside. As I often do with comatose patients, I sang a familiar hymn before speaking God's Word and praying. During the hymn, my peripheral vision caught sight of a stranger in the doorway. When I ended the prayer, he'd moved: he was kneeling on the floor next to the bed. After standing, he explained his unusual behavior by saying, “I came here because I knew that God was present here.” And so He was, as promised, by His Word. I chatted with this man for a while, and then went with him to his mother's bedside to speak the Lord's Word and pray there, too.

The Lord comes to deliver us from death and isolation. When we sing the *Sanctus* before the Supper, we don't just sing the “Holy, holy, holy” heard around God's throne. As we sing, “Heaven *and earth* are full of Thy glory!,” the hymn moves from heaven's hosts to Palm Sunday crowds: “Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord!” The crowds sang that because the Son of God had become flesh, and He was riding into Jerusalem on a donkey! He was there to “hosanna”—to “save now”—because He would be nailed to a cross five days later for all.

Behold! We sing the same because the same Lord rides into our midst in His means of grace. His body and blood, once perched on a donkey, are given to us in bread and wine. Why? To give us forgiveness—to save now. Jesus is present in His Supper to hosanna. There He is.

It is awesome that the Lord condescends—and delights—to visit His people gathered at the altar: how much more a reminder of His faithfulness that He also visits His individual lambs cut off from the fold. In the living room of the disabled, or across the bed from the IV bag in ICU, the Lord is no less present in His means of grace, to forgive and strengthen His people. In times when isolation and fear reach heights, the Lord steadily, faithfully declares, “Here I am, with grace and forgiveness and life for you; and no one can snatch you out of My hand.” What joy! Where two or three are gathered in His name, there He is in the midst of them. (Mt. 18:20).

Saturday, March 19

The Nunc Dimittis

Re-read: Luke 2:21-38 and review the February 21 devotion

And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. (Lk. 2:26)

Not every hospital stay ends with a discharge and a return to the comforts of home. Because of the extent of injury or infection or a whole host of reasons, life ends in the hospital room; and whatever the medical cause of death, the initial cause of death is sin, for sickness and death are sin's wages.

No matter how society tries to ignore death and emphasize life, youth and beauty, the truth is that death is always near. In the short time of preparing this booklet, I have encountered those who have lost unborn children, born children, brothers and parents. Pastors know personally far more than their share of the dead and the dying, and that is how it is supposed to be: you see, it is the great privilege of the pastor to bring the Word and Sacraments—to bring to the dying the Lord of life who has conquered death.

We spoke of Simeon once before, back on February 21. We often picture him as an old man, wizened by years and slowed by age, looking forward to deliverance from affliction. This may well be—but the Scriptures don't say. For all we know, Simeon could be a 22-year-old merchant in the prime of his life, with a brilliant future ahead of him, but the Bible doesn't tell us one way or the other. It does declare this God-given wisdom on Simeon's part: he is a man aware of his mortality. And, rather than deny death, by God's grace he comes into the presence of Jesus, who, though only forty days old, is still the Lord and Creator of life from eternity. Trusting in this promised Savior, Simeon sings his song, the *Nunc Dimittis*: “Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy Word. For mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people...”

More than once in the ER of a local hospital, I have sung that song for, and sometimes with, family members over the body of a loved one who has died. It is a testimony that this child of God has departed in peace, according to God's Word. That peace is sure because, during that life before death, the Lord visited that beloved child. He shared His death and resurrection in Holy Baptism, so that this one already had eternal life. He spoke His life-giving Word of Absolution, continuing that life. And He placed His crucified and risen body and blood in the mouth of this loved one, to strengthen and preserve him in the one true faith, even through death, unto life everlasting.

That's why we sing the *Nunc Dimittis* right after the Lord's Supper, because we experience what Simeon experienced: we, like him, have entered into the presence of our Savior. Where Simeon held Jesus' body, we receive that same body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. And so we depart in peace from the altar, according to God's Word; because even if death reaches out to snatch us today, the Lord of life has fed us life and will raise us from the dead.

