

Monday April 20, 2020
Read Matthew 1:1-17

Not Just a List

Lists are not very exciting. My grocery list is not interesting – bread, shredded cheese, green peppers, yawn, yawn, yawn. It's just a list. Matthew's list is not immediately exciting either. It's just a bunch of names. Some names are familiar – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Ruth, David, Mary. Some of the names are bizarre like Amminadab, Jehoshaphat, Jechoniah, Azor and Zadok. (You need help to get through this list!)

But it is not just a list. It's a story of how God kept His promise to Abraham to bless all the nations of the earth through his offspring. Here is a reminder to us that through the highs and lows, through wars, poverty, famine, pandemic, murder, adultery, deportation, exile, and more, God is faithful.

In the midst of the mess, it would have seemed to be just that – a mess. But then we get to the end of the reading, **“So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.”** In all of that time and all of that mess, there was an order that couldn't be seen. God was at work, preparing the way for His salvation in Christ that would bless all nations and peoples, including you.

In the midst of this mess, God remains faithful - a trip through Matthew's list reminds of this. We may be bored digging through the details or overwhelmed by the mess of the moment, but all along the way God prepared for Christ to come. And through the centuries since, He has remained faithful so that you would hear and know the promise of salvation in Christ. He will comfort, forgive and strengthen you now through the details and the mess of your days.

Prayer – Faithful Father, comfort me in the knowledge that You see beyond the mess of the moment to bring me salvation in Jesus. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Tuesday, April 21

Read Matthew 1:18-25

“The Days before Christmas”

Today’s portion of Matthew has Christmas written all over it. After all, it begins with the words **“Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way.”** Yet, did you notice that Jesus isn’t actually born until the end at verse 25! All the verses before then speak of what happened *before* Jesus was born. They speak about the preparation, the anticipation, and the waiting.

We have:

- 1) The betrothal of Mary and Joseph
- 2) Mary being **“found to be with child from the Holy Spirit”**
- 3) Joseph resolving to divorce her quietly before an angel of the Lord assures him of the situation in a dream and tells him Jesus’ name and what He will do
- 5) Isaiah’s prophecy from hundreds of years earlier
- 6) Joseph takes Mary to be his wife and knows her not.

Then, Jesus is born.

God was at work over a long period of time. He was at work during very difficult times. Think of Mary and Joseph. Think of Isaiah living during the days when the Assyrians were coming to attack Jerusalem. Yet God was faithful to His promises. In time, Jesus was born, and as the echoing “Alleluias” of Easter remind us, He did **“save His people from their sins.”** Today and every day until Christ returns are like the days before Christmas- days of preparation, anticipation, and waiting. Today, we with Mary, Joseph, and Isaiah hold onto God’s promises. **Jesus saves us from our sins. He is God with us.**

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I thank and praise you for saving us from our sins and for being God with us. Help me to cling to these your promises. Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Seminarian Jacob Tuma

Wednesday, April 22
Read Matthew 2:1-12

Redundant Joy

When was the last time that you would have described yourself as “filled with joy?” At Christmas? At the birth of a grandchild? When the Blues won the Stanley Cup? What about when you last saw a star?

Maybe not on that last one. Of course, the Magi weren’t joyful because they saw *A* star, but because they saw *THE* star settled over the place where Jesus was born. And their reaction wasn’t just joy. It was this, “**When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.**” On face value, that is just plain bad writing. Matthew says the exact same thing twice. Your High School English teacher would have hated such redundancy.

But the truth is that this is beautiful. Matthew is intentionally redundant as a way of stacking joy upon joy. This is the joy of Christmas and the birth of a grandchild AND the Blues winning the Cup AND MORE! Yes, the Magi have reached their destination, but better yet, they get to worship the Shepherd of Israel, who is also the ruler of the nations, who is also the Lord of heaven and earth, life and death, now and forever. Every aspect of joy – celebration, awe, gratitude, contentedness – all wrapped up in this child.

Perhaps you are lacking a bit in joy today. Look to Jesus. He is the source of joy. In hearing the Word of God today, Jesus is present with you. That’s right, the Shepherd of Israel, ruler of the nations, Lord of heaven and earth, Lord of life and death, now and forever is with YOU. He was born for YOU. He lived for YOU. He died and rose and lives again for YOU. And since He is alive, your joy can never be taken away. O Child of God, rejoice exceedingly with great joy in Christ, Your Savior!

Prayer: Lord, when I am down, help me look to Jesus and rejoice in my Savior again. Amen.

Today’s Devotion is written by Pastor Jason

Thursday April 23

Matthew 2:13-23

Who's in Control?

One of the things that always strikes me is the timing of Jesus' birth. He was born at a time when there was a lot of political turmoil and conflict. King Herod ruled Judea under the Romans, but was always paranoid because it was a time when any number of political rivals could literally stab you in the back. You wouldn't think a baby would pose much of a threat to one of the most powerful people around, but Herod was taking no chances! After all, he was in control, right?

Well actually, God was in control. And our God is one who protects. He shielded his son from Herod's wrath by sending Jesus, Mary, and Joseph into the wilderness of Egypt. But God does not abandon them in this time of exile! He keeps them safe, and when the threat to their lives is over, he calls them from their exile. And the crazy thing is, this was part of God's plan from the beginning! Verse 15 tells us, **"This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."** And when did this prophecy get made? More than 700 *years* before Jesus' birth, by the prophet Hosea! Clearly, God was in control of the entire situation, even if it might not have seemed that way.

So it is today. God is still in control, even if it might not seem like it. And the son who He brought up out of Egypt, Jesus Christ, He also brought up out of the grave, giving Him victory over sin and death. And we, as God's people, share in that victory. One day we too will be brought out of our graves, to live forever in the glorious light of our God. Thanks be to Him who frees us from our sin!

Today's Devotion was written by Seminarian Alex Smith

Friday April 24

Matthew 3:1-17

Taking Out the Trash

At our house, Thursday is garbage day. I know that doesn't sound very exciting, but it takes some preparation. The various little trash cans in the house are collected and dumped into bags. The bags are loaded into the big trash can to be rolled out to the street. All of this preparation needs to be done before the garbage truck arrives. I know this sounds pretty basic, but only because we are spoiled by the garbage man.

When this whole ordeal with the virus started, I received an email from the trash company assuring us that despite rumors, trash pick-up would continue. All of a sudden, the garbage truck and the man who operates it became a reason for thanksgiving! Imagine the mess if there had been no trash pickup for the last 5 weeks!

John was out in the wilderness telling people that it was time (past time!) to take out the trash. That's what sin is. Scripture refers to it at different times as "filth" and "pollution." John's task was to tell the people to bring out their trash. He just said it a little differently, "**repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.**"

Then Jesus came to the water. John knew that He didn't have any filth or pollution of sin to unload. But Jesus had come to be the garbage man. He'd come to take our filth of sin Himself. He was baptized so that when we would come to the waters, we could share in Him. He would take our sin, our filth. In turn, He makes us clean and gives us His place as beloved children of God.

Martin Luther made a point of teaching in the Small Catechism that confession has two parts: to confess our sins and receive absolution (the word of forgiveness) from the pastor not doubting that our sins are forgiven. We keep taking out the trash of our sin in the joyful expectation that Christ takes it from us every time. Talk about a reason for thanks!

Prayer: Thank you, Lord Jesus, for taking the filth of my sin. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Saturday April 25

Read [Matt 4:1-11](#)

Focused Like a Laser

Was He crazy?! Right after being baptized, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness **“to be tempted by the devil”**. Who’d do that?! Before beginning His ministry, it’s natural that Jesus might want some time alone to meditate and pray. But He goes into His enemy’s stronghold, gives up food for 40 days, and is then confronted by His adversary. Just three temptations, but temptations that get us humans all the time.

I love it when the Bible spells out the obvious: **“He was hungry”**. Why did God waste the space in His Book to say this? Everyone knows – if you don’t eat for 40 days, *of course* you will be hungry. But this is here to point out that, while Jesus is almighty God, He is also lowly Man. Jesus had truly begun His suffering.

The devil wasn’t very original in his temptations: if your target is hungry, of course you tempt him with hunger. The second temptation addresses another human “need” – fame. Like today’s “Instagram stars” who hang themselves over cliffs or off tall buildings, take a selfie, and post it to the internet to win fame and fortune, so the devil tempted Jesus at the top of the Temple.

Finally, the temptation that all too many of our leaders and politicians fall into: power, riches, and glory. All Jesus had to do was bow His head. Just a little. And “all this” would be His. Would that be too much to ask? Just a little compromise, and He could have everything the world has to offer (sounds tempting, doesn’t it?). Jesus was hungry. He’d lived for 30 years as a common craftsman with a mother to support. He was human and had human needs. He was hungry. He deserved food, fame, riches, and glory.

But He was on a mission. God had anointed Him with His Spirit for a purpose. Jesus was already focused “like a laser” on the cross. He looked right through Satan, looked into our eyes, and saw our need for a Savior. Here in the wilderness, Jesus defeated the devil for the first time, but would go on to crush him on the cross.

Prayer: Lord God, in my times of temptation, help me turn my eyes to the cross where Your Son, Jesus, died for me. In His Name, Amen.

Monday April 27

Matthew 4:12-5:12 (esp. 4:23-24)

Thy Kingdom Come...Soon Please!

You've prayed the Lord's Prayer a thousand times. Maybe more. It is easy for the words to glide by without a thought. Today in our reading, we get a glimpse of what we are praying for. **"He (Jesus) went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people."** Take notice. There are two parts there: proclaiming the gospel and healing every disease.

The gospel is the good news of Jesus. We belong to the kingdom of Jesus now by faith in this good news: Christ has paid the price for our sin on the cross and overcome sin, death and the devil as confirmed by His resurrection. His kingdom extends to wherever Jesus is! In His Word, in His Supper, among His people, Jesus is there, and He reigns. Yet, it is a kingdom that we see only by faith for now.

In His ministry, Jesus gave us glimpses of what His kingdom will be. **"So his fame spread throughout all Syria and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them."** Times of illness and sorrow and trial in this life remind us that while Christ has forgiven us, we still long to see His kingdom come in its fullness. The pain of this life leads us into prayer to see His kingdom come.

As we see those who don't know the peace of Christ we pray, "may the Gospel of Your kingdom of life and forgiveness come to many more. Bring everlasting healing of the soul, as only You can." As we or others suffer in illness, we pray, "may Your kingdom come to finally end the sickness that infects our world and our bodies. Bring the everlasting healing of the body, as only You can." As we grieve losses of every kind, we pray, "may Your kingdom come and bring to an end the power of death forever. Bring the everlasting healing of body and soul, as only You can. Come quickly, Lord Jesus and Thy Kingdom Come." Amen.

Prayer: (The Lord's Prayer)

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Wednesday, April 28

Read Matthew 5:13-48

“Assurance in Matthew 5”

Yesterday I was reading through some messages of encouragement that various LCMS members wrote for me and fellow concluding seminarians. Each message was much-appreciated, but one message in particular caught my attention. One gentleman named Gary shared that in the midst of the current pandemic situation, he has “been leaning on Matthew 5:14-16.”

This took me off guard for a moment. After all, *I had been preparing for today's devotion. I knew what Matthew 5 said!* I wondered, “What kind of assurance does anything in Matthew 5 (after the Beatitudes) have to offer to him or to me?” So I looked back at verses 14-16 from today's reading. Perhaps you might read them again too.

