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Easter 5 One Year Series 2017

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Fifth Sunday of Easter (Cantate)

The celebration of Easter slowly morphs as its seven weeks progress. From the ecstatic “He is risen!” of Easter morning, we start to yearn more and more for the outpouring of the Spirit, the bookend of the season which is also known as the high Festival of Pentecost.

This is reflected in the readings, especially the Gospel as Jesus tells his disciples that he will send the “helper” or Paraclete. There is no good English translation for that word. “The one called beside” is literally what it means, but it is so much more both in our context and in Jesus’ context. If you have an active ministry of congregant to congregant, such as Stephen Ministry, or simply a good and healthy parish ministry in which the members are caring for one another, this might be a great Sunday to highlight that. The Spirit who calls, gathers, enlightens, comforts, helps, consoles, forgives, and keeps the Church does not do so as some disembodied vapor floating around our building, but through the lives, words, and love of people.

Jesus tells his disciples today that he is going to give that Paraclete. The preacher of course stands on the other side of Pentecost. Indeed his preaching is part of that Helper’s work.

Collect of the Day

O God, You make the minds of Your faithful to be of one will. Grant that we may love what You have commanded and desire what You promise, that among the many changes of this world our hearts may be fixed where true joys are found; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

This prayer is familiar, phrases within this show up elsewhere, but it also has some unique things as well.

God makes the minds of his faithful to be of one will. Tell that to the thousands of denominations which dot the Christian landscape, or perhaps even just tell it to the delegates to a Synodical convention! This seems to fly in the face of what we experience. What does the prayer confess?

Yet, is this prayer not noticing a profound and great truth? The faithful, those who follow the great good Shepherd and know his voice, perhaps not all who are labeled a Christian by the world, that body of faithful people is in fact united. It may not always express that unity very well, but it is united in the worship and love of that same Jesus. Whether it is Thomas Aquinas Catholic, St. Paul Lutheran, or Community Church of Praise, therein are all sorts of people gathered to worship the same Jesus. Asians, Africans, Europeans and Americans all render praise to this Jesus on a regular basis. As one marvelous hymn notes, Christian Matins services perpetually follow the rising sun as the earth spins. It is always morning somewhere and Christians are praising God at the break of day.

In the actual request of the prayer, we make a strange petition: That we may love what God has commanded and desire what he has promised. There are two ways to take this. Do we love those things which he has commanded us to love? Or do we ask that we may simply love his commands, much like the Psalmist expresses his love and delight in the commands of the Lord

(Psalm 119)? Either of them is possible and both them involve a serious re-ordering of life from our natural sinful state. God loves sinners and commands us to love our enemies. His expectations in this regard are significant. God's commands can be difficult to love as well, at least from the human perspective. God commands us to lose ourselves, and love him with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. God commands us to love neighbor as we love our self. God commands a complete obedience of the person. We can see that, we might imagine that we grudgingly do it, but can we love it?

The second part of this petition is also an interesting prayer. That we may desire what he promises. At first, when I read this, I thought, "what else would we desire?" Further reflection, however, suggests that this also is a serious re-ordering of our hearts and minds from our natural state. It is nothing less than a shattering of the self-idolatry which infects us all. God, for instance promises to do great things among us in the ministry of Word and Sacrament, the people, water, bread, and wine which make up the ministry of God's Church. How much of religious expression does not go seeking after him in other places, the miracles of the Pentecostal movement, the burning of the bosom of the LDS, the magisterium of Catholicism, or the idolatry of doctrinal rectitude which occasionally pops up in Lutheran circles. All are attempts to find God speaking in places or ways that he has not promised to speak. They would put God's voice in a place which we control. He, of course, could speak there, but the promise is not found there. He promises to speak in the preaching of the Word, he promises to touch us in Baptism, He promises to enter us in Lord's Supper, and He promises to be present in the community of faithful people as they forgiven and love one another. Yet, we often hunger for something more and look for a certainty of our own making. We pray in this prayer to desire that which he has promised us, not something which we might deem more exciting.

The prayer reminds me a great deal of the work of a contemporary philosopher and theologian by the name of James K. A. Smith. He comes out of the Reformed tradition but he is challenging that tradition's approach to sacraments, liturgy, and sometimes sounds quite Lutheran. He is in truth drawing much of what he says from Augustine. If you are interested, I commend to you his work "You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit" published by Baker in 2016. There are some weightier versions of what he says which were published in the years prior to that from the same publisher.