Sunday, March 20

Palm Sunday + The Sunday of the Passion

Read: Matthew 26:1-27:66; or Matthew 27:11-54

"He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him. He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, 'I am the Son of God.' " (Mt. 27:42-43)

This is the final Sunday in Lent, doing double-duty as both Palm Sunday and the Sunday of the Passion. For a dose of Palm Sunday, you are invited to review the devotions of February 25 and March 18. For now, we turn once again to the appointed Gospel lesson for the day, and remember: whatever is happening, Jesus is present there. Whatever He is doing, He is doing for you.

So there He is, standing on trial before Pilate. There, Jesus freely confesses the truth of who He is—the King of the Jews. But when He is accused of all sorts of dreadful sin, He doesn't say a word. When the notorious Barabbas is released and His death is thus assured, Jesus still says nothing in His defense, but goes to the cross as a sheep before its shearers is silent (Is. 53:7). Why? Because while He is completely innocent of sin, He is taking the blame for it. When accused of sin, He accepts the accusation and the guilt. He does not object when Barabbas is spared because He goes to the cross for Barabbas. He does not object to have your sins placed upon Him; that is why He is there, to go to the cross and suffer God's judgment. Because He is there, He is also there in His Word of Absolution, announcing God's verdict of you: "The price for your sin has been paid, and your sentence has been served. Therefore, you are forgiven."

There He is, beside Pilate as the Roman addresses the crowd. No less than three times during the trial, Pilate declares Jesus to be innocent, guilty of no wrongdoing whatsoever. Each time he seeks to release Jesus, the crowds call for the crucifixion of the Christ. His death on the cross is no mistake, no misunderstanding: mankind puts Jesus to death because He is the sinless Son of God. They cry out, "His blood be on us and our children." God makes His sinless Son to be sin for you, so that you might be the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21). There He is, body nailed to the cross, blood shed. And because He is there, He is also in His Supper, giving you His body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins.

There He is, on the cross, forsaken by His Father as He is damned for the sins of the world; and as He makes this ultimate sacrifice, the crowds jeer, "He saved others, Himself He cannot save." How blind! He wills not to save Himself in order to save others, for He undergoes that death to defeat death and rise again. Because He is there, He is also present in Holy Baptism, giving you His death and resurrection (Rom. 6:1-4).

There He is, lifeless on the cross. It is finished, and His death is enough to accomplish completely your salvation. He doesn't look more than a battered corpse, but the guards get it right: "Truly this was the Son of God!"

There He is, on the cross, for you.

There He is, in His means of grace, for you.

Monday, March 21

The Pax Domini

Read: John 20:19-31; if you like, review the March 1 devotion.

Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, "Peace be with you." When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. (Jn. 20:19b-20)

As we heard on the first of March, the disciples were gathered together in a locked room for fear of the Jews. They'd heard reports that Jesus was risen from the dead, but had dismissed them. Then, suddenly, Jesus stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you," and showed them His hands and His side. There He was, flesh and blood and all. The locked door hadn't kept him out, for the Lord can do whatever He wants with laws of physics. Their fears and doubts didn't keep Him away, nor the fact that they had fled from Him at His arrest. In fact, it was precisely because of these sins that He was standing in their midst: He was risen to give them forgiveness. He was there to bring them peace.

The people of God gather together in Divine Service. They come with their share of burdens, worries and fears. "What will the doctor have to say when the report comes back?" "How can I tell my parents I was such an idiot?" "If I refuse to compromise, I could lose my job!" "How will I ever make that payment?" "Why can't I find a soul-mate?" And with so many worries, there's the additional worry of doubt: "If I really trust that the Lord is working all things for my good, like He promises, why do I worry so much? Why can't I sleep? And if I clearly don't trust the Lord to help me like I should, will He indeed help me?" Fear. Doubt. Worry.