Here, Jesus states something that is very certain. Of course, there is command involved, but Gary's message caused me to pause and see Jesus' matter-of-fact, authoritative word of promise: **“You are the light of the world.”** Jesus says it. So it is. As Jesus sends you and me out into this world to shine light in the darkness, He does not leave us to light our own candles. He certainly doesn't leave us to make ourselves perfect. No, He who had no sin- *He who is perfect*- has called you and given you His life in your baptism. He has given His perfection to you. He has given you His light. He has made you the light of the world. May we shine the light of Jesus before others with this assurance today.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, my life and my light, may you shine through me to others today. Amen.

Today's Devotion is written by Seminarian Jacob Tuma

Wednesday April 29

Matthew 6:1-15

Beware

Beware is an ominous word. You've probably seen a sign "Beware of Dog." They don't mean a poodle when they put up a sign like that. If you wander into this yard you may leave with teeth marks in your leg. You can imagine other times when "beware" is the right word, like a biohazard, nuclear waste or armed guards. In that context, we might think "beware" is a bit strong when Jesus says, **"Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them,"** (that doesn't seem too dangerous, until Jesus continues) **"for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven."**

So what is the problem here? Jesus goes on to teach about giving to the needy as well as prayer and fasting. Each of these was meant as a way to give glory to God by sharing His gifts, speaking to Him in prayer, and denying yourself of something to focus on God's mercy. The problem is the sinful tendency to do these things **"before other people in order to be seen by them."**

Often times, we want others to notice what we're doing, rather than just doing the good things God desires. When this temptation comes, it's good to remember that the one blessing we need is the gift Christ has already given to us freely – Himself. We don't need to seek the reward of heaven or the reward of others noticing what we do, we already have the greatest reward as a gift. So, we can give freely, too. If you are blessed with some extra time, right now, maybe you can find a way to give to others in some small way that gives glory to God.

If you need an example, I received a text on the day after Easter that one of our church families' homes had been "egged." Don't worry, this wasn't vandalism. Some unnamed person had thrown plastic eggs in the yard, and there was a message inside, "because He loves you." It could be something small like this, a financial gift to someone in need, or something else. Beware seeking glory for yourself, but be quick to share the generosity of Christ.

Prayer: Lord, help me to give in a way that gives glory to You. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Thursday, April 30

Matthew 6:16-34

Birds and Blessings

The other day I went for a walk since it was a nice day. I was sick of being cooped up. And near my apartment there is a cemetery where I sometimes walk because there aren't a lot of people around (at least not living ones). In the middle of the cemetery is a small pond and there are a pair of ducks that are almost always there. And on this particular walk it struck me that these ducks probably have no idea what's going on in our world right now. They don't know about the pandemic or the partisan politics or the everyday stresses that keep us in states of anxiety and worry. No, they just happily live out their duck lives. For a second, I was almost jealous. Must be nice to be a duck, I thought.

As I looked at the reading for today, verse 26 jumped out to me: **“Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?”** At the beginning of the verse, it seemed to validate my thoughts about the ducks—these ducks don't have to worry about anything, they've got a sweet life. But the question here struck me even harder: **“Are you not of more value than they?”** It's a reminder that although ducks and everything else in creation are wonderful works of God, humans really do stand apart. God made us in his image. And he cares about us more than anything else he has made.

The overall message of these verses comes down to one word: trust. Even in bad times, trust that God cares about you. If he cares enough to bless ducks, he will certainly bless us as well. Now, this doesn't mean life will be easy. There is still sin and death in this world. But we have one who has overcome all that, who came to earth in the flesh to redeem all creation. Jesus Christ cares for you and for me. And he will take all of our anxieties and exchange them for his righteousness. How comforting this is, that we have a God who cares so deeply!

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, help me always to trust in Your care for me.
Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Seminarian Alex Smith

Friday, May 1

Matthew 7:1-12 (esp. v 7-11)

Asking for Good Things

There is no doubt that at some point in your life you have asked for something that was not a great idea. It could have been a \$200 pair of shoes or a car that would go from 0-60 in 6 seconds flat. Unless you are a professional athlete or a race car driver, these things would probably not be beneficial.

I was thinking about this when considering Jesus's invitation to **"ask, and it will be given to you."** That sounds pretty open-ended (like you might want to ask for that \$1200 cellphone), but He goes on to explain, **"Which one of you, if his son asks him for bread will give him a stone?... If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"** Even as sinful people (Jesus calls us evil!), we are able to give our children the things they need (like bread). Certainly, our Father in heaven can **"give good things to those who ask him."** There's the key: asking for good things.

What are "good things?" Now this is not our definition of good things. It is His definition of good things. God wants us to ask for the Holy Spirit and the gift of faith (Luke 11:13). We are to seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness that is given through faith in Christ (Matt 6:33). In receiving the Spirit, we also pray to show the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 5-22-23). There are plenty of good things that Your Father wants you to ask for, and He is happy to give them.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, help me not only to pray for my needs of the moment and the things I want, but help me to ask for the good things that You have promised to give me through Jesus. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Saturday May 2

Read [Matt 7:13-29](#)

Matthew 7:29 "... he (Jesus) was teaching them as one who had authority"

"The Sermon on the Mount"

The Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) teaches many lessons. It teaches about what we should do and not do. It teaches the penalties for not being "**perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect**". This is the Law – it protects us from other sinners, it shows our need for a savior, and it guides our holy living. This is good and necessary. But the Sermon also reveals God in beautiful and astonishing ways.

When you and I fail at being merciful, God's mercy overwhelms us. When our sinful thoughts betray our imperfection, Jesus' perfect life saves us. When our selfishness corrupts our soul, God's gifts show us our sin, show us an example, and heal our hearts. And, though we all know you don't give pearls to pigs, God gave His only Son to you and me.

Today's reading holds several familiar illustrations. When the wide and easy highway to perdition calls out to us, Jesus, who perfectly lived His life on the hard path leading to life, draws us to follow Him. When false prophets surround us, luring us in with their rotten fruit, Jesus – the Way, the Truth, and the Life – causes the blind to see, the deaf to hear, and the lame to walk. He is the solid rock to build our lives on, so that when the rains in life come, we stand strong, looking to Him for salvation.

The culmination to the Sermon on the Mount, when the crowds expressed astonishment at His teaching, draws a parallel to this time after Easter that we live in. They marveled at the authority with which He taught; we worship His authority over life and death. And, because of His authority over heaven and earth, we go therefore to make disciples of all nations.

Holy God, Author of Life, please continue to reveal to me through Your Word: Your glorious power, Your endless mercy, and Your Son, my Savior. In His Name, Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jeff Nelson

Monday May 4

Matthew 8:1-17

He Carried the Cross Everyday

A few years ago I was on the highway and I almost hit him. You don't expect to see someone walking right on the side of the interstate, but there he was. He wasn't just walking either, he was also carrying a large wooden cross. I was driving, so I didn't get a chance to see if there was a message other than his shirt that read "Cross Across America."

I thought about this man on the side of the interstate when I read this passage from Matthew 8, especially when I got to the last verse. **"This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah, 'He took our illnesses and bore our diseases.'"** Matthew is quoting Isaiah 53 that speaks about the Suffering Servant who receives the punishment that the sinful world deserves, but He doesn't just take our sin, He takes all of the consequences too. These consequences of sin include illness and disease.

In this first half of Matthew 8, Jesus heals a leper, a paralytic (without even going to see him), Peter's mother-in-law from a fever, and for good measure, **"He cast out the spirits (demons) with a word and healed all who were sick."** Until the quote from Isaiah, it sounds like Jesus has one victory after another, and hardly a care in the world. But Matthew makes it clear that Jesus was carrying the cross every day, and not just as a show or a prop. He didn't just take sicknesses away, Jesus was taking our illnesses (on Himself) and bearing our diseases. He carried every sin and every consequence for sin.

Whatever pain ails you today, Christ has already carried it. He carried it every day as He took our illness and bore our diseases. He knows whatever pain you face, and He has overcome it. He may let you carry that cross for a time to remind you to trust in Him, but you can always remember that not only has He carried every pain of yours, but as the crucified AND risen Lord, He also promises to carry YOU beyond pain, sin, and even death to share in His life.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me to carry the cross You give me knowing You've carried THE cross for me. Amen.

Today's devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Tuesday, May 5

Read Matthew 8:18-34

“What Sort of Man?”

Two years ago when I went on a trip to Israel, I was really excited to visit the Sea of Galilee. Looking back, I am not entirely sure what I expected to see there. I just pictured the SEA OF GALILEE- the place where Jesus calmed the storm as some super-special body of water that would surpass any I had ever visited before.

Then I saw it. It looked like... a lake. I love lakes, but compared to my lofty expectations, the place was a bit underwhelming. If I had wanted to see a bunch of water with some reeds and rocks I could have visited any other lake back home!

As I look back at that trip and reflect on today’s reading, it reminds me: the things that Matthew writes about in today’s reading and elsewhere didn’t happen in Fantasyland. They happened in a lake like the ones you have been to. They happened in people’s backyards and homes. They happened to people like you and me. Jesus came into our world, broken with sin and its devastating effects. He came to places like the ones you see every day. He entered the seemingly hopeless circumstances of sin like you might experience every day, and He did something. He spoke. People were healed. Demons were cast out. Waters were stilled. And today, our crucified and risen Lord says to people like you, “I forgive you. I make you new. Peace, be still.” **What sort of man is this?**

Prayer: Dear Jesus, You are all-powerful. You are the Son of God. Remind me of your presence and power in the midst of my life today. Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Seminarian Jacob Tuma

Wednesday May 6

Matthew 9:1-17

Urgent Care

I received an automated email not long ago telling me that I am overdue to schedule an annual well-check with my doctor. This is problematic for two reasons. (1) My well-check certainly is not a necessary medical procedure. So I'm pretty sure I couldn't see my doctor. (2) My primary doctor recently moved to Connecticut. It seems like a long drive for a well-check. All of this leaves me without a regular physician, and either having to go to the emergency room or to an urgent care facility.

Urgent care seems to have been Jesus's preferred mode of care for His patients. Granted, He didn't have a facility, so He tended to make house calls, like with Matthew. After calling Matthew to follow Him, Jesus had dinner at Matthew's house with "**many tax collectors and sinners.**" To the Pharisees, this sort of treatment seemed offensive. Why on earth would Jesus spend time with tax collectors and sinners? Even worse, why would He eat with them?

Jesus's answer was simple, "they needed urgent care." Well, that's not quite what He said. Jesus said, "**Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.**" Getting to my well-check is a luxury, not a necessity. On the contrary, those sick with sin need the urgent care that Jesus alone can provide. In this time of limited service, you may have been kept from seeing your doctor for some time, even for a need greater than a well-check, but what a comfort it is to know that Christ makes house calls. He brings His urgent care to you, wherever His Word of forgiveness for sinners like us is heard.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, great physician, bring me the healing of Your forgiveness today. Amen.

Today's devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Thursday May 7

Matthew 9:18-38

Trust in the Touch

One thing this pandemic has taught us is to “think before you touch.” Before all of this, I honestly didn’t worry too much about germs. I touched surfaces and then my face without thinking, and I would give a handshake, high five, or fist bump without hesitating. Touching things and even other people is natural, and it’s a hard habit to break, even when you know it’s for your own good!