The upshot of all this is that we might have our hearts fixed where true joys are to be found. That language is very much Augustinian and hence sounds a great deal like Smith's work. Are there false joys? What are they? Is that simply the joy that does not have the permanence to last in heaven's timeless state? What does that true joy look like? What does it mean to have one's heart fixed there? We all would obviously want that, but what does it mean to be there? Can anyone articulate that?

Is false joy the smiling models who adorn the ads on our television and in our shopping centers which tell me that if I just buy this or that thing then I will be happy and attractive and popular like these people are? Is false joy the patriotism which puts everything into the basket of country

when our true home is in heaven? Is false joy the sense of community I get when I wear my team's colors and sit in the stadium with thousands, for a moment of fellowship, but really it is a mask covering my intense loneliness?

This prayer is asking us to rethink what we believe is normal, and what we think is miracle. The stakes are high. True joy is on the line.

Readings

Isaiah 12:1-6

You will say in that day:

“I will give thanks to you, O LORD,
for though you were angry with me,
your anger turned away,
that you might comfort me.

² “Behold, God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid;
for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song,
and he has become my salvation.”

³ With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. ⁴ And you will say in that day:

“Give thanks to the LORD,
call upon his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples,
proclaim that his name is exalted.

⁵ “Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously;
let this be made known in all the earth.

⁶ Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.”

This is the whole of chapter 12, so you really don't need to announce the verses really.

This chapter serves as the climax conclusion to the first narrative unit of the book. He starts out with a prophecy of gloom and doom, and then, hope starts to break. His own call vision is the center point. It is a fascinating piece of literature and I encourage you to read the whole thing if you are really interested in this passage. The chapters right before this, 9 and 11 have beautiful prophecies of Christ that we often use at Christmas time, and of course, chapter 7 has “behold a virgin will conceive...”

Here Isaiah seems to be describing the emotional experience of the person who is given the love of God. In this sense, this passage is really a form of poetry and could stand in as a psalm or a worship song.

In verse one he seems to dwell simply on the awe of it. The person who gives thanks is standing in amazed wonder at God's mercy. God was angry, he had every right to be, but he turned it away so that he might comfort me. That is really important, notice the subject of the verb here. God turns his own anger away so that he might comfort me. I did not turn the anger of God, nor did anyone else. God did this. And his goal was my comfort, not his justice, not some scale balancing, nor some act of tenderhearted compassion for a cute creation.

In verse two the preacher will want to notice that the praise of the person centers on God's salvation act. For us Christians this gets really exciting because the word for "salvation" in the Hebrew here is essentially "Jesus." Remember when Jesus gets his name? The angel says he will save his people. Isaiah is playing on that word from the other side of it. Now fear is gone, the whole world has changed. Remember Isaiah couches this in the time of the rise of the Assyrians. They will invest the city, surround it. In chapter 7 he said that the people's hearts were all shaking like leaves on a tree when the Israeli and Syrian armies surrounded the city. This is some seriously good news.

Verse three is simply marvelous and speaks for itself. We will draw water from the well of salvation. What a picture.

In verses four through six he puts the words of praise into our mouths. Notice the emotional content here. We do this with joy, thanksgiving, in response to his great and glorious salvation. We promote his name, we sing, for God is great in our midst.

This text is preachable.

Sermon Idea: We draw water from the well of salvation (That the hearer would simply revel in the graciousness of God.)

This text is used in Series B of the three year lectionary and is paired with the parable of the Prodigal Son/Forgiving Father. The sermon notes below reflect that pairing and the preacher might simply import this very familiar parable into the sermon.

We preach the OT here, but we can scarcely not use the Gospel as the illustration of our point. Both sons receive the love of the same Father; albeit differently in each case. Yet they both are loved by him. The prodigal is perhaps easier for us. We have rather made heroic the stock figure of the son who rebels against his father and runs away only to make a mess of himself. This father is understandable to us, admirable. It is the elder brother whose rebellion is more difficult and perhaps more pointed for us. His refusal to admit the love of the father is just as problematic as the sin of the younger son. He is just as rebellious, but in a different way. The father comes out to him, and the story ends right there. God is coming to us today, inviting us into the festivities for the sinners of every time and place. You see, he even loves crabby old Lutherans, in fact he loves them a great deal.