Sounds just like the disciples on the evening that followed the Resurrection.

Even as these worries seek to steal the attention of the Lord's people, the Lord is at work. Up at the altar, over bread and wine, the pastor repeats Jesus' Words of Institution for Holy Communion: "This is My body...this cup is the New Testament in My blood...for the forgiveness of sins." And after those words, the pastor turns to the congregation—and what does he say?

"The peace of the Lord (Latin, *pax domini*) be with you always."

Do you see? The Lord Jesus, risen from the grave, broke the laws of physics to bring Himself—body, blood, and all—to the disciples, to bring them His peace. The same risen Lord breaks the laws of physics to bring Himself—body, blood and all; in, with and under bread and wine—to you! To bring you His peace and grace!

Are you worried? Fearful? Full of regret? Troubled? It is for you that the Lord comes! He delights to bring His peace to His repentant people, and so He visits you with His resurrection tidings: "Peace be with you! I have died for your sins, and I am risen from the dead. I give you My body and blood for forgiveness, and I make you this promise: by this Sacrament, I strengthen and preserve you in the one true faith unto life everlasting."

As He came to His disciples, so He comes to you—to grant you His peace and renew once again your membership in Him.

Tuesday, March 22

Read: Psalm 46

Alway

The LORD of hosts is with us; The God of Jacob is our refuge. (Ps. 46:7)

Some who read this devotional are serving in the military; many who read this have friends and family in harm's way in remote corners of the world like Afghanistan and Iraq.

I remember a scholar describing war as a complete breakdown in society. No kidding. When different sides seek to kill each other, this would indeed seem to signal a rather big societal problem. Leave it to an academic to make war sound dull. Front-line soldiers and convoy riders, however, are well aware that it's a world of bullets, mortars, car bombs and even the odd firecracker. In my opinion, those who see front-line action have perhaps the clearest understanding of what all the world would always be like were the Lord to withdraw His gracious, protecting hand. They haven't been quite to hell and back; but they've been closer than most.

One of the things I admire about seasoned soldiers is their ability to think quick and innovate: they have to be this way because the battlefield is as unpredictable as it is unforgiving. There's much to be said for training, drills and discipline, with good reason: such preparation enables you to control those things that you can control, in the face of suspense, surprise and ambush. It must be an exhausting time, though, this hyper-alertness. Soldiers live at a level of high-stakes suspense and uncertainty that most of us cannot imagine. Add to that the incessant questioning of tactics and justifications in the press, not to mention the strange vocation of the soldier where he is commanded to kill for the sake of peace. There's a lot of uncertainty out there.

But here is one thing that Christians in the military need not be unsure of: their Savior visits them in His Word and Sacraments, too. I remember a picture of a chaplain holding service outside in wind and sand, a stack of crates as a makeshift altar. On the altar was a paten of bread and a chalice of wine: somewhere in the middle of nowhere, the Lord was visiting His people.

There's a hint of this in the *Pax Domini*, when the pastor says, "The peace of the Lord be with you alway. Alway, not always, it says in The [1943] Lutheran Hymnal; and I'm told that that archaic form doesn't just mean "all the time," but also "everywhere." Everywhere, including church, hospital, crate-altar and foxhole. The Lord visits His people in His means of grace, no matter where they are found.

Thus Psalm 46, where God is a very present help in trouble. By His Word, He can melt the earth, break the bow and shatter the spear; and, in His good time, He will. But as Christians in the military go about their duty, they have the certainty that the Lord has conquered sin, death and the devil already; and already, by His means of grace, He delivers the victory to them.

Should you be in the military, prayers for you ascend each Sunday at the altar of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, and many others. But better than that is this: the Lord of hosts is with *you*. The God of Jacob is your fortress.

Wednesday, March 23

Read: John 1:29-43; Rev. 5:6-14; if you like, review the Feb. 22 devotion.

