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Easter 4 One Year Series 2017

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Easter IV (Jubilate)

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, You show those in error the light of Your truth so that they may return to the way of righteousness. Grant faithfulness to all who are admitted into the fellowship of Christ's church that they may avoid whatever is contrary to their confession and follow all such things as are pleasing to You; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

God shows those in error the light of His truth – one really needs to identify the error which gets enlightened here. Indeed, believing that you are on the way of righteousness might be the self-righteous error that needs to be expunged! There are many errors which keep us out of that righteous way which the psalmist says God will preserve (Psalm 1). There is the error of false doctrine, which likely leaps to mind for most Lutherans who read this text. Properly so. But there is also the error of correct doctrine which never results in love for the neighbor. Walther famously said that if forced to make a choice, he would take the heterodox pastor who loved his people over the orthodox pastor who did not.

There is the error of “good enough” which uses the gospel as a license to do less. There is the error of “not good enough” which drives men and women to despair of getting into heaven.

All of these errors really come down to an error of faith. We often do not believe what God has promised us in Christ. In Easter's resurrection he has proclaimed that Christ has conquered sin, death, and devil, but we hang on tightly to our Lent because we are not sure we can trust that promise and need to keep on repenting for sins God has already forgiven. We do not trust that God will take care of us as a gentle shepherd cares for his flock (last week) and as a result we take matters into our own hands and come to contribute to our 401k's with a fervor that betrays our real religion. We smile and nod when Jesus speaks of service and humility, but dominate the people around us in word and deed, climbing ladders of power, influence and wealth.

There are many errors to which we may succumb. We need God to answer this prayer and grant the faithfulness which keeps the church. Of course, He does answer that prayer, calls his people back into the safety of his fold, and leads them to quiet waters and green pastures.

Readings

Isaiah 40:25-31

¹⁸ *To whom then will you liken God,
or what likeness compare with him?*

¹⁹ *An idol! A craftsman casts it,
and a goldsmith overlays it with gold
and casts for it silver chains.*

²⁰ *He who is too impoverished for an offering*

*chooses wood that will not rot;
he seeks out a skillful craftsman
to set up an idol that will not move.*

²¹ *Do you not know? Do you not hear?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?*

²² *It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to dwell in;*

²³ *who brings princes to nothing,
and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.*

²⁴ *Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows on them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.*

²⁵ *To whom then will you compare me,
that I should be like him? says the Holy One.*

²⁶ *Lift up your eyes on high and see:
who created these?*

*He who brings out their host by number,
calling them all by name,
by the greatness of his might,
and because he is strong in power
not one is missing.*

²⁷ *Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
“My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God”?*

²⁸ *Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.*

*He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.*

²⁹ *He gives power to the faint,
and to him who has no might he increases strength.*

³⁰ *Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;*

³¹ *but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength;*

they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.

Isaiah's audience was asking about a terrible thing: what, to them, felt like God's absence. It felt like God was a long ways away. They had been through a political and military meat grinder as the Assyrians and then Babylonians rampaged through their country. It felt like them God was not paying attention to their problem. What questions are our folks asking?

- 1. Will our parish survive? Our numbers are shrinking. We feel angst about finances and the lack of people, especially the lack of people under the age of 40.*
- 2. Will our culture survive? It seems like others are taking over.*
- 3. Will our denomination/Lutheranism survive? It seems like the non-denoms and others are succeeding while we are failing.*

We thought it interesting that God does not offer to take away the problems, he offers to make the folks who are suffering stronger and more resilient.

The last portion of the text tells us that God does great things and he gives us strength. But the hard part about this is that if God is the one who is providing the solutions that means he also is the one who is in charge. We hate to relinquish control and cede that to God. We like to be the ones to tell God what to bless instead of pursuing the things which God is blessing.

I thought it important to see the few verses which precede this reading. Isaiah addresses these words to a situation of idolatry. Isaiah's depiction of this seems to be a bit of a caricature. The Babylonians and the other pagans of the day were far more sophisticated than this suggests, however, even that assessment needs to be taken with a grain of salt. We know only the intellectual elites. We know almost nothing of what the laborer in vast empires of Assyria and later Babylon actually thought and believed. Isaiah's words may well have rung very true for his Israelite readers who were rubbing shoulders with these people.

Isaiah, remember, writes to people that have been hammered. The Assyrians and Babylonians have waged unrelenting war against them for over a century and now their cities lie in ruins and their nation has been ravaged. These are not people who need to hear about from whom they need to be defended. They know it full well.

Their bigger question is what can be done about it. It would appear that Isaiah is either forestalling a set of questions here or answering them, depending on when you think Isaiah wrote this. We find it unfathomable, but the ancient would have had a number of very interesting questions which such an event would have prompted. The ancients seemed to conceive of their world as a reflection of heavenly events. Thus, if our armies lost a war to some foreign nation, it might be because their gods have defeated our god.

Isaiah begins this section of chapter 40 by hearing none of that. There is no other god. He sits enthroned above the heavens and all the peoples of the earth are like bugs before Him. In

comparison, the mighty princes are but blades of grass which sprout and wither before the dry wind. Even the mighty prince who has conquered their land, the great names that have come down even to our time, Tiglath-Pileasar, Nebuchadnezzar, Sennacherib, they are but a blade of grass. Yet in most of the ancient world these men likened themselves to gods, demanding the worship of their peoples. They have won the war, the city lies in ruins, and perhaps they are gods. Isaiah will have none of this sort of talk. The God who stretched out the heavens and sets the stars in their galactic dance is so far greater than them that one cannot comprehend the distance. To whom will we compare Him?