I think the preacher will need to point out that we do look like that brother too often, especially to the folks who are outside the church. At least that is what they tell us. What should be a beautiful community where sinners are forgiven has been portrayed as a spiteful, judgmental

community which fights among itself, excludes the sinner, and never lives up to its own moral code. Who would want to join such an organization?

Isaiah sees something else, does he not? How would that look today if we drew our water from the wells of salvation? This sermon will want to cast the vision of a community in which forgiveness is the very life blood of our congregation. It might be very disturbing! We might be loving people the world does not think are lovable, but then again, Jesus was criticized for that very thing, eating with sinners and tax collectors. Sitting at a table with him, even with them, is still pretty good company. I think I will drink that water of life, draw from that well of salvation.

Psalm 66

Shout for joy to God, all the earth;

² sing the glory of his name;
give to him glorious praise!

³ Say to God, “How awesome are your deeds!
So great is your power that your enemies come cringing to you.

⁴ All the earth worships you
and sings praises to you;
they sing praises to your name.” Selah

⁵ Come and see what God has done:
he is awesome in his deeds toward the children of man.

⁶ He turned the sea into dry land;
they passed through the river on foot.

There did we rejoice in him,
⁷ who rules by his might forever,
whose eyes keep watch on the nations—
let not the rebellious exalt themselves. Selah

⁸ Bless our God, O peoples;
let the sound of his praise be heard,

⁹ who has kept our soul among the living
and has not let our feet slip.

¹⁰ For you, O God, have tested us;
you have tried us as silver is tried.

¹¹ You brought us into the net;
you laid a crushing burden on our backs;

¹² you let men ride over our heads;
we went through fire and through water;
yet you have brought us out to a place of abundance.

¹³ I will come into your house with burnt offerings;
I will perform my vows to you,

¹⁴ that which my lips uttered
 and my mouth promised when I was in trouble.
¹⁵ I will offer to you burnt offerings of fattened animals,
 with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams;
 I will make an offering of bulls and goats. Selah
¹⁶ Come and hear, all you who fear God,
 and I will tell what he has done for my soul.
¹⁷ I cried to him with my mouth,
 and high praise was on my tongue.
¹⁸ If I had cherished iniquity in my heart,
 the Lord would not have listened.
¹⁹ But truly God has listened;
 he has attended to the voice of my prayer.
²⁰ Blessed be God,
 because he has not rejected my prayer
 or removed his steadfast love from me!

The psalms are often best read as the prayerful praise and petitions of the person who has read the OT reading and taken it to heart, the person upon whom the Spirit has worked what the rest of the readings are driving at. So too it is today. The Psalmist is singing praises to God, joyfully, not out of coercion or some sense of duty, but because he delights in God.

I think the preacher who is attracted to the sermon above might want to highlight the final verse of the Psalm. The psalmist simply is glad God is listening to him and, though he has ample reason, has not removed steadfast love from him.

James 1:16-21

¹² Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. ¹³ Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. ¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

¹⁶ Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. ¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸ Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

¹⁹ Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰ for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. ²¹ Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

Luther (*Luther was famously not terribly enamored of the book of James. We often cite his introduction to the NT in which he calls it a “straw-y Epistle” but we might also look at his Postils for some of that. While he grudgingly treats the Epistle, he also suggests that we don’t pay enough attention to I Corinthians 15 and we ought to just replace this one. License for free-texting preachers!? I repeat some of his comments here as well as excerpts from a sermon preached in 1536 in Wittenberg.*)

The selection from the first chapter of James, however, having commonly been read for this Sunday, and as it contains good instruction and admonition, we will, for the sake of some of who may desire to retain it, allow it to remain; and we will make some explanation of it lest we be thought to desire its rejection altogether. It was not, however, written by an apostle. It does not bear the apostolic stamp in all its particulars, and is not in every respect comparable with the true doctrine.

1. This lesson was addressed to all Christians. Particularly was it meant for the time when they had to endure from the unbelieving world persecutions severe and oft; as James indicates at the outset.