In our reading from Matthew for today, Jesus performs several miracles that involve touch. In one, it is a woman who touches his garment and is healed. In another, Jesus heals two blind men by touching their eyes. And he even raises a girl from the dead, simply by taking her hand. How amazing it must have been to feel Jesus’ physical touch, to see him walking around during his ministry.

In our current situation, we are missing the embrace of friends and family, even the simple joy of a high five or a slap on the back. It isn’t fun, and it isn’t right. It’s just one of the many things that are wrong about the virus, and it shows us that the world around us is broken and affected by sin. But Jesus was not afraid to touch people who were sick, or even dead. No, Jesus brings healing with his touch. He restores things to the way that they should be.

So what should we do? Be bold like Jesus, and touch one another anyways? No, it is better to observe the recommended measures to prevent spreading the disease. But what we can do is trust the one who brings healing with his touch, the one who has begun the restoration of this broken world. And on the Last Day, he will reach out and touch our hands, raising us from death to eternal life. Trust this promise, and the one who has made it.

Prayer: Dear Lord, comfort me with your presence during this time. Keep me from feelings of loneliness or fear, and sustain my faith in the promise of the resurrection. Amen.

Today’s devotion was written by Seminarian Alex Smith

Friday May 8, 2020

Matthew 10:1-23

Never Sent Alone

As I read the list of Apostles and their marching orders in today's reading, I couldn't help but think of other names: Adam, Mark 1, Mark 2, Jacob, Chris, Alex, Mitch. You probably recognize this list of names as the seminary students who have served at Hope in recent years.

In the Church, we talk about the priesthood of all believers (that comes from 1 Peter 2). This means we all carry the message of Jesus with us wherever we go. Each of us should be ready to speak of the hope that is in us (1 Peter 3:15). But this passage reminds us that not everyone is sent. I cannot encourage you often enough to pray for these students and young pastors. They are not necessarily being sent out with instructions identical to the apostles, but as long as Satan is at work in the world, there are challenges that lie ahead that these young men cannot handle.

Mercifully, we are also reminded that they do not go alone. **“Do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”** That promise still stands as we speak the Scriptures – the Spirit is at work. He still changes hearts and minds. Through His Word, the forgiveness of Jesus is delivered, and the peace of God rests in the hearts of His people.

In your life, you may be called to speak of the hope that is in you. Rest assured, that the Spirit of God goes with you, too, as a baptized child of God. Ask for His help and rely on His powerful Word. But whether or not you are sent as the apostles were or our students are, hold up Christ's servants in prayer. As the hymn says,

*If you cannot be a watchman, Standing high on Zion's wall,
Pointing out the path to heaven, Off'ring life and peace to all,
With your prayers and with your bounties You can do what God commands;
You can be like faithful Aaron, Holding up the prophet's hands. LSB 826 v3*

Prayer: Lord, let Your Spirit guide me by Your Word when my time to speak comes. Bless those whom you have sent and are preparing to send: Adam, Mark, Mark, Jacob, Chris, Alex, Mitch and many others. Make them bold in Your promise that they do not go alone. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Saturday May 9

Read [Matt 10:24-42](#)

Matthew 10:24a “A disciple is not above his teacher”

“Hard, Beautiful Words”

When you first begin studying for the ministry at the seminary, your professors make no secret of the trouble you’re getting into. They pull out scripture like our text today and place them right in front of you: “**A disciple is not above his teacher**”. With those words, Jesus exposes the ugly truth to future preachers: “Just as they called me (Jesus) the king of the devils, so will you be treated” (paraphrased). These aren’t idle words when you consider the hardships Jesus endured.

Jesus was misunderstood by His family, friends, townspeople, and nation. He was driven out of towns, called “demonic”, taunted by enemies, questioned by authorities, and plotted against. And then there was Holy Week. Add to the list of mistreatments: betrayal, slander, beatings, having the shirt stripped off His back and finally, being nailed to the cross – exposed to the world and forsaken by God.

But, that’s not what future ministers are “signing up” for. For that matter, that’s not why people are drawn to the Christian church. We do so to be disciples of the true Master. And that Master is the Lord of the Universe, the Creator of everything, and the Savior of the World. There will be suffering as we serve the Lord, but Jesus has already won the war. He paid the price for our forgiveness and proclaimed victory over death and the devil himself.

The same Father who placed a certain number of hairs on our heads and who cares when a single sparrow falls to the ground – loves you. When suffering comes, He is there on the cross beside you, sharing your burden and preparing a place in paradise for you.

Lord God, my Teacher and Master, encourage me by Your Word and Spirit to fight the fight and to endure to the end. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Pastor Jeff Nelson

Monday May 11, 2020

Matthew 11:1-19

Greater than John

We have 5 young people who are doing their interviews for Confirmation beginning today. The first two questions that we discuss are an ice breaker of sorts. The confirmands pick one person from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament and explain what they learned about God or faith from this person's life. It's one of my favorite things to do as a pastor – to hear young people talk about the Scriptures and how God is teaching them through His Word.

I have heard about many Biblical personalities – Moses, Esther, Noah, Mary, Peter, and even John the Baptist. Yet, I have not heard anyone say that they picked John because I learned from John that, "I'm greater than John and everyone else that came before him." That might sound arrogant, but it would be correct! The same is true for you. You are greater than Moses and Esther and Noah and Isaiah and David and John the Baptist.

How do I know this? Jesus said so! **"Truly, I say to you, among those born of women (that's a fancy way of saying everyone) there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."** Now you may believe that this is true because Jesus said it, but how is it possible?

Grace. You are not greater than John the Baptist (or Ruth or Elijah or anyone else) because you have superior virtue. You are not any less sinful. You are greater because you have what all of the people of the Old Covenant only anticipated from afar: You know the truth of Jesus' death and resurrection. You have been baptized into Christ and covered in His righteousness. That means to paraphrase Gal. 2:20, **"It is no longer you who live, but Christ who lives in you. And the life you now live in the flesh you live by faith in the Son of God, who loved you and gave himself for you."** You have been joined to Jesus by faith, and nothing and no one is greater than Him.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank you for allowing me to share in the greatness of Your life by faith. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Tuesday, May 12

Read Matthew 11:20-30

“When Jesus Gets Specific”

Jesus gets pretty specific in today’s reading. In the first few verses, He gets uncomfortably specific as He, one-by-one, calls out and denounces cities **“where most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent.”** Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah, had specifically come to these towns and had performed miracles in their midst. Old Testament prophecies were being fulfilled right before their eyes and ears! Yet, these specific people did not believe. As we read Jesus’ words of judgement, He is not speaking about us, but there is still something about these words that can be unsettling. We, like these cities, are specific people with specific sins.

Jesus can get very specific, and thankfully He gets specific not only at the beginning of today’s reading but at the end as well as He says, **“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”** This is the kind of specific that we need because *all* means **all**. *All* stretches out over you, me, and everyone who is in our broken, sinful condition. *All* makes sure that you are not left out! Jesus came for people like you. He forgives your specific sins. *He has graciously called you out by name in your baptism*, and He gives you daily and eternal rest for your soul. This rest is for you. This rest is for every other person in your life. May we specifically receive and extend this rest to others today.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank you for extending Your rest to me. Grant me peace which the world cannot give, and open my eyes and ears to Your yoke which is gentle and light. Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Seminarian Jacob Tuma

Wednesday May 13, 2020

Matthew 12:1-21 (esp v 1-8)

Lord of the Sabbath

Once upon a time, Sunday was a day of rest. Everyone (or so it seemed) went to church. Stores were closed. Restaurants were limited. At most, gas stations were open. Now, I'm not talking about the first couple weeks of everything shutting down. This was probably 40 or 50 years ago (or more depending on where you are from). People took the Sabbath day seriously. There was a day to rest and go to worship and not many other options were available.

Today, we have a very different world. Sabbath (if it means anything) means squeezing in 60 minutes of worship amidst work and entertainment and running to the store and more. Even in our slowed down world, we can find it hard to make it a priority to stop and rest in the Word of God.

So, Jesus probably would correct us for a very different reason than in today's reading. The people of His day were more concerned about following Sabbath laws (including man-made ones) than making sure people had enough to eat or helping someone in need. Today, we might be unconcerned about those lacking food or slow to help someone in need, but not because we are worried about following Sabbath laws. We have lots of good intentions that are often lost because we are just so busy. A little more rest might help us straighten out our priorities

No matter the problem, we need the essence of the Sabbath – rest. And the reading tells us where to find it. (Jesus said), “**the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.**” That not only means that He is in charge of it. Since Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath, He is also the source of true rest. True rest is not sleeping in, avoiding work, or even just entering a church building. True rest is in Jesus. After all, what did He say in yesterday's reading just before these Sabbath episodes? “**Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.**” He is our rest – our peace with God, the giver of a clean and forgiven conscience, the way to rest eternal. To truly rest, we need Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, let me find true rest in You. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Thursday May 14, 2020

Matthew 12:22-37

Identity Matters

Fairly often in Jesus' ministry the common people get things right while the religious authorities get things wrong. In today's reading Jesus casts out a demon. And the people who witness it think that maybe Jesus is the Son of David, the Messiah. Which He is! They've got it right. But the Pharisees think the opposite. They accuse Jesus of being in league with the devil. A serious accusation, and a completely wrong one. And Jesus has quite harsh words for the Pharisees in response.

The world around us struggles with the identity of Jesus as well. Some view him as simply a great philosopher, someone who had good moral teachings. They compare him to Buddha or Confucius, just a wise man with some good ideas. Others think that he might have been a prophet or had some divine power, but was ultimately just another prophet. But we believe like the common people: Jesus is the Son of David! The Son of God, who takes away the sins of the world.

And as Jesus says in this passage, if he is truly the Son of God, then the kingdom of God has come to earth. Jesus' ministry brought about God's kingdom, and it will be fully realized on the Last Day when Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead. So take heart! God's kingdom is being established, his Son is reigning on the throne. Jesus is Lord. And we are with him, citizens of his kingdom even while we are here on earth. Look forward with joy to the fulfillment of God's kingdom, and trust that Jesus is truly in control.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, help me take comfort in who You are – the Son of God and my Savior. In Your name. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Seminarian Alex Smith

Friday May 15, 2020

Matthew 13:1-23 (esp. v 18-23)

The Perils of Farming

In theory, farming sounds easy. You put seeds in the ground. It rains. The sun shines. You get plants. Sounds easy. That's probably how it would work in a sin-free world.

In this world, birds come and eat your seeds. Rocks prevent roots from going deep, and so the sun sometimes bakes the plants instead of helping them grow. Thorns and weeds grow alongside good seeds, and will choke out life. Yet sometimes, seeds reach good soil and grow and produce a huge crop.

Jesus' parable of the sower is very familiar. The other familiar part to us is all of the perils of faith. Satan seeks to steal the Word. He rejoices when people are kept from worship or keep themselves from ever hearing the Word. Difficulties in life abound that challenge the faith, and sometimes steal our attention from Christ. Faith chokes as it looks only at the circumstance of the moment instead of to the Savior. Worries over wanting more of the things that don't last steal our attention from the Word of the Lord that endures forever.

These are the three great enemies of the faith – the devil, the world, and our sinful desire. These perils of farming are always looking to encroach on the good soil of Your heart where Christ has planted His Word and tills and waters the soil by His Spirit. The key to growth is for the seed of God's Word to be received often, and for this seed not be overrun with rocks and birds and thorns. We can't completely avoid these perils of farming, but we can avoid inviting them. More importantly, keep looking to the Word of Christ, He is faithful to sow His Word of forgiveness, peace, contentment and joy.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, protect me from the enemies of faith and make my heart good soil that clings to You. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Saturday May 16

Read [Matthew 13:24-43](#)

Matthew 13:33 “He (Jesus) told them another parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.””