But that then leads to the second question which is probably the greater question for the people of Judah. Not many of them would have seriously entertained the idea that God was defeated anyway. But the second question does seem to have troubled them because Ezekiel will wrestle with the same thing. It is not that God has been defeated, but perhaps he doesn't care. The affairs of the poor downtrodden Jews are too small for God to bother with. They have been forgotten. Or worse, God is angry and he has hidden his face from them, deliberately ignoring them. God doesn't want to care about them anymore. But, as Isaiah noted, the God who leads out the starry host, makes sure that not one is missing.

The Lord does not grow weary like men do. He never forgets to visit that shut in and never drops the ball on the gal in the hospital. He doesn't get tired, he doesn't get weary, and that stamina is applied to his gracious mercy and care for his downtrodden people. Just watch what God can do. Even young men get tired, but God will give strength to the weary and the faint. Those who hope in the Lord run and not grow tired, they walk and do not grow faint. They will renew their strength and rise up on eagle's wings.

For the preacher, this is a potent text. Many a congregation, especially congregations who are served by Deacons, feel like they are the forgotten stepchildren. They are not often written up in the District newsletters; they are often toiling along, and feel as though some are simply waiting for them to die. That is not how God sees them at all.

Three years ago we pondered that this unwearied and energizing God is able to be present, fully present, for everyone of the two billion people who are called Christian today. He never gets divided, it is not that you get 1 two billionth of God, you get the whole thing. He is always present with you, fully present. Does that reality energize us?

Sermon Idea: To run and not grow weary, to walk and not be faint, to rise up on wings of an eagle. (That the hearer would be a witness to the love of Christ, filled with vitality and joy for he/she is the child of God, united with the incarnate Christ.)

This sermon is aimed at the congregation which is perhaps discouraged or tired from service. They are wondering why they are coming to this place, why it is not working, why their beloved congregation is not growing or why it is shrinking.

Are you weary? Does the thought of doing something else at church make you blanch or roll your eyes? There is a funny thing that Christians do, they start to think that they have to do stuff,

then they start to do it because no one else will do it, then pretty soon they are trudging up to the door, enduring something, then loathing it. But wait a minute. This could be very different. This could be exciting, this could be fun, this could be the highlight of your week! What does that take? I want some of that too? I want the energy of Paul. I want a little of that uplift on eagle's wings and that ability to run and not grow weary, to walk and not be faint. I would like to be different, wouldn't you?

This is not a secret, at least it should not be. The joy, energy and vitality of the Christian faith is located in Jesus and his love. When I am doing his work, when I am engaged in his kingdom, when I am the child of God, His Spirit fills me and I get to see the world through his eyes. It is easy to see the problems and forget that Jesus died for all those problems and to be excited at the prospect of seeing his solutions unfold both for us and through us. As a Pastor, I am a forgiver of sins, the abundance of sin I encounter is simply job security for the likes of me. I don't look at the tabloids in the line at the grocery store and get discouraged, I see opportunity to forgive! I have seen God unleash the power of forgiveness and love between people who have been in conflict, and so I come to every fight eager to see what God can do with this one. The preacher really needs to have a story to illustrate this at this point. I can tell you my stories, but I cannot tell you your stories and they are so much better. Think about it, remember your life, your ministry. Be ready to tell a story about how God has stepped in and solved a problem.

There is no problem bigger than God's solution, there is no sinner bigger than God's forgiveness, and there is no hurt whose tears he will not wash away. God has led out the starry host and calls them all by name, he has welcomed the children into his arms, and born the weight of this world's sin on the cross. If you cannot see Jesus at work in what you are doing at church, you probably need another job to do. Find the thing he is blessing and jump in with both feet. His joy will attend you and his Spirit will fill you and be, simply be, the Christian he has made you to be.

God is really interested in and will bless that sort of service. Trust him. He wants to help you. He wants your joy not your drudgery. He will make it work.

Or

Lamentations 3:22-33 This passage of Jeremiah's Lament is part of a larger poetic piece. If we are to read it we have to have some context. For that reason I am including the whole chapter for our consideration.

Jeremiah begins the chapter lamenting the place to which God has brought him. It is clear that God is the source of his sorrow even though he has used the instrument of the Babylonians to do it. Notice the vividness of the imagery here. His skin wastes away, Jeremiah wears heavy chains. God is a bear lying in wait for him. God has bent his bow and aimed at Jeremiah and filled his kidneys with arrows. Remember the Babylonians have just conquered the city of Jerusalem. These are images which would be vivid for the first readers.

*¹I am the man who has seen affliction
under the rod of his wrath;*

² *he has driven and brought me
into darkness without any light;*
³ *surely against me he turns his hand
again and again the whole day long.*
⁴ *He has made my flesh and my skin waste away;
he has broken my bones;*
⁵ *he has besieged and enveloped me
with bitterness and tribulation;*
⁶ *he has made me dwell in darkness
like the dead of long ago.*
⁷ *He has walled me about so that I cannot escape;
he has made my chains heavy;*
⁸ *though I call and cry for help,
he shuts out my prayer;*
⁹ *he has blocked my ways with blocks of stones;
he has made my paths crooked.*
¹⁰ *He is a bear lying in wait for me,
a lion in hiding;*
¹¹ *he turned aside my steps and tore me to pieces;
he has made me desolate;*
¹² *he bent his bow and set me
as a target for his arrow.*
¹³ *He drove into my kidneys
the arrows of his quiver;*
¹⁴ *I have become the laughingstock of all peoples,
the object of their taunts all day long.*
¹⁵ *He has filled me with bitterness;
he has sated me with wormwood.*

In these next verses Jeremiah brings the Lament to the real problem. He has lost hope. He could endure all the suffering if he had hope, but he has lost it. It seems to be pointless. He is bereft of peace. He has forgotten what happiness is. But in the next section he begs God to remember. In Exodus God remembered his promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and sent Moses. In Genesis God remembered Noah and sent the wind to dry up the waters. When God remembers good things happen. God's remembering gives Jeremiah hope as he remembers God. He calls God to mind and therefore he has hope. Our passage is the content of that hope.