9. But we will speak now particularly of the blessings we have in Christ’s resurrection, a subject appropriate to this Paschal season. The text says, Every good gift and every perfect gift cometh down from the Father of lights. For God has begun the work of edifying us, of building us up, and will constitute us his own children, his heirs. This work, James says, is wrought through the Gospel, or “the word of truth,” as he terms it.

10. But what does the resurrection advantage us? It has already brought us this gain: our hearts are enlightened and filled with joy, and we have passed from the darkness of sin, error and fear into the clear light; the Christian is able to judge all sects, all doctrines of devils, that may arise on earth.

11. Secondly, through Christ’s resurrection we have a good, joyous conscience, one able to withstand every form of sin and temptation and to maintain a sure hope of eternal life. The great, glorious gifts and blessings of the resurrection are these: the Gospel, Holy Baptism, the power of the Holy Spirit, and comfort in all adversity. What reason has any man to murmur and to rage when such divine blessings are his, even here in this life, blessings which none can take away or abridge?

12. But these do not represent the consummation of resurrection blessings. We must yet await the real, the perfect, gifts. Our earthly condition does not admit of perfection; hence we cannot truly perceive, cannot comprehend, our treasure. We are but “a kind of first-fruits of his creatures.” God has only commenced to work in us, but he will not leave us in that state.

13. That future existence, James goes on to say, will be one wherein is “no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning” – no alternating of light and darkness. In other words, there will

not be the variation and stability characteristic of this world, even of the Christian life – today joyous, tomorrow sad; now standing but soon tottering.

14. To these things the Christian should direct his thoughts and efforts, that he may learn to prize his blessings, to recognize his treasures as great and glorious, and to thank God for the beginnings of his grace and blessing bestowed here below.

(Complete Sermons of Martin Luther Vol IV. Baker Publishing, 2000. Pp. 288-302.)

(James 1:12-18 is heard on the first Sunday in Lent in series B. Here are the edited notes from the last time we treated this.)

James says that God tempts no one. Then what do we say about God's treatment of Abraham in Gen. 22 above? What is the difference between testing and temptation? James seems to use the words almost interchangeably in this text but then says God does not do this. Yet, James must have read Gen. 22 as well. How can he say God does not tempt/test?

- 1. Temptation tempts us to act upon our own desires. If anything, the temptation which came to Abraham in Gen. 22 would have been to run the other way from God's command. God did not ask Abraham to do what he wanted. Temptation always plays on our own wants and desires.*
- 2. The testing of Abraham was to reveal Abraham's faith for Abraham to see. Temptation would have involved revealing Abraham's brokenness and sinfulness.*

In one sense, testing and temptation can feel very much the same, look the same, but they are at the heart of them, very different. One directs our attention up to God and the other directs us to ourselves and down to Satan.

James seems to be speaking to a totally different world than the one in which we live. Recently Oxford Press has been publishing a series of books which bring classic texts of the western tradition to a broader audience. The Dalai Lama specifically requested the opportunity to write the introduction to the book of James, which he holds to be a text which reflects the heart of Buddhism. Does that change the way you read this book? Should it?

What does "remaining steadfast" look like today? How would we say that to an audience of 21st century folk? "Until death parts us" has come to mean "until I find it difficult." John the Steadfast of Luther's day was noted for his firm stance on behalf of the Reformation.

Unfortunately he said all the right things and just as it was all coming to a head, he died and his son John Frederick had to become "the Magnanimous" in a crushing defeat.

Is steadfastness remaining faithful to promises that we have made? Is this a moment to talk about confirmation promises? Is it a moment to talk about the times we have stood at the font as a sponsor and promised to pray for a child, parents, and families? Is it time to remember vows

made to a spouse before an altar? These are hard things to do. Blessed is the person who is steadfast.

Or is steadfastness something that really belongs to God and which he gives to us? Is it synonymous with faith or is it one of the fruits of faith in which we participate like love and service and acts of charity? Is the steadfastness of which James speaks really the steadfastness of God to us? Is that were we are to remain?

Is it both?