The Agnus Dei

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn. 1:29)

"The peace of the Lord be with you alway," declares the pastor; and the congregation responds by singing the *Agnus Dei*, Latin for "Lamb of God:" "O Christ, Thou Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us...grant us Thy peace." As with so many parts of the liturgy, this hymn is also straight from Scripture, this time from the lips of John the Baptist. Remember, John has been preaching that the kingdom of heaven is near because the King of heaven is near. Where is He? He has come to be baptized. He's there in the crowd; but so unremarkable-looking is the Savior that John has to point Him out and say, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

As we discussed back on February 22, "Lamb of God" is a strange title for the One who conquers sin, death and the devil. In Scripture, lambs are good only for sacrifices and meals—which is precisely why Jesus is the Lamb of God. As we continue through this Holy Week, it is no coincidence that Jesus is in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. It is no coincidence that the Last Supper is the Passover meal. It is no coincidence, for He is the Paschal (Passover) Lamb who is sacrificed to deliver us from death.

And, therefore, it also makes perfect sense that Christ feeds us Himself, our Paschal Lamb, in His Supper, Holy Communion.

Jesus is called the Lamb also in Revelation 5, where the hosts of heaven sing, "*Worthy is the Lamb who was slain To receive power and riches and wisdom, And strength and honor and glory and blessing!*" (Rev. 5:12). The Lamb of God whom all of heaven worships is the same who comes in Divine Service, to *serve you*—to give you His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins.

To the unbelieving eye, the Lord's Supper looks like a bit of bread and wine, nothing more: we know that the Lord is present there only by His Word. That is exactly how it was at the Jordan River, too: people did not recognize the Lamb of God until John the Baptist pointed Him out. We live by faith, not by sight; and by faith we believe He is there with grace.

(We also practice care in admitting people to the Sacrament, only because the Lord warns that those who receive it without repentant faith will receive it to their judgment. This warning is consistent with Scripture: it is not good for one to come into the Lord's presence and say, "I believe in Jesus, but He is not here." See I Corinthians 11:27-32.)

The night that Jesus was betrayed will be remembered by the Church in just one more day, and His death the day after. There He is, eating His Last Supper with His disciples before His Sacrifice on the cross. And in the Lord's Supper, there He is for you: Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. There, He has mercy upon you. There, He grants you His peace.

Thursday, March 24 (Maundy Thursday)**The Benediction**

Read: Numbers 6:22-27 (If you like, re-read Luke 22:7-20 and review the Feb. 26 devotion)

"So they shall put My name on the children of Israel, and I will bless them.." (Num. 6:27)

The conclusion of the Divine Service takes us back to the tabernacle one more time. The finishing touches had just been added at the start of Numbers, and the people were preparing for its consecration. This took place over twelve days, after which we read: *Now when Moses went into the tabernacle of meeting to speak with Him, he heard the voice of One speaking to him from above the mercy seat that was on the ark of the Testimony, from between the two cherubim; thus He spoke to him* (Num. 7:89). As Israel celebrated the Passover (!) shortly thereafter, the cloud covered the tabernacle day and night (Num. 9:15-16). Note the progression: God had made Israel His people and delivered them by sacrifice (the Passover lamb); now He was dwelling among them, in the Holy of Holies, for their good.

And as the Israelites prepared to dedicate the temple, the Lord gave the blessing which Aaron and his sons were to speak to the people: The Lord bless Thee and keep Thee; the Lord make His face to shine upon Thee and be gracious unto Thee; the Lord lift up His countenance upon Thee, and give Thee peace" (Num. 6:24-27). The Lord's face was turned toward His people: He had them in His sight, to watch over them, nearby from the tabernacle. And by this blessing, He put His name on them: He'd called them, saved them, and they were His.

At a Passover centuries later, Jesus ate with His disciples. He had called them to be His own, and in a few short hours would save them—and all the world—by His sacrifice on the cross. But again, although He would die, then rise, then ascend into heaven, He would not be far from His people. He instituted a new tabernacle that night, establishing that His face would be toward His people in, with and under bread and wine. He'd called them, saved them, put His name on them. They were His, and He would not forsake them.