¹⁶ *He has made my teeth grind on gravel,
and made me cower in ashes;*
¹⁷ *my soul is bereft of peace;*

I have forgotten what happiness is;
¹⁸ *so I say, "My endurance has perished;*
so has my hope from the LORD."

¹⁹ *Remember my affliction and my wanderings,*
the wormwood and the gall!

²⁰ *My soul continually remembers it*
and is bowed down within me.

²¹ *But this I call to mind,*
and therefore I have hope:

²² *The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;*
his mercies never come to an end;
²³ *they are new every morning;*
great is your faithfulness.

²⁴ *"The LORD is my portion," says my soul,*
"therefore I will hope in him."

²⁵ *The LORD is good to those who wait for him,*
to the soul who seeks him.

²⁶ *It is good that one should wait quietly*
for the salvation of the LORD.

²⁷ *It is good for a man that he bear*
the yoke in his youth.

²⁸ *Let him sit alone in silence*
when it is laid on him;

²⁹ *let him put his mouth in the dust—*
there may yet be hope;

³⁰ *let him give his cheek to the one who strikes,*
and let him be filled with insults.

³¹ *For the Lord will not*
cast off forever,

³² *but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion*
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;

³³ *for he does not afflict from his heart*
or grieve the children of men.

The rest of the Lament speaks of what God has done to the people but now the suffering of Jeremiah and his people is recast. Yes, the temple is still destroyed and they have suffered terribly. Their suffering, however, is not the just chastisement for sins. But that also means repentance and restoration is possible. Hope! Jeremiah pledges himself to that repentance that the LORD would look down from heaven to see the affliction of people.

³⁴ *To crush underfoot
all the prisoners of the earth,*
³⁵ *to deny a man justice
in the presence of the Most High,*
³⁶ *to subvert a man in his lawsuit,
the Lord does not approve.*

³⁷ *Who has spoken and it came to pass,
unless the Lord has commanded it?*
³⁸ *Is it not from the mouth of the Most High
that good and bad come?*
³⁹ *Why should a living man complain,
a man, about the punishment of his sins?*

⁴⁰ *Let us test and examine our ways,
and return to the LORD!*
⁴¹ *Let us lift up our hearts and hands
to God in heaven:*
⁴² *“We have transgressed and rebelled,
and you have not forgiven.*

⁴³ *“You have wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us,
killing without pity;*
⁴⁴ *you have wrapped yourself with a cloud
so that no prayer can pass through.*
⁴⁵ *You have made us scum and garbage
among the peoples.*

⁴⁶ *“All our enemies
open their mouths against us;*
⁴⁷ *panic and pitfall have come upon us,
devastation and destruction;*
⁴⁸ *my eyes flow with rivers of tears
because of the destruction of the daughter of my people.*

⁴⁹ *“My eyes will flow without ceasing,
without respite,*
⁵⁰ *until the LORD from heaven
looks down and sees;*
⁵¹ *my eyes cause me grief
at the fate of all the daughters of my city.*

Enjoy this, this the only time that Lamentations shows up in the pericope system. The book of Lamentations is attributed to Jeremiah, the weeping prophet of the final days of Judah and its

aftermath. They are prayers spoken to God by Jeremiah and the people who have felt “let down” by God as a great tragedy has overtaken them, but as public prayers they have become God’s word to us. How we read them will be important for our understanding. Are we invited to pray them along with Jeremiah? Are they warnings to us? Just how do we read this? This is a similar problem to the psalms which are also the prayers and songs of David and others.

This reading is one of the more commonly read passages from Jeremiah’s otherwise much neglected little book. There is even a popular song entitled “Great is Thy Faithfulness” which draws on the first verses of this reading. A passage from Lamentations shows up in the Good Friday liturgy as well.

Is this text an occasion for a preacher to proclaim a theology of grief? Our world has little room for grief. We have no ritualized or formalized grief. Perhaps a funeral can still do that for some communities, but here in the northwest we are subjected to “celebrations of life!” instead of funerals. Do we need more lamentation bands instead of just praise bands? Do we need to proclaim that it is OK to grieve? Jeremiah thinks that God has it in for him. He sees that God has sent the Babylonians and has destroyed their city and their nation. He is on the point of thinking that this is God’s hatred of them. Are we able to find this sort of emotion in our Bible? Are we able to hear it from our own people? Or do we immediately shush them and turn the conversation to another place? The Bible has many individuals who are angry or frustrated with God’s actions. Do we make room for those emotions in our community? Grief almost always involves anger and sadness. How do we tell people that Jesus hears those prayers too? Jeremiah felt like God wasn’t listening.

How would this work for poor folks of the congregation whose pastor and fellow congregants were slaughtered in South Carolina last week? They are undoubtedly grieving deeply. How have they been able to express that? What does the Gospel speak to such hearts?