James is an interesting little book. It is not attributed, historically anyway, to the disciple of that name, but to the brother of Jesus, James the Just. If the tradition is true, he was the leader of the Christian community in Jerusalem, the mother church of all Christendom. He was not the first leader, that was the apostle James, the first martyr of the 12. Herod killed that first James a short while after the death and resurrection of Jesus. This second James would lead God's people for some time, but in the tumult of the decades following Jesus' ministry which would eventually culminate in the Jewish rebellion of 68-70 and the destruction of the temple, James would also meet a martyr's death. We think around the year 50. Supposedly he was thrown from the top of the temple, when that did not kill him, they stoned him. Josephus talks about him and notes that he was genuinely grieved in both the Christian and Jewish communities as a good man who was unjustly persecuted and killed. In that he would bear witness to his brother and Lord, Jesus.

Where this little letter fits into all this, is then also somewhat muddy. Scholars are all over the map on this letter. Some even assert that this is not a Christian text originally at all, but a Jewish text that has been reworked. That sounds to me like someone trying to get published because they have a wild new idea; but it worked and they got published. The text appears to have been reworked at some point. It clearly was originally delivered as a sermon, but then seems to have been sent out as a letter. The most plausible reconstruction of events, and remember this does rest on some guesswork, is that after James' death and after the dispersion of the Christian community of Jerusalem into the surrounding area following that city's destruction in 68-70, the letter was repackaged and sent out to encourage these Christians. We know that they were not warmly received into the synagogues at the time, in fact the reception was decidedly chilly. The letter makes a lot of sense if the audience is understood to be a Palestinian Jewish Christian audience who are discouraged. James reminds them of the basics of the faith, encourages them, and challenges them to live out their faith in their situation. As the word from the martyred hero of the community, it would have had a powerful effect on the folks to whom it was addressed.

We get these words today because James assures the hearers that God does not tempt people to evil. We have evil desires in our hearts which happily cooperate with the temptations which are around us and lead us into acts of sin. God is not rightly blamed for what is in our rebellious hearts, the sins we commit or even the consequences of those sins, our own death.

God gives good and perfect gifts, he does not change, he is the father of lights (perhaps the stars above?) He brought us forth by His Word of truth (creative act) and we are now the good gifts which he has given to this world in which we live, first fruits which bear witness to the larger harvest which is to come through His continuing work.

John 16:5-15

⁵ But now I am going to him who sent me, and none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’

⁶ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. ⁷ Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. ⁸ And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹ concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; ¹⁰ concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer;

¹¹ concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

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.

Luther (*Luther’s treatment of this text is lengthy – 25 pages in LW, Vol. 77. Our notes are only the briefest of excerpts and the reader is encouraged to read this whole section in that work.*)

1. We have often heard this meaning of this Gospel reading elsewhere. The problem is that people do not always understand the words as speaking about things we know. Therefore, we will explain it a little(!), so that people see that the very same things are in these words which nearly all other gospel readings contain.

4. He first points out what His kingdom on earth shall be, in order to take away from them their old deeply rooted delusion about the external, worldly dominion and government over the Jewish people and all the world in this life...

5. What kind of kingdom is it, and how is it ruled? He shows this in the words He speaks: "The Holy Spirit will rebuke the world." It is not to be a government conceived and organized in a worldly way by human wisdom, power, might, law, and order, but a government of the Holy Spirit, or a spiritual kingdom, in which Christ rules invisibly and not with external, bodily power, but only through the Word, which the Holy Spirit will preach and through which He will work in people's hearts.

12. Now, what will the Holy spirit rebuke, or about what will He teach? He tells us this plainly in the words He speaks: "And when He comes, He will rebuke the world concerning sin and concerning righteousness and concerning judgment."

13. This means taking a lot in one bit and loading plenty [of trouble] onto themselves: the poor beggars, the apostles, will interfere in the world and severely scold everything it does. Obviously, they must have a large back and strong supports.

61. This part (vss12-13) also belongs to the promise about the Holy Spirit and His office in Christendom. However, He breaks off here from what He had begun to say about the doctrine and what the Holy Spirit will preach, which He had summarized in a few words. He points them instead to the fact that the Holy Spirit Himself will come and teach them these things, so that they will understand them and in fact experience the. "It is not now the time," He means to say, "to speak much about doctrine," since He is saying farewell and comforting them about His departure. Moreover, even if He were to speak long and much about it, they are not yet ready to grasp and understand correctly how it will be in His future kingdom.

(Luther's Works Vol. 77. CPH, 2014. Pp. 224-250.)

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.