“Hidden in Plain Sight”

Yesterday my son, Isaiah, made his first batch of bread. You know, *real* bread, made from scratch in a mixer with flour, sugar, salt, shortening, and yeast. He mixed it up, added warm water, mixed it again and let it rise. After doubling in size, he punched it back down and put it into pans, where he let it rise again. Then he baked it, and oh! what a wondrous smell! And the taste of fresh bread, right out of the oven, with some jam on it...

I just had to choose this parable out of the three in the text after last night’s lesson in the kitchen.

In these three parables, Jesus explains a secret which is hidden in the Gospel – just like yeast is “hidden” in bread dough. It’s not really so hidden a secret at all, though: the kingdom of heaven looks pretty normal – at first. Take your baptism, for example: a little baby (oftentimes), a little water, and a few words. Not much to look at, right? But it grows, and grows, and doubles in size and more.

Look at what it did to our five confirmands. Just like the woman in the parable – their parents, teachers, and pastor toiled hard to work the Good News into their hearts. And there, the Holy Spirit caused it to grow into faith and understanding, causing it to grow and transform them into new creations.

The message is: Jesus’ reign in our lives may not look grand and glorious – now – but it is growing into a magnificent Bread of Life (jam not even needed).

Heavenly Father, grow Your Word in my life today to bear fruit in my deeds to my neighbors and in Your heavenly kingdom forever. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Pastor Jeff Nelson

Monday May 18, 2020

Matthew 13:44-58

A Reckless Investment

I am no expert on investing. But there is one concept that I understand – it is important to diversify. You don't put all of your eggs in one basket. You should invest some in a variety of different things. That makes sense. In the current topsy-turvy world of closings and social distancing, some companies are doing great (like if you make cleaning products or face masks) and others are really hurting. But in time that will change too. It makes sense to diversify your investments.

That is not the philosophy followed in two of Jesus's parables. The kingdom of heaven is compared to a man who finds a treasure in a field and sells all that he has to buy that field. Then the kingdom of heaven is compared to a merchant looking for pearls, **“who on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.”** This is a reckless investment strategy! Imagine basing your whole retirement on one pearl.

Your eternity though is based on one pearl – the truth of the Gospel. Jesus's death and resurrection for you is the one treasure that lasts in AND beyond this topsy-turvy world. Jesus is our priceless treasure and next to Him, all the things of this world are worthless.

Yet, seen another way, these parables remind us of our God. This reckless investment strategy of selling everything is what Jesus has done for you. He has deemed YOU to be the treasure that He has purchased “not with silver or gold, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death.” (Small Catechism) In view of His costly love for us, the only reckless investment would be to trust in anyone or anything else.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, help me always to trust in You as my priceless treasure.
Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Tuesday, May 19

Read Matthew 14:1-21

“Good Ideas”

The disciples had a pretty good idea: Jesus should **“send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.”** Sure, when we know how the story ends, their idea sounds silly. But imagine that you were one of the disciples there that day. I would have felt pretty good about the idea! Sending the people away was logical and responsible. It showed some care for the people!

But Jesus- He had a different idea. First, He turns the issue on the disciples saying, **“You give them something to eat.”** Then, He tells them to bring Him the little food they had. Before you know it, all of the people **“ate and were satisfied.”**

Jesus’ response was anything but logical. It was out-of-this world miraculous! It was more than responsible. It was an abundant gift with leftovers! Jesus’ response showed more than a passing care. *It showed His great compassion.* He, who had heard news of John the Baptist’s death, had already been healing people that day, and still had the cross before Him, was not too occupied to take care of this one meal.

Your life may not always look like the second part of today’s reading. But Jesus, your Good Shepherd, has shared some of His ideas with you. He has come and acted to save you and give you a life eternal. He calls you today to love your neighbors- to give *them* something to eat today and forever. You can trust His ideas.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank you for having compassion on me. Help me to trust you, my Good Shepherd, today. Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Seminary Graduate Jacob Tuma

Wednesday May 20, 2020

Matthew 14:22-36

“O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”

From our perspective, this is a really easy question to answer. Why did Peter doubt? He was a fisherman. He had spent a good portion of his life out on the water...in a boat. Experience taught him to have a healthy respect, a proper fear of the water, especially when the winds came up and the waves grew. Now, he had stepped out of the boat and was standing on the water. This should not be. Every other time Peter stepped out of the boat, he sunk like a rock. Besides all this, the winds had come up and the waves were relentless.

To us, Peter may seem to be the one with great faith, at least compared to everyone else who stayed in the boat. But Jesus still asks his question, “**O you of little faith, why did you doubt?**” If we were in Peter’s sandals, we might respond with, “well, look at the waves and the wind! Besides, people don’t walk on water! Of course, I was scared.” But Jesus didn’t ask about fear. He asked about doubt.

At Jesus’s invitation and with eyes fixed on His Lord, Peter stood on the waves. Why? Because as the disciples say at the end of text, “**truly (Jesus) is the Son of God.**” With eyes of faith fixed on Him, there is no need to fear the winds and the waves, nor anything else in all of creation. What have we to fear? Jesus is the Lord of all Creation! So, “**take heart...do not be afraid.**” Peter sank because He “**saw the wind and he was afraid.**” Peter took His eyes off of Jesus and fear consumed him.

When fear and doubt consume us, Jesus invites us of little faith to look to Him. He is the Lord of heaven and earth, the rescuer from sin and hell, the giver of life now and eternally. He is truly the Son of God who loves you. So, no matter your fears today, look to Jesus. Trust in Him and take heart. Do not be afraid.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, when I am sinking in fear, help me look to You. Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Thursday May 21, 2020

Matthew 15:1-20

Tradition and the Heart

There are many different kinds of traditions. I'm sure we all have them! There are cultural traditions, where we acknowledge our heritage in certain ways, maybe by making special foods or celebrating a special holiday. There are also family traditions. I'm guessing everyone's family has a particular tradition for how they do all kinds of things. For example, in my family, the Christmas presents are always opened one at a time, starting with the youngest person and leading up to the oldest. It's a tradition that started with my great-great grandparents apparently, and we still do it today. Tradition can be a good thing—it unites people around something familiar, and that can be very comforting. Maybe during these days where we've been spending more time at home you've even developed new traditions or practiced older ones.

But in our reading for today, Jesus faces off against the Pharisees about tradition. The Pharisees followed a long list of traditions and regulations that they had set up. They thought by following all of these perfectly they would eliminate the possibility of anyone sinning against God's actual regulations. But that's the problem—all of the rules the Pharisees were making up weren't required! They go after Jesus and his disciples for not performing ritual washings before eating. They're really trying to verbally trap Jesus.

But Jesus doesn't fall for it. He tells them that the things that come out of our hearts and mouths are what really defile us. And he's right. So often we get caught up in thinking if we follow the traditions or go through the right motions that it will make God happy with us. At the same time we sin and break his commandments daily. But the good news here is that there is one who has not sinned, and it's the one rebuking the Pharisees. It's Jesus! By his perfect life, and by his death and resurrection, we can be forgiven. Even when we, like the Pharisees, rank tradition over following God's commands. Praise be to him who gives us victory over sin!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, keep us from becoming blinded by our unholy pursuits. Remind us of what matters most, and that traditions are not the "end-all be-all" of our lives. Grant that we may cling to Jesus, listen to his words, and put them into practice. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Seminarian Alex Smith

Friday May 22, 2020

Matthew 15:21-39 (esp. v 29-39)

Plenty for All

Jesus has already fed 5,000 men plus women and children. Now He feeds another 4,000 men plus women and children. Tens of thousands have been fed on those two occasions, but why does He do this twice?

The crowd of 5,000 plus seems to have been mostly made up of people from Israel. But not only was that whole crowd fed, there were 12 baskets of leftovers. To the people of Israel, 12 is an incredibly important number. Israel was made up of 12 tribes. So, the 12 baskets of leftovers give an indication that Jesus has come to provide for all of Israel.

Yet this story in today's reading tells us something more. The numbers are smaller, but no less significant. After feeding a crowd of 4,000 plus that seems to made up Gentiles, there are 7 baskets full of leftovers. For the reader of Scripture, 7 immediately calls to mind the 7 days of creation. The miracle points to the truth that Jesus has come to bring true and lasting sustenance not just for the crowd, but for the whole creation.

Taken together, Jesus has given all that was needed to the Jews and the Gentiles, and His mercy is so abundant that there is enough leftover for everyone. So these stories aren't mostly about feeding big crowds. In these stories, we are reminded that the true bread from heaven, Jesus Christ, gives life-giving food – Himself. (See John 6) So, you never need to doubt Jesus's care for you. There's plenty for all.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, Bread of Life, strengthen me in Your mercy that is always enough for me. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Saturday May 23

Read [Matthew 16:1-12 \(esp 16:4\)](#)

All Clear

The “Blitz”. The Germans had invented the “Blitzkrieg”, or “lightning war” that used modern mechanized weaponry to run right over the slower, antiquated tools of their enemies. In the fall of 1940, they turned their sights on London, and unleashed their air force on anything within and around the city. For eight months, bombs rained down on the city. Buildings burned, homes were flattened. Pubs, restaurants, churches, and cemeteries turned to rubble. Many Londoners took to the subway, or “Tube”, for shelter. The bombs fell at night, so that’s where people lived at night. They could still hear and feel the explosions, and saw the results in the morning’s light, but their lives were focused on hearing the air raid warden say, “All Clear”. That was the sign that the enemy planes were heading away and it was safe to emerge from their holes in the ground.

In our text for today, the Pharisees and Sadducees joined together to tempt Jesus, demanding a “sign” from Him to prove He was the Messiah. Normally fighting each other over anything, these two opposing groups united to confront Jesus. But, calling them an **“evil and adulterous generation”**, just as many Old Testament prophets called the religious leaders of their day, Jesus answered, **“no sign will be given (to it) except the sign of Jonah”**. Jesus, after all, had only been giving them sign upon sign upon sign. Thousands fed from only a few loaves and fish. The blind were given sight, the lame made to walk, the deaf to hear, the dead raised to life. But they didn’t have **“ears to hear”** and **“neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.”**

The only sign that Jesus gave them was also lost on them. Jonah was well known to them as having been saved from death by being swallowed by the great fish. Back in chapter 12 Jesus had already explained to them this analogy that, just as Jonah had been delivered from death after 3 days, so too would He, Jesus, not remain in the ground. They couldn’t see that sign, but Jesus gave that sign to you and me.

When the figurative “bombs are falling” in our lives: when isolation, illness, or joblessness makes us tremble and hide away, Jesus announces, “All Clear!” All the things He said, all the promises He made, all the blessings He offers – are proven by His resurrection. Because He lives, we know that everything He did is true and that through Him, we have life now and salvation forever.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, I thank and praise You for showing me Your Sign: that Your Son, Jesus lives. In His risen Name, Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Pastor Jeff Nelson

Monday May 25, 2020

Matthew 16:13-28

Sacrifice

Today is Memorial Day. We have set this day aside to honor those soldiers who have made the ultimate sacrifice in the defense of our nation. We have days like Veterans' Day to honor the living who have served as well, but it is good to have a day to remember the lives of those who gave all in order to win and preserve our freedom.