I encourage you to read carefully the verses which precede and follow this. Like the Job reading we had a last week ago, the reading challenges the idea that God is our buddy. Here Jeremiah squarely lays the affliction he feels at the feet of God. God is a bear lying in wait for him. God has made the paths crooked, God has driven an arrow into his kidneys, made him grind his teeth on gravel, and torn him to pieces. Jeremiah’s pleas for help have not been answered; Jeremiah has been cast into darkness and despair.

The only respite Jeremiah has is the promise of God, something to which he clings blindly and with the clutch of a very desperate man. The promise is our text for the day. The general gist of this is that the person who is feeling cut off from God should patiently wait. God does not leave us without hope. There is hope. The Lord does not cast off forever. Yes, he causes us grief, but he also has compassion on us, and deals with us according to his steadfast love.

Notice too that verses 28-30 really sound like Jesus in his suffering and death. He is filled with insults, he gives his cheek to his tormenters, he is silent and puts his mouth in the dust (I thirst!). God’s answer to our suffering is always Christ.

The preacher interested in using this passage will want to read the rest of this book. Jeremiah is pretty upset with God in spots. He wonders how such a thing could have happened, he doubts God, and he wonders if God still loves him at all. He wonders if he loves God. This is a book which plumbs the depths of human emotions. A surface reading of this will not get what he is saying at all and will lead to the superficial sermon which often makes too light of human suffering. "You'll get over it." is not what Jeremiah means at all. He is speaking to and for people who are undergoing a serious crisis of faith. He does not take that lightly, but offers them realistic hope. Yes, this situation really stinks, but it is not the whole story.

The last verse raises some interesting questions for us. God does not afflict us from the heart. He does not afflict us to destroy us or because he hates us. His love for us is steadfast and sure, even when we cannot see it so well. He may be educating us and that might be very unpleasant. There may be consequences and parts of God's plans which I cannot see very well, but He has revealed to us that He loves us. If I am suffering, I know that God does not hate me.

For the Christian who is asking questions about God, however, this raises some very interesting questions. If God is really God, and therefore has all the power, how is it that he is doing things that he does not want to do? Power gets what it wants or it fails, it has run into a greater power. Here God afflicts us unwillingly. God is hurting me, but he doesn't want to do it, what compels him to such an act? There is only one attribute of God which makes sense of this, Love. God's power is subject to his love. His love drives him to do things that he does not want to do. Because I am in Christ, the affliction I may suffer at his hand I can believe is always pedagogical and reforming. The affliction which his only begotten suffered, when he gave his cheek to the one who strikes and when his mouth was in the dust of Golgatha, that was punitive/retributive, that was justice being done. He does not afflict me from his heart.

How shall we say that to our skeptic neighbors? There is a difficulty in facing the person who is facing deep grief and telling them to look to the unjust death of Jesus two thousand years ago. How does that make it better? God suffered too. Does that really help? I think we can say that it does help, but if we are going to love the folks who don't get it, we have to see this too. God's ways are mysterious and they don't make sense and pretending that they do make sense is not going to be productive at all.

Too often we tell people how they should feel. The context however really smashes that idea that Christians always feel good. I don't know about you, but I loathe the idea that all songs in church should be happy songs. Jeremiah clearly does not feel good here. I think of someone who has lost a child. If I just tell them to buck up, what I am really telling them is that they are feeling the wrong thing. Truthfully, however, Jeremiah was wondering where God is. He felt alone. He felt terror. He saw no way out. But he still had hope. Feeling like you are getting stomped on, feeling anger and loneliness, feeling like God is not on your side does not mean you have no hope. Jeremiah still had hope. We tend to think that some emotions are so antithetical to faith that the person who feels these things cannot believe. But that simply is not so. Such feelings may

not be healthy for a whole life, but they are part of the human experience. Jesus died for folks who feel this way too.

Sermon Idea: Love enough! (That the hearer would believe that God's great love is enough in the Resurrected Christ for any crisis, for any problem they may face.)

This sermon is for the discouraged in the congregation. The hearer is the person who wonders if God can love them or if they have a problem which has no solution, a cancer the doctor has said is incurable, a divorce which has no end in sight to the pain, a child who has descended into the depths of addiction, etc.

The children of Israel had a serious problem. They thought that the covenant which God had made with them had been shattered by their own sinfulness. But this scene plays out frequently in the Bible. Jairus had a problem, his beloved daughter, the delight of his eyes and heart, lay dying and dead in his house. The Canaanite woman had a daughter with a demon screaming in the back room of her house. The women who went to the tomb the first Easter morning had a big problem – Jesus was dead. Big problems need big solutions. God is the God of big solutions. The children of Israel came home, the covenant was kept, God was gracious to them. The woman touched the edge of Jesus robe, and was healed. Jesus took the little girl by the hand and she was raised. The woman went home to her demoniac daughter and hugged her sobbing. Jesus is aware of your fears and your problems today. He knows how great they are. And he has done something about them, and continues to do things about them. He died because they world was seriously messed up. His death and resurrection are the solution for the whole universe. But he also knows your problems, your suffering, and your personal hurt. He hears your prayers, gives you his undivided attention. I don't exactly know what that will mean for his solution, but I know, it means he will do something marvelous. It may be at the end of time, it may be today. But I know he will do something and it will be wonderful to behold. God's love will prevail

Psalm 147:1-11

Praise the LORD!

For it is good to sing praises to our God;

for it is pleasant, and a song of praise is fitting.

²The LORD builds up Jerusalem;

he gathers the outcasts of Israel.

³He heals the brokenhearted

and binds up their wounds.

⁴He determines the number of the stars;

he gives to all of them their names.