Today, the Divine Service begins with the Invocation (see March 12), taking us back to Holy Baptism: there, the Lord put His name on you, making you His people. The Sacrifice has been made for your sins at the cross, and so you remain His people; therefore, the Lord turns His face toward you and feeds you His holy Supper and gives you peace.

This is the heartbeat of the Christian's life. The Lord has called you as His own. He continues to speak His life-giving Word. He continues to feed you His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. By these means of grace, He is near to you. He declares, "I have called you by the Gospel and made you My own. I look upon you with favor and will not let you go. I am not far away in time of trouble, for I give you My Word: by these means of grace, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

Friday, March 25 (Good Friday)**A Most Terrifying Absence**

Read: Mark 15:22-39

And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which is translated, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Mk. 15:34)

There He is, on the cross. It's the culmination of the mystery of the Incarnation: for if it is beyond our comprehension that the Son of God became flesh, both human and divine, then it is even more dumbfounding that the Son of God allows Himself to be put to death by sinful man. But there He is, God present and dying on the cross.

Yet, at the same time, there He isn't. As the Son hangs on the cross, present there for your salvation, His Father turns His face away. Father and Son have been in communion with each other from eternity, but that endless fellowship is broken at the cross. While Jesus suffers physical death for you, this is the greater death that He dies—He is separated from His Father in heaven, deprived of His presence. Because His Father is absent, there is nothing there but death. Because Jesus is forsaken by His Father at Calvary, that cross truly is His hell, fully deprived of the Father's presence and grace.

That eternity of hell comes to an end for the Lord Jesus, however. Before He breathes His last, it is finished, and He commends His spirit into His Father's hands before the temple curtain is torn, top to bottom.

"It is finished," that judgment for you and me. There's no more price to be paid.

What great comfort when you are haunted by guilt. Whether it's a conscience that revisits mistakes or the devil's whispers that some affliction is God's revenge, you are likely to be tempted to believe sometimes that God is angry with you. You will likely wonder at times if the Lord is punishing you for some sin, and thus has abandoned you to the dust. At such times look to the cross: see the Son present there for you, even as His Father forsakes Him. Christ's death is sufficient for all of your sins.

Therefore, God the Father declares to you, "You can be certain that I am not angry with you. Why? Because I took out all of my perfect, righteous anger on My Son at the cross. I have no wrath left for your sins, because it was finished there. Therefore, I use all things for your good. I have called you in Baptism to be My beloved child. I give you life by My Word even as I feed you with My Supper. I am not far away, and I have not forsaken you; to be angry with you now, My beloved child, would be to forsake My Son and His Sacrifice again. No, My wrath is spent, and you are forgiven."

As you look to the cross for such relief, don't forget that temple curtain. That thick veil, which walled off the Most Holy Place, was torn by God, top to bottom. This testifies that the Sacrifice has been made, that there is no longer need for a mediator between God and man, because Christ is our high priest. However, it proclaims something else: God is no longer present in that Holy of Holies. In this New Testament He is present with His people in His means of grace. There He is, near you, for you; and will not forsake you.

Saturday, March 26

Read: I Peter 3:19-22

Rest and Descent

...also He went and preached to the spirits in prison... (I Pet. 3:19).

In between the services of Good Friday and Easter Sunday, Saturday gets little notice or recognition. It is, however, a most opportune time to address a little-publicized event that is recorded in I Peter 3 and the Apostles' Creed: in between “was crucified, dead and buried” and “the third day He rose again from the dead,” you find, “He descended into hell.”

There He is, in hell. Why?

Why does Jesus do anything and everything? He does it for you.

He is not there to suffer. He has already suffered an eternity of hell on the cross, because it was there that God forsook His Son and damned Him for the sins of the world. By the time Jesus died on the cross, the judgment was done and the sacrifice complete. “It is finished,” preached the Lord, and “Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit.”