Sacrifice is not a natural characteristic. That's why we honor those who give of themselves, because sinful human nature always leans toward self-interest. To give freely in the service of another is not our first inclination. Yet to every soldier of the cross, we are called to sacrifice as well. **"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me,"** says our Lord. It is a high calling, and yet one against our typical inclination.

The world tells us to "live our best life. Be true to yourself. Look inside." In contrast, Jesus calls us to deny ourselves. Instead of looking to ourselves, Jesus wants us to find our true identity in Him **"who loved us and gave Himself up for us (Eph 5:2)."** We are called to take up our cross and follow Him who died on THE cross. Jesus calls us to a life of sacrifice, but only after having walked that road first for us. His life of sacrifice defines us.

To follow our Lord's calling, we would do well to take time today and remember. Remember and give thanks to God for the sacrifice of those who gave their lives for the freedom of our nation. All the more, remember and give thanks for the sacrifice of Him who gave His life to give everlasting freedom to all who believe in Him, and having been given so great a gift, follow Him in such denying ourselves for the sake of others.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank you for those who have given their lives to provide freedom. Thank you for your greater sacrifice to give life and freedom forever. Help me each day to deny myself, take up my cross and follow You. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Tuesday, May 26

Read Matthew 17:1-13

Listen to Him

“Listen to him” is not always good news. After all, a lot depends on whom we are supposed to listen to! Listening to your spouse... tends to be a good idea. Listening to an older brother or sister while mom and dad are away from home... can go wrong. “Listen to him” puts someone else in a position of authority over us- authority that can be used to help us... or simply boss us around.

What strikes me about Matthew’s account of the Transfiguration is the timing of the disciples fear. They certainly must have felt fear at the sight of Jesus’ glory and the sight of Moses and Elijah. But when does Matthew highlight that Peter, James, and John were terrified? When they heard the Father saying, **“This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”**

Matthew doesn’t tell us exactly what was going on in the minds of the disciples. They could have been terrified by the Voice, the message, or both! But Matthew does share what happened next. Jesus, the One whom the disciples were supposed to listen to, could have said a lot of things! He could have said, “It’s about time that I have your attention!”

But instead He graciously touched them and said, **“Rise and have no fear.”** This is your Savior. He speaks graciously. He shows you in His Word how He, the glorious Son of Man, came to forgive you and lift up your head. Listen to Him.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, throughout this day and week, grant that I may continually hear Your voice. Focus my eyes on You, and help me to share Your grace with others. Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Seminary Graduate Jacob Tuma

Wednesday May 27, 2020

Matthew 17:14-27 (esp 22-27)

Taxes, Fish and the Freedom of Sons

One of the best parts about slowly reading through Matthew's Gospel is that we bump into little stories that are not very familiar. This little story that ends our reading today is a unique little gem. Jesus sends Peter fishing in order to find a coin in that fish's mouth and use the money to pay a tax. What on earth is going on?

Some tax collectors are seeking a tax worth about two days' wages that was used to support the temple in Jerusalem. Apparently, Jesus didn't usually pay this tax. He had no problem "**giving to Caesar what is Caesar's,**" but He didn't pay a tax for the temple because as Jesus explains, kings don't tax their sons, but others. So, Jesus says, "**the sons are free.**" As the Son of the heavenly King, He didn't need to pay tax to His Father.

Nevertheless, He has Peter catch a fish that will have a shekel in its mouth (enough for Peter's and Jesus's taxes) in order to pay the temple tax. Jesus didn't have to do this, but pays the tax "**not to give offense.**" In humility, Jesus submits to paying the tax, as He humbles Himself again and again throughout His ministry all the way until "**the Son of Man is...delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and on he will be raised on the third day.**"

This is striking – Jesus is free to not pay the tax, but for the sake of those who could not possibly understand why He wouldn't need to, He pays the tax. Jesus uses His freedom to the sake of others. In in His whole ministry, though He has the power even to have a fish cough up His temple tax, His divine power is used only for the sake of others.

Consider one more thing: Through faith in Christ, you have been made a child of the heavenly King, a co-heir with Christ. We are set free! As you live in that freedom, look to Christ in how to use you freedom.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank you for humbling Yourself to make me a child of God. Help me to follow You in using my freedom in service to others. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Thursday May 28, 2020

Matthew 18:1-20

The Searching Shepherd

In our reading for today, Jesus tells some pretty hard truths about sin. He doesn't mince words. Matthew 18 has many familiar words: **"Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."** **"If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away."** "If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Those are some hard truths, and can be pretty convicting. We might start wondering, how can we possibly have hope when we know that we're sinful people?

Well there's another familiar part in our reading here: the parable of the lost sheep. This parable tells us quite a bit about how God operates. Even though only one sheep is lost, he leaves the ninety-nine behind to go find it. Not something a normal shepherd would do! Most shepherds would've said, "Oh well, let's cut our losses. Bad luck for that lost sheep." Not so without God. He pursues us when we go astray and brings us back to the fold. It might be a painful process, sin can get us into some pretty terrible situations. But even when we sheep get lost and tangled in bushes with wolves prowling around us, the voice of our shepherd is there, calling us back.

We're even told that he rejoices over the redemption of a lost sheep. He doesn't bring us back to punish us, or to make an example of us to the others. No, our God is one who cares, who welcomes back sinners. And so should we! When a fellow brother or sister in the faith begins to stray, we seek them out. We try to bring them back (with the aid of the Holy Spirit). We don't just tell them "Good riddance." Because God is merciful and loving toward us, we should be merciful and loving toward others.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for always bringing us back to you, even when we sin and stray from you. Give us the patience to forgive others and to welcome them back into the fold. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Seminarian Alex Smith

Friday May 29, 2020

Matthew 18:21-35

7.2 Trillion Reasons for Thanks

7.2 trillion is a number that is hard to wrap your mind around. Let's say that you were the average construction laborer in the United States today. Your annual salary would be about \$36,000 a year. That's not great money in today's economy, but it's not terrible. In a lifetime, someone who makes \$36,000 a year would earn about \$1.6 million over 45 years of labor. That sounds like a lot, but that's a long way to \$7.2 trillion. In fact, to earn \$7.2 trillion, the average laborer would need to work for 200,000 years!

Such is the predicament of the man who came before the king in the parable that Jesus tells in the reading. Somehow this servant built up a debt to the king of 10,000 talents or roughly the equivalent of \$7.2 trillion. Remarkably, the king has pity on this man and forgives the entire debt. This servant has \$7.2 trillion reasons for thanks!

Yet the man walked out of that meeting with king and saw a fellow servant who owed him 100 denarii (about \$12,000). That's a lot of money, but a drop in the bucket next to what he had been forgiven by the king. Yet the forgiven servant does not show any mercy to the man who owed him 100 denarii. When the king caught wind of this story, he brought in the unforgiving servant and said to him, **"You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?"**

That question is for us, too. You have been forgiven a debt of sin even greater than what was forgiven by the king. Your King has paid the whole debt of sin Himself in order to forgive you. You have more than \$7.2 trillion reasons for thanks! In this world, fellow sinners will hurt us and build up a debt. How will we respond? Should we not have mercy on our fellow servants, as Christ has had mercy on us?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for your great forgiveness of my sin debt. Help me to forgive those who sin against me. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Saturday May 30

Read [Matthew 19:1-15](#)

Matthew 19:3a “And Pharisees came up to him (Jesus) and tested him by asking...”

Pharisees

How many stories in Matthew’s Gospel begin with those words? They don’t approach Jesus to learn directly from “The Word” what good things He has in mind for them. They don’t even confront Jesus because they are in disagreement over a difficult passage and want to better understand it. No, they come as prosecutors – trying to entrap Jesus in His own words. They’re acting as lawyers, or politicians – attempting to set a “perjury trap” where they can catch the author of the law in contradicting Himself. Pharisees!

Just how human is that, though? How many people throughout history have tried every which way to squirm out from under God’s Law? Sinners throughout the human experience have tried to evade that Law, hide from it, twist and distort it into something they can tolerate. And, like the Pharisees here in our text, they actually try to turn it against God Himself – “if I can just get God to contradict Himself, then He can’t condemn me” – they think. But it’s not just “those Pharisees”. It’s all sinners. It’s you and me. We all have tried these mind games to pretend we’re not so bad, that we didn’t actually sin, that we can save ourselves.

As usual, though, Jesus turns their question on its head. They wanted Him to tell them when it’s OK to divorce your spouse. He instead told them about the beautiful plan God has for marriage, the same He’s had since the beginning of time. He wants a man and a woman to be united “as one flesh” for the rest of their lives. Very rarely we see this beauty in the “real world”. You know, the little old man and woman who are celebrating 75 years of marriage, still looking at each other with love in their eyes.

Sadly, for most of us, we ruin God’s good plan for us. Marriages have been ruined by sin since before Moses received the Law from God. We lie to and cheat one another. God gives us a beautiful diversity of people in our world and the “band aid” of police to enforce civility, but some abuse that authority and others react with violence.

By living in a sinful world, we live in a condition grossly complicated from God’s plan for Paradise. Like little children, we struggle with the chaos this creates in our lives. Which brings us to the last three verses of the reading, where we hear Jesus say, “**Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.**”

Prayer: Lord Jesus, lay Your hands on me and pray for me. In Your Name, Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Pastor Jeff Nelson

Monday June 1, 2020

Matthew 19:16-30

He's Got It All

Think hard. Who do you know who “has it all?” From person to person, we might visualize something different, but it probably includes some combination of lots of money, a good family, good health, good looks and a little more money. We are not alone if we think that lots of money leads to the good life. The disciples thought so.

Jesus made the jarring statement, **“it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”** The disciples’ reaction? They did not say, “That’s right! Money is evil.” Matthew tells us that, **“When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, ‘who then can be saved?’”** The disciples truly thought someone who was rich had it all, including eternal life. They probably didn’t think you could purchase salvation. They saw money as confirmation that God was on the side of the wealthy. But Jesus turns that on its head too. **“Many who are first will be last, and the last first.”**

So, what’s the problem with money? Nothing. There’s a problem with *us*. Money tends to reveal it. In the Large Catechism, Martin Luther pointed to love of money and possessions as “the most common idol on earth.” If we have a lot of money, we are tempted to think we are fine on our own and don’t need God. (That’s problem Jesus is discussing.) If we don’t have a lot, we are easily jealous of others and ungrateful toward God. The temptation to idolize money stalks all of us.

Who then can be saved? Jesus said, **“With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”** Our hope is in the ONLY ONE who’s got it all – Jesus. He has lived the perfect life. He has forgiveness and life and salvation in His nail-pierced hands. He has all the riches of heaven. And He loves nothing more than to share it all with all who trust in Him. This generosity from Him is the only source of salvation. And this kind of generosity should characterize our use of *all* His gifts to us.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, as You have been generous to me, help me to be generous in sharing Your priceless Word, the earthly riches You’ve given me, and my time and talents in service to others. Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Tuesday, June 2

Read Matthew 20:1-16

What a Guy!

The end of today's parable could have been a joyous moment for the early morning laborers. After all, these workers didn't have a job when they woke up that day. The master came to them, hired them, and paid them according to the agreement!

These early laborers could have simply gone home that evening, enjoyed a meal with their families, and shared a story about how great their boss was- how he gave full wages to a group that had only worked for an hour. This master cared about his workers. *He was out-of-this-world generous!* What a guy!