⁵Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;

his understanding is beyond measure.

- ⁶The LORD lifts up the humble;
he casts the wicked to the ground.
- ⁷Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving;
make melody to our God on the lyre!
- ⁸He covers the heavens with clouds;
he prepares rain for the earth;
he makes grass grow on the hills.
- ⁹He gives to the beasts their food,
and to the young ravens that cry.
- ¹⁰His delight is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his pleasure in the legs of a man,
- ¹¹but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him,
in those who hope in his steadfast love.

It is good to sing God's praises. Why is that good? Is it good for us? Undoubtedly. Is it morally right? The world has a hard time talking about any moral right these days. But it is morally proper, good, and right to sing God's praises. It is simply reflecting the reality of who he is and who I am. It is good to be real.

I would also have you notice the things for which we praise God, and how they are arranged in this psalm. The restoration of Jerusalem, the binding up of the broken hearted, the sorts of things we preach about regularly, the saving of people, is mingled in with what we might call divine providence. The stars are numbered and named, the ravens are fed, the clouds form and the rains replenish the earth. God's delight is in all who fear him.

The implications for the preacher are expansive. Have we gotten our preaching too narrow? The world wants to say we can talk morals and "spiritual" things, but read the sermons of the patristics and the reformation era preachers. They were not speaking of a kingdom which impinged only on one's "spiritual" dimension but upon the whole of life. It is good for all creation to be engaged in the praise of God.

I think we have this psalm today because of verse 4 and its parallel with 26 of the Isaiah text. You get this picture of God knowing all the stars by name. If you want to really illustrate this point and you have a projector, go to the NASA website or the Hubble Telescope site and download one of those pictures with a field of stars closely packed together. It could be really even more effective for us that in was for the folks in David's time to know that God has them all named, all of them are precious to him. It might make you and me feel a little less insignificant.

God cares for the whole of his creation. The cries of young ravens in the nest are prayers that he hears and answers as well. The Lord takes pleasure and delight in the people who fear and hope in him.

¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

¹³ Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. ¹⁵ For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. ¹⁶ Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. ¹⁷ Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

¹⁸ Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. ¹⁹ For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.

Luther

1. This Epistle selection, too, is an admonition to good works, or the fruits of faith. It touches upon nearly every condition of life, teaching how each individual should live and conduct himself. But first, Peter admonishes Christians in general that in their intercourse with gentiles, or the unbelieving world, they give no real occasion for censure or reproach concerning their conduct. The admonition seems to hinge upon the fact that Christians, as the apostle reminds them in the first and second chapters, have been called to a lively, a never-dying, hope of an imperishable inheritance in heaven, an of eternal joy and salvation; that they are now redeemed, having obtained remission of sins through the precious blood of Christ; and again, that they are become a holy nation and royal priesthood, to show forth and magnify the grace of God, they who in time past were not God's people and had not obtained grace. "But now," Peter would say, "you have obtained grace through the divine calling of Christ, through the suffering of your Lord. Live, then, as a holy people of God and citizens of heaven."

9. Christians should be aware of their citizenship in a better country, that they may rightly adapt themselves to this world. Let them not occupy the present life as if intending to remain in it; nor as do the monks, who flee responsibility, avoiding civil office and trying to run out of the world. For Peter says rather that we are not to escape our fellows and live each for himself, but to remain in our several conditions in life, united with other mortals as God has bound us, and serving one another. At the same time, we are to regard this life as a journey through a country where we have no citizenship – where we are not at home; to think of ourselves as travelers or pilgrims occupying for a night the same inn, eating and drinking there and then leaving the place.

14. Christians are subjects of two kingdoms – they have experience of two kinds of life. Here on earth where the world has its home and its heavenly kingdom, we surely are not citizens...But

being obliged to continue in this wretched state – our Babylon – so long as God wills we should do as the Jews were commanded to do – mingle with other mortals, eat and drink, make homes, till the soil, fill civil offices and show good will toward our fellows, even praying for them, until the hour arrive for us to depart unto our home.

Sermon Idea: Citizens of Heaven (That the Holy Spirit empower the hearer to live out his/her hope in Christ through a life which shines with God's holiness.)

Luther has compared the Christian life to a drunk trying to get on a horse. When we are about to fall of one side, we over correct and fall of the other. This shows up in the lip service we pay to what Christ has done. We say Jesus has forgiven our sins, but we still want to mope around in a penitence which does not rejoice in the forgiveness. We would with this deny the joy of Easter. Or, if we don't fall of the horse on that side, we turn forgiveness into a license, permission to sin some more. Either way we end up in the mud.

Peter exhorts us to take seriously that God has, in Christ, taken our sins and given us Christ's righteousness. We are often so relieved at the first part of that, that Jesus has taken the guilt, that we pass over the second part, that Christ's perfectly obedient life is now given to us to live. The removal of sins has not left some vacuum in our lives, but Christ has filled it with righteousness, his righteousness. As Paul says, Christ lives in me (Gal. 2:20).

For Peter's persecuted audience, this was not a matter of theological debate. They were being persecuted. Peter admonishes them to be persecuted for Christ's righteousness, not for justifiable reasons. Be persecuted because you are a good person, not because you are a criminal. As Luther reminds us above, this was not a call for them to gin up some holiness of their own effort, but it is a truth which God has already declared and enacted in our lives. We have the righteousness of Christ imparted to us.

He uses the language of citizenship to do this and we should do the same. Find a story of some immigrant, some refugee whose every day, whose very life, has been transformed because one day they got a letter from the state department telling them that their request for asylum had been granted. We heard one of those at the last CU graduation I attended. The young woman who spoke of her family's flight from Rwandan genocide into refugee camps and American citizenship was powerful and beautiful. You will not have to look far for that story.