No, Jesus is not there to suffer. He descends into hell to demonstrate His complete victory over His enemies—your enemies.

Historically, wars on earth usually involve land: one army is here, the other is there, and each one tries to rob the other of real estate. Everyone knows that an army has won the victory when its commander can march into the enemy's palace and sit in their king's throne. Like a high-stakes game of “capture the flag,” it indicates that the foe is defeated. A recent parallel would be the famous scene of U.S. Forces entering Baghdad and toppling the statue of Saddam Hussein, signifying the end of his oppressive regime.

If hell is the one place where the Lord is absent with grace, one would think it could be the last stronghold of opposition. Here, the devil and his angels could plot their comeback strategy and operate at least upon on the pretense of power. But it is not so; and to demonstrate His complete victory for you, Jesus marches into hell to proclaim His victory over sin and grave, devil and hell.

When the Lord puts His name on you in Baptism, the devil paints you with a bullseye. He will use every affliction possible to convince you that the Lord is weak or uncaring or angry. You must always remember that the devil is a liar. And when he whispers such temptations into your ear, remember the descent into hell. You are no match for the evil one; but so thoroughly is Satan beaten that Christ can march into hell, declare His victory and the devil's defeat...and then march right back out again.

The old evil foe has been toppled, and he will never have any power again. That victory is yours in Christ, who descended into hell and declared His victory for you.

Sunday, March 27

Read: Matthew 28:1-10

The Hope of Glory and the End of the Story

“He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay.” (Mt. 28:6)

As we conclude this devotional study on the Lord's gracious presence, we rejoice to declare His absence—His absence from the tomb. The women have come to the tomb to prepare Jesus' body for burial, but He's not there. He's risen from the dead. To rise from the dead, He's conquered death once *for all*—for all time and for all people. He isn't going to die again, but lives forever.

The presence of God is woven into the story of His people throughout history; but while the Bible ends with Revelation 22, the story continues. Where death is conquered, only life remains. Where death is no more, there is no more end. Remember: All that Jesus does, He does for you. He was crucified for you, to redeem you from sin. He rose again to conquer death for you. He ascended into heaven so that you might be taken to heaven, too; and because He lives forever, so do you. That's the end of the story.

There are two great temptations to distract you from heaven. One is to delight so much in the things of this world that you care nothing for what lies hereafter; this is the plight of our society today, and its hype of pleasurable life is really a culture of death. The other temptation is to be so crushed by the effects of sin on this dying world as to simply give up in despair. As one who spends a fair amount of time visiting the ill, the disturbed, the dying and the imprisoned, I seem to have mislaid my rose-colored glasses. I'm really quite happy if the Lord returns in glory today. I give thanks to the Lord for the hope of heaven and the assurance of eternal life.

I remember a phone call I received from a fellow pastor when things were going poorly in my first parish, where some had literally demanded that I stop preaching the Word of God. The outlook was grim, and I related the situation to this pastor and said, “The end of the story is going to be ugly.” He replied, “No! You know the end of the story, and it begins with the resurrection of the dead. In the meantime, you've got a couple chapters to endure.” So do you. Your afflictions may be far different from mine, but the devil, the world and your own sinful flesh are going to do their evil best to beat the Life out of you. Such chapters come, and they can get pretty long.

But they're not the end of the story; nor, despite their boasts, are they the main theme. Here is the theme of history: your Savior is with you. Having become flesh to live, die, rise and ascend, He comes to give these *to you*. He's joined you to His death and resurrection in Baptism, when He put His name on you. The Word-made-flesh still speaks His life-giving, wonder-working Word to forgive your sins. He feeds you His Supper for forgiveness, to strengthen and preserve you in the one true faith until...life everlasting!

That's the end of the story. And it's only the beginning.

The Lord be with you. Amen

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Questions and comments may directed to tpauls@goodshepherdboise.org
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