But instead, upon seeing his generosity to the other laborers, **“they grumbled at the master of the house.”** They described their work as bearing **“the burden of the day and the scorching heat.”** They saw the master as a problem.

You probably don't need me to point out that the response of the early morning laborers was wrong. But I will offer this thought: **what a master we have in our God.**

He provides for our needs today. Through His Son Jesus, He has brought us into His eternal Kingdom. On the last day, He will grant us an eternity beyond anything that we could ever imagine! Today does not need to be a day of grumbling about what we think we should have. It is a day to live in the joy of receiving His gifts and laboring in His Kingdom! What a gracious God we have to share with others.

Prayer: Gracious Father, I thank you for your abounding love toward me in Your Son, Jesus. Help me to rejoice in and proclaim this generous gift for others in my words and actions today. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Seminary Graduate Jacob Tuma

Wednesday June 3, 2020

Matthew 20:17-34

A Different Way

I grew up playing basketball in the 80's and 90's, and so I was very interested in the recent documentary about the Chicago Bulls from that time. Now, you may not be a big basketball fan (I can't say that I watch much anymore), but everyone knew Michael Jordan. To paraphrase someone in the series, when it comes to all-time sports icons there is Babe Ruth, Muhammad Ali and Michael Jordan, and that's it. The greatest. Through the series, Michael Jordan describes himself as relentless, even ruthless, in his pursuit to be the greatest and to squash his competition.

How different is the greatness that Jesus describes! **“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you, must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave.”** This sounds like anything but greatness, as measured by sports or politics or by the ways of this world.

But this describes the greatness of our God. For **“the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”** Our hope is grounded in Christ whose greatness is in His service, His sacrifice. Never ruthless, He was relentless in giving Himself completely for your sake, and for the sake of all.

Greatness in His kingdom is characterized by King Jesus. These short devotions don't give full space to comment on all that has transpired in our nation over the past week, but this text does give us direction in how to respond. First, look to Christ – the servant of all and the only Savior. Certainly, good leaders, policies and laws can help us protect one another's lives and livelihoods, but there is only one Savior. Then, follow Him in service to all. Pray for all. Rejoice in and emulate true greatness found in Christ THE Servant.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, Servant of all, help me to be a servant to all as well. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Thursday June 4

Matthew 21:1-22

Faith in the Son of David

In our reading today we get the familiar story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. This is one of the more famous moments of Jesus' life and ministry because we celebrate it every year on Palm Sunday. We get palm branches at church to give us a physical reminder of the festive occasion. And there's the famous donkey, and people shouting "Hosanna," which we loudly echo in familiar hymns like "All Glory, Laud and Honor" and "Hosanna, Loud Hosanna."

Jesus is entering the Jerusalem, also known as the City of David. And many people are crying out calling him the Son of David, the messiah. But when he finally enters the city, the question everyone there is asking is "Who is this?" The City of David fails to recognize its own son and heir. And this failure will lead the people of Jerusalem to turn their shouts of "Hosanna" into shouts of "Crucify" in just a few days' time. What a failure to understand who Jesus is!

Do we sometimes fall victim to the same failure? Sometimes we might think that Jesus isn't doing enough to help us. We pray for something and it doesn't happen. Or we expect a dramatic miracle in our lives and things seem to just go along ordinarily. We ask Jesus for a sign and it seems he is silent. And we might sometimes wonder to ourselves, "Who is this Jesus?" Faith in Jesus isn't always easy. The way of the cross may sometimes look like foolishness. But Jesus says here, "Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' it will happen. And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith." So stay in his Word and in his church, and he will keep you in the faith until the end.

Prayer: Faithful Lord Jesus, by Your Word and Spirit help me be faithful until the end. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Seminarian Alex Smith

Friday June 5, 2020

Matthew 21:23-46

Counting Others as More Significant

James 3:1 is a warning that, “**not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.**” Those words are not on any of the recruiting materials for our seminaries, but they probably should be. After all, Jesus spends our entire reading today chastising the religious leaders of His day.

First, the chief priests and elders tried to trap Jesus with word games, but He traps *them* with His question about John the Baptist. Next, He uses two groups of notorious sinners (tax collectors and prostitutes) as examples of those who enter the kingdom of God ahead of the religious leaders. Why? These leaders simply try to look religious and say the right things, but are not repentant. The notorious sinners fail publicly, but truly repent and are welcomed. Finally, Jesus tells the story of a vineyard that should produce fruit for the owner (God), but those who should take care of the vineyard are hoarding the goods for themselves, even to the point of killing the owner’s son (Jesus).

A couple days ago, I wrote about the exalted nature of servanthood in the kingdom of Jesus. Jesus is the Chief Servant, even willing to be killed in order bring many more into His kingdom. It’s a danger for any of us, but especially for pastors and leaders in the church, to make ourselves more important than others. Christ shows us a better way. He gives of Himself. We are to do the same. Pastors. Teachers. Leaders. Each of us. Yet if we are to give of ourselves in love, that begins in repentance for the times we demand our own way – in life and in the church. Then we humbly follow Jesus, “**counting others more significant than ourselves**” (Philippians 2:3), since He has humbled Himself completely.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, help Your servants, including pastors, teachers, and each one of us, humbly follow You. Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Saturday June 6

Read [Matthew 22:1-22](#), especially 15-22

“Two Kingdoms”

Our story begins, **“the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words”**. This time, they entrusted the tempting to their students and the “Herodians” (descendants & followers of the Herod dynasty). After showering him with flattery, they asked Jesus, **“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”**

You can imagine the thoughts going through Matthew’s mind when he heard this. The recorder of this encounter probably had to cover his mouth to hide his smile, as he marveled at the irony. Here he was, Matthew – disciple of Jesus – and now a recovering tax collector. He’d been called by Jesus out of that reviled profession and could be sure that these Pharisee-minions were about to be properly put in their place. But he was also certain that Jesus’ answer that would exceed his expectations.

Asking them to bring Him the proper coin with which to pay the tax, Jesus then asked them whose coin it is. Upon their pronouncement of **“Caesar’s”**, Matthew again had to stifle a laugh when Jesus answered, **“Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s”**. How many times as a tax collector had he said similar things? He’d become wealthy because he had been really good at saying just the right thing to squeeze a little more from his “customers”, and was doubtlessly confused to hear Jesus say that.

The lesson he learned was that as followers of Christ we live in “two kingdoms”. Human, earthly government has been empowered by God to reward good behavior and punish bad behavior. The spiritual kingdom, ruled by God through the Church, delivers forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Just as Matthew wasn’t removed from “Caesar’s kingdom”, you and I, as Christians, are called to both. We are to be good citizens of the state – through things like voting, participating in discourse (protesting appropriately), running for office, and promoting peace, justice, and the rule of law. This serves our neighbor, while as citizens of the Church, we serve God and are saved by faith in Jesus for eternal life.

Prayer: Lord God, Ruler of the Universe, help me to serve you in both Your kingdoms. Through Your Son’s Name, Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Pastor Jeff Nelson

For more on this subject, go to the [LCMS Life Library – Two Kingdoms](#) and follow the blue links.

Monday June 8, 2020

Matthew 22:23-46 (esp. 34-40)

The *Two* Commandments

Pop quiz: Recite the 10 Commandments. Go ahead. Get a piece of paper and see how many you can list and in the right order. (I'll let the 10 commandments at the bottom of the devotion – no peeking!)

At the time of Jesus, it was common to speak not of 10, but of 613 commandments that were listed in the books of Moses. I won't ask you to list all 613, but that's the list Jesus was to choose from when He was challenged with the question, **"Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?"** His answer seems almost obvious as He quotes Deuteronomy 6:5, **"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment."** But Jesus doesn't stop there. He continues, **"and a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the prophets."**

In our world, we construct tons of laws to try to fix all sorts of problems, and that makes sense to a certain degree. But the foundation of God's law is quite simple: love God and love your neighbor. Even following this short list of two commandments is beyond our sinful capacity. Complete devotion to God (heart, soul and mind) is rarely attempted and never fulfilled – except in Jesus who follows His Father's will completely. Our record on loving our neighbors (all of them, always) as ourselves is just as inadequate – except for Jesus who gave Himself completely for us. Yet in Christ, that is, by faith in Jesus and guided by the Spirit, we are forgiven and genuinely desire to love God and love our neighbor.

There are many calls for reform of various kinds in our day. They are likely a mixed bag of good and bad ideas. I would suggest here is the best place for each Christian to start: to daily ask God to reform our hearts to love Him more fully and to love our neighbors (all of them, always) as ourselves.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank you for forgiving my many failings to fulfill your law of love. Help me today and each day to love you with all my heart, soul and mind, and love every neighbor as myself. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Tuesday, June 9

Read Matthew 23:1-12

Watch Out

I don't know what Facebook posts or news headlines you have encountered lately or what you think about all of the sin and pain in our world. But I do know that when I hear about the sins of others- and when I read about the sins of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23- I need to watch out.

You and I need to watch out when we read about the sins of others because, while everything that Jesus says in today's reading is true, we are not Jesus. We ourselves are not without sin.

We can be quick to *despise* others who don't practice what they preach. When we see the faults of *others*, our sinful nature might even lead us to believe that *"if only everybody else would be more like me," the world's problems would go away!"*

Whether we are reading today's text or today's headlines, we need to watch out lest we ourselves fall into sin. As Paul says in Galatians 6:1, **"Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted."**

We need to watch out. More than that we ultimately need Jesus! For He is the **"one instructor, the Christ"** who saves us from *our* sins. He indeed put His own words into practice: **"The greatest among you shall be your servant"** and **"whoever humbles himself will be exalted."** Jesus takes away our blindness to our sin and turns us to repentance and faith in Him. May He grant us humble, faith-filled hearts today.

Prayer: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from Thy presence, and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation, and uphold me with Thy free Spirit. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Seminary Graduate Jacob Tuma

Wednesday June 10, 2020

Matthew 23:13-39

The Problem with Acting

Today's reading is not exactly the most uplifting portion of the Scriptures. Jesus hammers away at Pharisees by calling them each "a child of hell," "blind fools," "blind guides," "whitewashed tombs," and "serpents, a brood of vipers." These are the short terms that He uses. Of course, He uses one other term again and again – hypocrites.

Literally, a hypocrite is a "play actor." This is someone who pretends to be someone else. So, it could refer to a performer on a stage, but as far as I know Jesus doesn't have a problem with performers. Yet consider what an actor does. The person uses words and actions that portray one person, but remove the audience, and the actor is someone else completely. If you are telling a story, that's fine. If you are claiming to be a religious leader of the people of Israel and only your outward actions reflect this, that's a big problem.

This is a difficult text to read because in some manner we are each hypocrites. Now we could try to brush this off by saying, "everyone does it," but Jesus' words don't sound like He takes hypocrisy lightly. We could also try to rationalize our moments of hypocrisy, as though it's not a big deal, but as baptized people who wear the name of Christ, it is a big deal when we fail to reflect the new life we've been given in Jesus.