So too, our lives have been shaped by this bestowal of citizenship by God to us. We belong at his side as much as Jesus does now. That is our home, our place, and as a result we act that way. This is preaching Christian life as the result of God's work. Remember Luther's admonition to living in two kingdoms. The old man will want to turn this into something we do and God notices/rewards. It is the only economy he understands. But this is pure gift, indwelling of God. I have not done this. God has opened my eyes to see, breathed this life into me to live.

OR

I John 3:1-3

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ² Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. ³ And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

⁴ Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. ⁵ You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. ⁶ No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. ⁷ Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. ⁸ *Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.* ⁹ *No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.* ¹⁰ *By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.*

I think that the only way to preach I John 3:1-3 is as a Lutheran who gets Law and Gospel and Sinner and Saint tension. John says we are God's children now. This the saint part of that equation. We will be revealed to be like Christ on that last day, but we are that right now. Lutherans struggle to preach this sometimes, we are very good at the Lenten emphasis on the Sinner but the Saint is also fully there. It appears that John's opponents wanted to spiritualize the saintliness, taking it out of the incarnational matrix and put it into the realm of the unreal. But we are fully saint – physical and spiritual and emotional and all the rest of it. We are wholly saint. John will not let us spiritualize that. (Remember last week's intro to the whole book – he has touched it!)

If you want to follow up on the touch metaphor you might have used last week, consider the fact that today we are called the children of God. A father lovingly picking up his child could work really well for continuing that. If we are children of God, can we do better than to say that he puts his arms around us today?

John asserts the love of God to us, we are called the children of God and it is the truth. The world which did not recognize him does not recognize us either, but being called the children of God means something very real when God is the speaker. The preacher who is interested in this case will want to explore the whole idea of performative utterance. When God says something it happens just because he said it. He is literally incapable of speaking falsehood because as soon as he says it, that thing of which speaks springs into being just as he described it. I suppose this means he has to be quite careful about what he says.

But John also must struggle with the incarnational dilemma. If Christ is here, why can I not see him? If Christ is present in this world, why does it look so broken? There is a time of waiting between the speaking and the seeing of this new reality. But we know the day comes when we

shall also see what God has said. On that last day we shall see Christ and we shall be able to bear that sight because will be like him, as he is now. What do you think that means for us?

John seems to direct our attention to purity. The one who is expecting to see Jesus and be like Jesus can expect purity. I wonder if our people get excited about that idea? I mean eternal life sounds good, being eternally young sounds even better to a culture which is fixated on youth. Being heirs of heavenly treasure sounds really good for people in economic troubling times, but purity does not sound like nearly as much fun. In fact, we often think of purity as being the opposite of fun. Will heaven then really be a never ending party with tea and cakes but never any beer? Will it just involve listening angelic choirs sing complex melodies, going to Church, or watching G rated movies forever? Is it possible to be pure and fun at the same time? What would that look like? Can we imagine it? More importantly can we preach to our people in such a way that they don't hear purity and immediately leap to "boring?"

The next verses again demonstrate John's sometimes frustrating ability to give and take away in the same breath. He sets up opposites and then brings them together, truths that resolve into tension and vice versa. One cannot indulge in sin, dive in head first, and call oneself a Christian. And yet, last week he said that if do sin the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all unrighteousness. Our brothers and sisters in the holiness movements have a doctrine called "complete sanctification" in which they take this to sort of an extreme, suggesting that in conversion God has totally purified our will. We will still sin, we are not perfect people and sometimes we will in ignorance or for other reasons sin, but we will never want to.

Of course that creates some problems within those bodies. My neighbor is a wonderful person but she has been baptized four or five times because of this. After some difficult times in her life and having done some things of which she was ashamed, she had concluded that she had not been completely converted before. She sinned and enjoyed it, you see. This necessitated a deeper conversion and a true baptism in place of what had obviously been an incomplete conversion and hence a fraudulent baptism. I am wondering how she can trust the current baptism. I am not sure that she does.

I think there is another way to read this. John is doing something else with these words. We could run with this into the Pauline "New Man and Old Man" dichotomy and assume that John is speaking here of the old man, the wretched sinner who clings to us and whom God drowns in baptismal remembrance and renewal every day. That can work, but it might not be quite what John had in mind either.

Look to the words which are excised from our reading but which I have included above. John paints this in even starker words. The sinner is of the Devil, the righteous man is of God. Yikes, that rather leaves all of us on the down escalator at the end of time, doesn't it?

The key seems to come later in the chapter in the incarnation. John starts to tie this sinning and purity to the act of loving one another. It is rather the issue of the Old Testament command to keep the Torah. The Torah was not kept in the perfect adherence to the rules, but in bringing

one's sin to God. Likewise the relationship will certainly involve occasions when the person has sinned, and sometimes even enjoyed it, but the relationship ultimately is what is important, the sorrow is expressed, the love is restored. The Jesus who has become flesh and blood in the incarnation has changed the way we view the neighbor. We can no longer just walk away.

We will develop a sermon on the I John series and the theme today is "Living as the Children of God" John challenges us on several fronts here. Clearly this means something is different about us. But what? Is it that we lead such morally superior lives? I don't think so. I think the difference is what we do with the garbage of our lives.

Sermon Idea: Living as the Children of God (That the hearer would live as the child of God, hoping in (expecting) the promise which God has made to him/her in Christ's resurrection.)

What does it mean to live as the child of someone? I am the child of a Lutheran pastor and his wife. How do I live as their child? What does that change about the words I say or the deeds I do? (I go to church a lot. Always have. I have a particular way of solving problems. I tend to see things through a preacher's lens.) How does it change the way I think about myself or perceive myself? (I do like Lenten hymns, I suppose that says something about my self-perception.)

The Christian is called the child of God, perhaps nowhere else so clearly as John does here. Although, the Lord's Prayer which begins, "Our Father..." certainly embeds this idea in our weekly worship as well. We are given the right to say those words honestly, not just as a pious wish, but as the baptized children of God.

John seems to give us a few things to think about as we are called children of God, each or all of which could be developed into a sermon.

- a. The world does not know you – the child of God lives in some tension with the world around us. Conformity to the world seems to be a denial of our child of God status. It is fundamental to who we are. It did not know Jesus either and our connection to Him makes us odd and unrecognizable to the world as well. This can be painful. We like to be accepted and welcomed.
- b. We have hope – We will see him as he is. We will be able to do so, because we are like him. One gets the sense that the rest of the world will not be able to tolerate that vision, but we will be able to.
- c. This is an appearing, not a coming, both in terms of Jesus showing up and in terms of our true nature. This implies that Jesus is already here. He is not coming, but he is appearing. It also implies something about us: we are already this child of God but we cannot really see it either. There is a hiddenness both to Jesus and to ourselves. Lutherans speak of being sinner and saint. Jesus' kingdom is now/not yet. That tension shows up in this text.
- d. We are purified. I see this text as describing a process, not an accomplished fact. We will be like him, but that suggests that we are not right now. The purification is part of that becoming like Jesus. Jesus is doing this to us right now. (This can be pastorally

important. If you declare that we are pure any reasonable person will take a good hard look at his/her life and determine that you are talking about someone else. At the same time, the sinner/saint dichotomy almost demands that we make that assertion. Herein lies another preaching tension.)

- e. This purity means that we are heading in another direction than the world which is enslaved to Satan, Sin, and Death. John's words on "lawlessness" need to be carefully understood and proclaimed here. The eager, willful sinner is lawless, without restraint, without any submission to the law. John is not suggesting that Christians no longer commit sins, have sinful habits and addictions, or that they have somehow conquered their sinful behaviors. There is however a sinning which is born of lawlessness and there is a sinner which is born of our human frailty and reality that we are both sinner and saint. The difference between the sinning of the Christian and the sinning of the lawless person is that we are called to repentance, we bring those sins to God for forgiveness. In effect, our sinning is not lawless, because we place it under the judgment of God's law. We recognize that these sins need to be forgiven. The lawless one refuses to acknowledge that they are sins and hence needs no forgiveness. There is no need to repent, they are natural and normal. Empowered by the Spirit, we recognize our sins for what they are, transgressions of the law, grieve over them, and seek God's forgiveness. That is a sinning which is not lawless, but one which lives under/in the law. Sin is always a breaking of the law, but lawless sinning imagines that there is no law.
- f. So much of the world in which we live has subscribed to this lawlessness. We have said that there are no sins. Divorce is not a sin. Smoking pot is not against the law. Living together is a good idea in many eyes, homosexuality is simply another expression of sexual identity. There is no law which applies to any of us.
- g. This means that living as the child of God means that we are always coming to God for the gift he so lovingly bestows on children. The highest form of our worship is our penitent prayer for forgiveness. We come again and again with the same sins. God is not ever bothered by that. He does not say that we have failed him for the last time like some celestial Darth Vader. He is delighted that we once more have placed our sins, yes the same ones, under the Law once more and he forgives them. Jesus died and rose for that one too.
- h. We were worried about the person who would take this as a license to sin more. But this is lawlessness. John says in verse 6 that the person who continues in this sin does not know Jesus, does not have Jesus abiding in him/her. Such a license to sin attitude is directly contrary to the very children we have been called to be. Children want to please their father. The child who rebels against his/her father is in fact lawless. But this image is hard. Some folks don't have good memories of parental love. Abused people will have a hard time with this.

- i. Philippians 3:16 – live up to what we have already attained. We are the children of God. The challenge presented to us to live that way. But don't let this suck the joy of this. We are the children of God. We have attained. We are the children of God right now. That means that we know the ending of this story. We know how this is right now and we know how this will end up. The father has lavished love on us (I John 3:1 NIV).

The preacher may want to break out one of these as an exemplar of living as a child of God or he may want to run through the whole catalogue. The goal, however, is that the person live this life. We will proclaim that we are right now the children of God. That means something for the way we deal with the realities of this life. It also will mean something beautiful on the day of our Lord Jesus' revelation, the last day of this old creation's timekeeping. We deal with the current realities in light of that anticipated day. Sin never overwhelms us, but we know that it is broken by the power of the resurrected One who is with us now and like whom we too will be seen to be. It has no power over us.

John 16:16-22

¹² *"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵ All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.*

¹⁶ *"A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me."*

¹⁷ *So some of his disciples said to one another, "What is this that he says to us, 'A little while, and you will not see me, and again a little while, and you will see me'; and, 'because I am going to the Father'?" ¹⁸ So they were saying, "What does he mean by 'a little while'? We do not know what he is talking about." ¹⁹ Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, "Is this what you are asking yourselves, what I meant by saying, 'A little while and you will not see me, and again a little while and you will see me'? ²⁰ Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.*

²¹ *When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. ²² So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. ²³ In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.*

²⁴ *Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.*

Jesus is speaking these words in Chapter 16 of John, shortly before the betrayal in the garden. In chapter 17 he will pray his beautiful prayer for unity and Judas shows up in chapter 18. The disciples could not bear all that Jesus had to say right then, but now, John's readers, the

contemporary disciples, they can bear it. For the Spirit of Truth has come, he came on Pentecost, and he came to you and me on the day we were baptized. He guides us into all truth, tells us what is to come and glorifies Jesus. He does this by taking what is Jesus' and giving it to you.