The proper Christian response is honest reflection and repentance. Instead of making excuses, we genuinely consider, "when have I only acted the part of God's Child, while living, speaking or thinking differently?" Perhaps it has been the difference in how you treat people in your home versus the image you portray outside of it. Maybe it is something else, but take time to reflect on this question, and then come to Jesus in repentant prayer. He doesn't merely point out sin to make us feel bad, but to convict us of our sin in order to hear His Word of forgiveness, heal us, and shape us as His people.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, forgive me for the times when I have been a hypocrite in thoughts, words and deeds. Help me, by Your Spirit, to live today, not as an actor, but truly as Yours. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Thursday June 11

Matthew 24:1-28

Real Hope and Comfort

“It’s the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine.” Those are lyrics to a song by the rock band R.E.M. But hearing Jesus describe the tribulations and trials of the end of the age doesn’t often make us feel very fine. It doesn’t sound like something we’d really want to experience. But the truth is we are experiencing it. Ever since Jesus ascension into heaven, the world has been in the end times. And all the evidence you need can be read in a history book or seen on the nightly news. Right now the world might seem like it’s going off the rails. Pandemics, war, oppression, civil unrest—these are all part of daily life in this world.

In the midst of all of this chaos and uncertainty, everyone has one thing in common. They’re looking for something to hope in and to give them comfort. Some look to political candidates or parties to save the day and bring peace (both sides are guilty of this). Others try to comfort themselves by engaging in all kinds of selfish and destructive behaviors that they think will make them feel good or make them happy. We’ve all been guilty of these things at times, it’s part of our sinful nature.

But our reading today isn’t all doom and gloom. For as Christians, we know how the story ends. For us, the end of the world, the Last Day, will be a joyous occasion! Though the trial and tribulations of this world are difficult, we can fix our hope on Jesus. For he is the true Christ. And he will keep his promise to return to put an end to all sin and suffering and death. And we shall be brought into the new and redeemed creation. Jesus promises, **“But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”** That’s real comfort. That’s real hope. And the Holy Spirit will continue to point us to this hope as we trust in God’s Word and in our savior Jesus. It’s all going to be fine.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, keep us faithful in a world spinning out of control, that in the end, we may receive the salvation You are even now preparing for us. Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Seminarian Alex Smith

Friday June 12, 2020

Matthew 24:29-51

Something That Lasts

One of the harsh realities of this world is that things don't last. If you are a life-long St. Louisan, a trip down memory lane confirms this reality. You might have gone to see the window displays at Famous-Barr downtown. Summers were marked by games at Sportsman's Park or, later, the previous Busch Stadium. Maybe you enjoyed a late-night meal at the Parkmoor or watched a movie at Wehrenberg Theaters. I could keep going like this for some time.

This is the way of this broken world. Nothing lasts forever. Well, that's not quite true. In speaking of the signs of the end times, Jesus said, "**Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.**" Things all around us change on a constant basis. Things come and go. But not the Words of Jesus. He is "**the same yesterday, today and forever**" (Heb. 13:8). The eternal God, who has rescued us from sin and the brokenness of this world, lasts forever. The life He gives lasts forever. The Word He speaks lasts forever.

In this ever changing world, where so many things go the way of the Forest Park Highlands (which went up in [flames](#) if you aren't aware), Christ assures us that the most important thing will not vanish: His Word of forgiveness, life and salvation.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, help me cling to what lasts – Your Word. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Saturday June 13

Read [Matthew 25:1-13](#)

“Be Prepared”

The Boy Scout motto is, “always be prepared”. A few years ago when I brought Isaiah to a scouting summer camp just south of Farmington, I wasn’t prepared. I had all the right clothes on: hat, sunglasses, and even had the bug spray ready to go in the trunk. The plan was to get there, put on the bug spray, and then help him get settled before returning home. Simple. However, I’m no Scout. By the time I got out of the car and around to the trunk, I already had 3 ticks crawling on me.

In our reading, we hear a lesson on preparedness. Ten young maidens were waiting with a bride on her special day. According to the custom of the day, they’d wait at her home (usually her parents’) for the groom to come to take her to his home where the celebration feast would begin. On this day, he was delayed. He didn’t actually arrive until midnight!

We’re not told why he was delayed, but that there was a difference in the ten awaiting him. Half were “wise”; the other five were “foolish”. Like good Scouts, the wise virgins were prepared – they didn’t expect the groom to be delayed, but this was important! They had everything with them to be sure to be ready when he arrived. They wouldn’t miss this for anything!

To drive home the point of the lesson, when the bridegroom finally arrived, the foolish virgins’ smartphone batteries were dying and they had to leave to charge them (sorry, I couldn’t resist!). The wise maidens went into the feast, the doors were closed, and the celebration began – without the foolish ones.

The bride, of course, is the Church. Jesus is the groom, and the marriage celebration is eternal life with God. The best way for you and I to “be prepared” is to regularly come to the place where the bridal party meets the groom: the communion rail. There, we’re washed clean in the waters of our baptism. We hear the Good News spoken. We see the altar on which Jesus gave Himself, and we join with the entire wedding party in a foretaste of the feast to come.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, in these trying times, strengthen me to be prepared for Jesus’ return. In His mighty Name, Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written Pastor Jeff Nelson

Monday June 15, 2020

Matthew 25:14-30

Using “a Little”

Jesus tells a parable today about three servants receiving 5, 2, and 1 talents respectively from their master. That sentence doesn't mean much to us. If you consider that 1 talent is worth 20 years of wages or about \$800,000 in modern terms, now you realize what's going on. Each of the servants are entrusted with a large sum of money. What will they do with it?

Let's work backwards. The last servant digs a large hole and throws all \$800,000 in the hole and buries it. In other words, he does *nothing* with money. Why? He is afraid of the master whom the servant describes as cruel and demanding. The problem with the third servant is that He distrusts the master and therefore does nothing. The person who lacks faith in God may be given great gifts, but apart from faith in Christ those gifts won't be used to the glory of God who gives every gift to us.

The first two use what they are given in service to their master. That's just what a servant does! In each case, the first two servants use what they have been given and return the fruits to the master. They are each greeted in the same way, **“Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.”** What struck me is “you have been faithful over a little.” The first servant was given the modern equivalent of \$4 million! But to our Master, this is “a little.” Our Master, Jesus, has all the riches of heaven at His disposal. He rules over all the earth as well. Yet a faithful servant is not one who receives the most or does the most. After all, every faithful servant (every Christian) receives the same verdict and eternal joy.

In the end it matters only that Christ is your Master (and mine) who has purchased you by His blood and, by faith, you have been His servant. He entrusted to you things that you are able to work with for his glory. If you keep your eyes on the Master, then you will remember to be his servant and to live that way.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, help me use whatever “little” you give to me in thankful service to You. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Tuesday, June 16

Read Matthew 25:31-46

Eyes of the Blessed Sheep

Did you notice what Jesus says about the eyes of the sheep in today's reading?

On the one hand, their sight couldn't be clearer. Their attentive eyes saw those who were hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, and imprisoned. They saw, and they responded with the appropriate form of service. Their eyesight was great!

Yet when King Jesus proclaims that they were serving Him all-the-while, the sheep ask the question, **"When did we see you?"**

On the one hand, the eyes of the sheep saw everything. On the other hand, the eyes of the sheep were oblivious! This isn't necessarily a problem. Jesus doesn't scold the sheep for not having "seen Him" in their service. This is simply something that is not revealed to the sheep until the day of final judgment.

Today's reading can be a great comfort for you and me because we often ask questions like *"Where is God in the midst of my work?" "What is the use of the things I am doing?" "When will this all make sense?"*

We ask these questions, but today Jesus just calls us to be sheep- to hear the voice of our Good Shepherd and follow Him, to trust in Him, and to see the needs of others and respond accordingly. We do this until that glorious day when **our eyes will see Him** and He will say, **"Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."**

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for blessing me with the assurance that in your death and resurrection I am an heir of eternal life. Open my eyes to see the needs of others so that I may bless them as I am bountifully blessed in You. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Seminary Graduate Jacob Tuma

Wednesday June 17, 2020

Matthew 26:1-13

A Beautiful Thing

Picture a truly beautiful moment. What comes to mind? Perhaps you envision a moment of compassion and kindness between two previous strangers – as one stops to help another in need. Perhaps you imagine a mother cradling her newborn in her arms. Perhaps you imagine a seasoned couple holding hands and renewing their vows after 50 years.

Perhaps it did NOT cross your mind to envision a woman dumping \$30,000 worth of ointment on the head of her unsuspecting teacher. But that's the "beautiful thing" described in our reading today. The disciples saw Jesus anointed in such an extravagant, reckless way and they are indignant. **"Why this waste? For this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor."** That is a very practical suggestion, and on multiple occasions Jesus has taught these same disciples to care for the poor.

But this time Jesus corrects them insisting, **"she has done a beautiful thing to me."** He goes on to describe that she has **"prepared me for burial."** It is doubtful that this woman knew that's what she was doing, but Jesus knew. She seems simply to have loved her Lord and acted on it.

At times, we are stingy and uncaring about those who are hurting around us. For those times, we should repent and with God's grace better love those around us. Yet it is a beautiful thing when God's people give of themselves spontaneously in praise and thanks to our Lord who has loved us extravagantly, even to death. May God grant us such grateful hearts that are moved to do such beautiful things!

Prayer: Dear Jesus, help me to give of myself extravagantly in response to Your extravagant love for me. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Thursday June 18

Matthew 26:20-35

A Tale of Two Disciples

Peter and Judas are perhaps the most famous of Jesus' disciples, for very different reasons. Peter is generally thought of as one of the most outspoken, vocal apostles. He many times serves as the spokesman for the rest of the disciples when they have a question for Jesus. And there are of course the famous stories of Peter, like his attempt to walk on water or his preaching on Pentecost. Judas is famous for a bad reason—everyone knows him as the disciple of betrayal.

But in our reading today, there's not as large of a contrast between the two. Jesus tells his disciples that one of them will betray him, and then tells Judas it is him. Later, on the Mount of Olives, Jesus tells Peter that he will deny him three times. Peter protests, and so do the other disciples. But we've heard the story before—we know that everything Jesus says will happen, and all of his disciples will abandon him.

But the key difference between Judas and Peter is what they did when they realized they had sinned. Judas despaired and took his own life. But Peter trusted in the mercies of God. He would later be forgiven by Jesus, as would the other disciples. And they would then be entrusted with sharing that message of Christ's forgiveness with the whole world. We have also strayed from God. We do it both unknowingly and knowingly. When we sin, we start to separate ourselves from God. But when we realize our sin, turn away from despair toward the mercies of God. For there is forgiveness for all who repent and believe. Be like Peter—an imperfect man, but one who realized he was imperfect and knew that he needed Jesus.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, forgive us when we sin. Bring us back to you with repentant hearts, and grant us the courage to resist temptation. In your holy name we pray, Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Alex Smith

Friday June 19, 2020

Matthew 26:36-56

Teach Us to Pray

How did you learn to pray? Maybe parents sat by your bedside and taught you, “Now I lay me down to sleep...” Perhaps simply sitting in worship week after week, you absorbed and starting saying the words of the Lord’s Prayer. It could have been around the dinner table, giving thanks for the meal and asking, “Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest.” A pastor could have taught you about the Lord’s Prayer or a Sunday School teacher gave you an example for prayer.

Jesus taught His disciples to pray. He gave them the words that we call the Lord’s Prayer, but He also gave them an example. He regularly went off by Himself to speak to His Heavenly Father, and then there is the Garden of Gethsemane. He knew the terrible road of suffering ahead and that the cross would at the end, so that **“the Scriptures might be fulfilled.”** That didn’t make the path desirable, just necessary. So He asked, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” Out of love for His Father and in love for you, Jesus would swallow the cup of sin’s punishment at the cross.

“Not as I will, but as you will.” These can be the hardest words for us to pray when we have specific things we want. In Gethsemane, Jesus prays for us, for all of the times we struggle to seek God’s will, even in our prayers. As with all things, He has lived perfectly in our place. Yet He also teaches us to pray: to make our requests to God, but to make our highest priority *God’s* desires for us – that *His* will would be done. After all, His will, more than anything, is that you would be with Him forever.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, teach me to pray that Your will would be done in my life.
Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Saturday June 20

Read [Matthew 26:57-75](#)

“Injustice”

We’ve heard a lot about “injustice” lately. First, it was the disturbing video of police holding a man down to the pavement – until he died. Then, this injustice brought up other stories of injustice – hundreds of years of slavery, police oppression of blacks, racism, the power of the “haves” over the “have-nots”. Then, this led to new injustices: burning, looting, injuries, and more killing. Here in St. Louis - a beloved, retired police chief – murdered; all arrested rioters– released. Around our country and across the world, other protests and violence targeted “systemic injustice”.

If you’ve been following along with our readings, you just read yesterday about Judas betraying his Lord to the religious police. And in today’s reading, the injustice goes on. Jesus, under restraint, is hauled before the “justice system”. We’re told, “the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death”. Finally, two false witnesses came forward that agreed on their accusation, leading Jesus to say a few words that the council jumped on: “He deserves death.”

The difference in these two pictures of injustice? Focus. In our world today, cries of “*Injustice!*” are shouted in every direction. Police, criminals, politicians, protesters, rich, and poor – everyone receives blame. At Jesus’ trial? Everyone was united – Jesus was to blame. Where are the Pharisees and Sadducees? Ordinarily fighting each other on every issue - now are arm in arm, united in accusing Jesus.

But following that midnight trial, Jesus committed the greatest injustice of all time. His accusers deserved the blame. His disciples who ran away or – worse – denied Him, deserved the blame. You and I and all sinners – deserve the blame. But Jesus took the blame for our sin – our rebellion, our deception, our lack of justice – and paid for it for us on the cross.

What were Jesus’ words that were declared worthy of death? “From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Later that day, Jesus demonstrated that power by dying for “all nations”, that “whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”. And now we love all nations while awaiting His return.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank You for paying the price for my sin. Help me love my neighbor as You have loved me. Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Pastor Jeff Nelson

Monday June 22, 2020

Matthew 27:1-10

The High Cost of Justification

Everyday we try to justify ourselves. We might do it by explaining our actions. "I know what I said was terrible, but I was tired...but I was provoked... but you started the argument." Sometimes we try to justify ourselves by seeking to atone for our actions. After a cruel word or action, we compensate with kindness that is motivated by our guilt. We want to make up for what we have done. We know that there is a price to pay for our actions.

The problem is that when we sin against another, we don't get to make things right on our own. Judas thought by returning the infamous 30 pieces of silver and declaring "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood," that he could justify himself. The chief priests and elders of Israel were unimpressed, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." Guilt-ridden, Pilate punished himself. Motivated by guilt, he tried to compensate for his actions at the price of taking his own life.

Judas's demise is a good reminder for us that we cannot justify ourselves. To be fair, there is benefit in showing our repentance through a change in actions. But we cannot pay the price for our own justification. That doesn't leave us hopeless, but our hope cannot be in ourselves or our ability to make up for our sins. We are justified, made right with God, only through the "innocent blood of Jesus." As Paul says in Romans 5, "Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." This is why the only true answer to conflict is repentance and forgiveness, not explanations, rationalizations, self-punishment or excuses. Our hope is in the forgiveness of Jesus, the only One who can pay the high price of justification.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, forgive me my sins for the sake of Your suffering, death and resurrection alone. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Tuesday, June 23

Read Matthew 27:11-32

Silence amid the Noise

Today's reading is loud.

You can hear the crowd shouting in anger before Pilate's judgement seat. There are the echoing chants: **"Let him be crucified!"** and the voices so exasperated and desperate that they cry, **"His blood be on us and on our children!"** Then there is the mocking jeer: **"Hail, King of the Jews!"**

So many voices. So much noise! But what does Jesus do?

He doesn't defend Himself. He doesn't counter deception with clarity or falsehood with truth. The only words of Jesus that Matthew records in today's reading is the **"You have said so"** of verse 12. Otherwise, He is silent.

This is not something you see every day. In our world, the name of the game seems to be: *the louder the better!* However, Jesus **"gave him (Pilate) no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed."**

Jesus was silent amid the noise, fulfilling Isaiah 53 which says, **"Like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth."** He was silent as He accepted the cross from which His blood **"speaks a better word than the blood of Abel"** (Hebrews 12:24). *He was silent because of His amazing love for you.* Jesus was silent, but what He accomplished speaks a word that rises above any "noise." No mockery of the devil or the world can take that word away. No crowd can negate it: **you have been redeemed with the blood of Jesus.**

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for Your silence before Your accusers and for willingly laying down Your life for me. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Seminary Graduate Jacob Tuma

Wednesday June 24, 2020

Matthew 27:33-56 (esp 51-56)

Filled with Awe

“When the centurion and those who were with him...saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe...”

When was the last time you were “filled with awe?” Genuine awe is a mixture of fear and wonder and respect and terror and amazement. Awe comes from recognizing that you are in presence of someone or something bigger and more powerful than you.

For the centurion, he was clearly in presence of something bigger and more powerful. The scene that inspires awe is breathtaking in speed. Jesus cries out and dies. The temple curtain is torn. The earth shakes. The rocks split. Tombs open. Bodies are raised. This is the end of the world in miniature – the earth breaking open and the people of God are raised. This is the kind of scene that would cause awe in anyone.

And what is the centurion’s response to the awe-inspiring scene? **“Truly this was the Son of God!”** What is so astounding is that the centurion would have been around a few hours earlier. As Jesus hung on the cross, others joked about this very thing! **“If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross...let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”**

And all creation answers, “This IS the Son of God.” And this is what the Son of God would do – suffer and die for His beloved creation, even as they mock Him. He will swallow every hate-filled word and action and desire. The ones thrown at Him and all the ones that stretch across time. Including all of yours. Such thoroughly undeserved mercy should fill us with awe. This is the Son of God and His love for you.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, true Son of God, I am filled with awe at Your love for sinners like me. Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Thursday June 25

Matthew 27:57-66

Conquering the Grave

In biblical times, the funerals of great leaders were monumental affairs. For example, when the Roman Emperor Augustus died, all of Rome was shut down for a week for a festival of mourning. Other prominent Roman leaders read elaborate eulogies before he was publicly cremated, placed into a magnificent tomb, and worshipped by the people.

In today's reading from Matthew, we get to see the funeral of Jesus. It's not a grand affair. Joseph of Arimathea has to go ask for Jesus' body before it is buried with those of the other criminals. He then wraps Jesus' body in basic linens and buries him, with only a couple of the women present. No senators and military leaders to read eulogies. The upper crust of society was nowhere to be found.

But Jesus' burial is important. It shows us that our own burials matter. Jesus spends time in the grave before he is resurrected, just as we will. He models how we should look at our own graves and the graves of fellow Christians: they are places of expectation. This does not diminish entirely the sadness of death, after all death is a result of sin and it is right for us to mourn. But we are not ones who mourn without hope. Because we know that at the moment we die we will be with our Lord. And we know that just as Jesus would eventually walk out of his tomb as our resurrected Lord, so we too will be raised from our graves, and our souls will be reunited with our bodies. What a glorious hope!

I've always enjoyed walking in cemeteries. They're usually quiet places to walk, and often quite beautiful, with flowers and trees growing among the rows of graves. But on the Last Day, when Jesus returns, cemeteries will have a lot of activity! All the dead will be raised, and when we are raised we will fully participate in the fulfillment of all that God has promised. All things broken and hurt by sin will be restored in glory. And we will see the face of our Lord, welcoming us into an eternity with him. He who was buried in the grave and conquered it has also conquered it for you.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, comfort me with the hope of the resurrection. Remind me that although the things of this earth are temporary, you will renew them on the Last Day. Grant us patience and faith as we await your return. In your risen name, Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Seminarian Alex Smith

Friday June 26, 2020

Matthew 28:1-10

With Fear and Great Joy

I bet you can come up with a number of times in your life when you have been genuinely afraid. It could have been a car accident or a near miss. Maybe it was completely forgetting something really important, and then realizing it later. We have all been struck with fear for a moment.

Likewise, you can probably come up with a number of times when you have had truly great joy. It could have been your wedding day or a sporting event or when you got a new job.

But how many moments are met “with fear and great joy.” I can honestly only think of two, but that might be a product of the date on the calendar. Today is Hannah’s birthday, so my thoughts immediately went to the first moment that you hold your children. There is genuine fear over the holy responsibility given by God to care for this little one. There is also incredibly great joy. Love multiplies as you marvel at the gift of God. Your whole world has changed forever.

That’s the closest I can get to the experience of the woman running away from the tomb with fear and great joy. There has been genuine terror for them in the presence of the Lord’s angel and holy mystery that Jesus was dead no longer. There is righteous fear in the presence of God who has power even over death. But “great joy” hardly describes the euphoria of the women. The friend was alive! Not just that, death is defeated! Sin has been overcome!! The whole world has changed forever!!! And the women got to carry that message to the disciples. And the disciples got to carry that message to the world! And that message lives in your heart to carry with you.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Prayer: Dear Risen Jesus, in great joy over Your defeat of sin and death, help me carry Your message to those around me. Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Happy Birthday, Hannah!

Sunday June 28

Read [Matthew 28:11-20](#)

“Commissioned”

One of the most iconic paintings from the Renaissance period is the [ceiling of the Sistine Chapel](#) in Rome, Italy. Michelangelo’s work being the crowning conclusion to a comprehensive plan, the entire chapel is filled with paintings, frescoes, and tapestries that tell the story of the Christian Church. Pope Julius II commissioned the artist to paint the ceiling, but had to encourage him to agree to the work. Michelangelo considered himself a sculptor, not a painter, but eventually agreed, throwing himself into what became “his most heroic achievement”.

Our reading for today is the conclusion of Matthew’s Gospel. Like Michelangelo’s masterpiece, the last half of chapter 28 illustrates Christ’s work on earth. The scene begins looking like defeat – only eleven of the disciples remain, and some of them still express “little faith”. But Jesus is no longer hiding His glory: **“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”** That’s like God telling Moses, **“I Am Who I Am.”** Jesus is God, and He has something to say.

God has been creating His masterpiece, and Jesus has just finished setting the stage for the next movement. As Michelangelo’s painting depicts, God created the world, He put life into man, and after man failed to follow God, Jesus became Immanuel – God With Us. Jesus paid with His life for our sinful failings, and gives us robes of righteousness to obliterate our sin on the Last Day.

So, as Michelangelo was commissioned to tell the story, Jesus commissions His Church – you and me and all believers – to continue spreading that Good News to all the world. His Gospel is for all people, and He wants each of us to pick up a brush to paint the picture for our neighbors to see. And, when we have trouble opening our mouths, or knowing what to say, Jesus just says, **“Behold”**. **“I AM with you always, to the end of the age.”**

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank You for saving us from sin. Help Your Church to make disciples of those still enslaved to sin. In Your Name, Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Pastor Jeff Nelson