The preacher might just want to do a sermon on the Holy Spirit today and what he does. John's original audience had the Spirit, as do we. They were ready for the whole load of Jesus's teaching in a way that the disciples in this narrative were not. That is John's point here, I think. He was often facing an opponent who said that there was a secret or further knowledge of God which was necessary. John is really trying to say that with the outpouring of the Spirit, the information is complete now. You have it.

I have often likened the Holy Spirit to an extension cord. The cord makes no electricity but is essential for the whole process of getting the radio to make music. The Spirit does not die on the cross for my sins, he does not make the forgiveness I need, but he connects me to Christ. He does this through my five senses, when I touch the water, taste the sacrament, hear the word. I see the smile on my loved one's face as she forgives me and I also see His smile. I even remember as a child how the scent of wine clung to my mother as she resumed her place beside me in the pew. I was in the presence of something holy.

This Holy Spirit takes what is Jesus, and declares it, gives it, to us. This is the very act of absolution; it is a divine thing, a sacred word in our ears. Remember last week, when we hear, he knows us and we follow him?

Jesus tells his disciples that they will not see him, they will grieve about that, and then will see him again. Typically they don't get it. I find it interesting that John uses this little device. Clearly he thinks that his readers are in better shape. They have heard and understood what Jesus says.

Then Jesus re-uses one of the favorite metaphors for the Bible to describe the emotional state of a Christian – they are like a woman who is about to give birth to a child. She is sorrowful, but also joyful, and when she holds that baby in her arms, all the sorrow is forgotten. The joy of holding that child simply overwhelms it. (My wife also credits the fatigue factor for making the whole thing a bit of a blur.) But my wife's recollection aside, Jesus is pointing us to a valuable truth in this whole thing. The sorrows of this life will be matched and exceeded by the joys. If it was not worth having the kid, our specie would have long ago simply died out.

In a very real sense, Jesus has spoken to contain or manage our sorrow about this whole world. He gives us hope. This sorrow we feel right now is not the end of this story nor is it even the dominant emotion in the big picture. The dominant emotion is joy, a joy no one, nothing can take away from us.

But he also gives us permission to weep. The sorrow, the pain, the suffering, the rest of the crap that the world throws at us is not dismissed, any more than a woman's labor in childbirth is dismissed. (Or at least, make sure you dismiss it from a distance, like far enough away that she cannot reach you with the rock that is lying at her feet. I speak from personal experience here.)

The Christian who is enduring the sorrow is not told that the sorrow is not real or that it is inappropriate for us to feel it. It is real.

Jesus also does something else with the sorrow, it gives it meaning, not necessarily explaining it, but he puts it into the larger picture. The travail of labor is not meaningless pain, it is very purposeful; a new life is being born. It is a very beautiful thing, despite the pain. It is a very good thing. The Christian's sorrow is also put into that great life giving work of God. I cannot tell you exactly how it all fits together, any more than I can tell you exactly why labor hurts so much. Some things make sense, others do not. I know an obstetrics nurse who tells me that at a certain point in the process of labor a woman often becomes really angry, quite often at the father of the child. She says it is almost like clock work, and it seems to be driven by a cascade of hormones and chemicals that her brain is releasing. At this moment otherwise loving and sweet women will shout things at their husbands which they would never dream of doing at any other time. Why? No one really knows. But all of this is part of a process of giving birth to a child. Likewise, the sorrows of the Christian are part of God's salvific plan for this world. I can tell you that martyrs often bore a powerful witness to Christ and as a result many came to faith. But I cannot tell you why your best friend is dying of cancer right now or why you have not found a job or why young men plant bombs at marathons or why fertilizer plants blow up in Texas. I don't know. But I do know that Jesus takes our pain and sorrow and somehow connects it to this life-giving work of his.

Sermon Idea: Jesus gives me unquenchable joy (That the hearer would rejoice in the presence of Christ, even amid the hardships and sorrows of this world, for Christ is with us.)

This sermon is for the community which needs to simply believe that Jesus is not a past or a future king only, but also a present shepherd king. This preacher should be ready with an example of what Christ is doing right now, a person who has come to faith recently, a story of someone who has encountered Christ in a meaningful way, a story from recent events in the news or perhaps a story from within your congregation.

The goal of this sermon is that the hearer would rejoice over this presence of Christ, with the joy which Jesus promises us in the Gospel lesson. That Joy is a joy which happens alongside the sorrows of this life, amid the travail, it does not necessarily replace the sorrow nor should the preacher preach it that way. In the lesson Jesus likened this joy to a woman's labor. I would go with that imagery. It speaks powerfully to people, especially anyone who has had a child, but be a little careful of it. It also can be a dagger in the heart of a woman who could not have a child.

This sermon really seeks to put the sorrows of this world into a healthy place. We do not deny the grief, nor do we say it is meaningless, but rather we baptize it. God has given meaning to suffering in a strange way by dying and rising himself. Now, though our eyes cannot always see him, we have Christ with us far more intimately and beautifully than the Disciples did long ago. We have him through the Spirit poured out in our baptism, a constant presence, never leaving us.