

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Its that time of year when the days get shorter, the weather is unpredictable, well more unpredictable than normal, the outdoor summer festivities are packed away along with our patio furniture and lawn chairs, and we find ourselves feeling sad or in a slump for no reason at all. There are those who will begin to rummage and scavenge for heavier clothes and new cardboard or any weather proof material that can help shelter them from the winter weather and living on the streets. No matter our situations, some people suffer more serious mood changes when there's less natural sunlight but I think we all feel the effects of less natural sunlight despite the changes and challenges that confront us all. The shorter days seem to leave us down in the dumps. And then to top this all off, in last week's Gospel, as if we really need to be reminded, we hear that the sun will be darkened and then we hear Jesus telling us in a very apocalyptic tone, beware, be alert, keep awake, you don't know when the end is coming. And just like the weather that swings in a matter of hours from the 50s or 60s to the 40s and 30s, we hear today this glorious Good News, from the prophet Isaiah:

¹Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. (Isaiah 40:1-2)

and we also hear this in the very first words of Mark's Gospel:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (Mark 1:1)

This dear Church is just as Mark tells us, this is the Good News and that Good News is Jesus Christ! However, as we gather this day as the church, centered in Jesus Christ, what does this really mean for us? What is the Good News and what does that Good News mean for us?

Saint John would tell us from his Gospel that the Good News is this, "From (the fullness of Jesus Christ) we have all received, grace upon grace," (John 1:16). Simply put, I think we all know the Good News is just as Jesus tells John the Baptist's disciples in the Gospel of Matthew:

⁵the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. (Matt 11:5)

We know too that the Good News is NOT just the mercy Jesus tells John's disciples; it is also the promise of grace and salvation through the very faith God has poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Through our faith we have that promise of Good News but there is a little more to the story here...but this is where perhaps, for some of us, our faith stops or our perception of it stops here. In other words, I have faith; I'm good to go. Well...yes and no.

For some, I guess this is all that is needed. Sadly this is like giving a bunch of money to someone and telling him or her NOT to spend it or bank it, just simply hold on to it and do nothing with it.

I think it is safe for me to say that we are all aware of the fact that every Advent Season comes with the voice of John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness. We don't get to Christmas without going through John the Baptist. And along with all the wonderful references to the Good News we also hear John saying to us once again today, 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make

his paths straight," (Mark 1:3). John is not telling us to sit on our hands or our money, nor our faith...John is basically saying to us once again as we hear John doing every year around this time, do something with your faith.

While we know as Lutherans that we are justified by grace through faith, some simply take this to mean that, this is all that is needed, or all I must do. As I said, yes and no...there is more to faith than just believing.

Some Christians who sit quietly in this seat of justification through faith use their faith to create their own Jesus. This Jesus created is the projection of one's own likes and dislikes of scripture, or one's own perspective and understanding of scripture. And in that created Jesus, they can tell you just how and why Jesus does what he does. The reality of that type of Jesus is that he only functions to the likes and dislikes of his creator...that person who assumes to be God. Again, showing us our original sin of wanting to be God or at the very least have all the wisdom of God. Unfortunately, the gods and the Jesuses we create are centered in our perspective rather than an omniscience of God's perspective.

Our faith calls us into something much more than ourselves...it calls us to see beyond ourselves and our own perspectives...to see past our worlds, our worlds being, our likes and dislikes, our judgments, and prejudices. Simply put, our faith calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves...rather to see Jesus as he truly is...that other person.

Saint Paul's letter to the church in Rome tells us that our faith requires much more than just sitting on it quietly and selfishly. St Paul writes:

¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect. ³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. (Romans 12:1-5)

By the very nature of the faith we confess, we are called into the Body of Christ...now what? What do we do now as the Body of Christ? You may find yourself thinking, I don't know about all that other stuff pastor, all I have to do is believe...right? Well, once again, yes and no.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes this comment concerning statements regarding the Body of Christ found throughout the New Testament. In his book *Ethics*, an unfinished book that was edited and published after his death Bonhoeffer writes this,

It is implicit in the New Testament statement concerning the incarnation of God in Christ that all men and women are taken up, enclosed and borne within the body of Christ and that this is just what the congregation of the faithful are to make known to the world by their words and their lives. What is intended here is...the summoning of the world into fellowship of this body of Christ, to which in truth it already belongs.

We are anointed, we are Baptized and we are to bring the Good News for the oppressed and the broken hearted as the Prophet Isaiah will remind us next week in our Old Testament reading. However, we do NOT do this in words or speech, but in truth and in action. Bringing the Good News as Isaiah says requires us to BE the Body of the Good News and we are to BE the essence of that Good News.

We are the grace and the mercy for the world if we are the body we confess to be. Through our Baptism we are not privileged, nor are we appointed judge, jury, and executioner...we are NOT empowered to overthrow governments, nor are we given dominion over all areas of American society. We are however, called to simply love our neighbor and treat others with dignity and respect to be graceful and merciful in a culture that divides and polarizes. Our faith calls for us to be the voice and the actions of the body of grace and mercy amidst the hateful rhetoric that only encourages us to "hate" the enemy, and the enemy being any who would see things differently or simply disagree with "ME."

This Season of Advent begins a new liturgical year that will find us throughout the year in the Gospel of Mark. This is the Gospel that does not begin with a birth narrative of Jesus, rather it begins with the Baptism of Jesus. One of my favorite passages from Luther is in our Large Catechism that addresses our anointing or our Baptism:

Thus, we must regard baptism and put it to use in such a way that we may draw strength and comfort from it when our sins or conscience oppress us, and say: "But I am baptized! And if I have been baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body."

No greater jewel, therefore, can adorn our body and soul than baptism, for through it we become completely holy and blessed, which no other kind of life and no work on earth can acquire.¹

This jewel is given...and given freely at the cost of Jesus Christ.

Our very souls and our bodies have been adorned with the jewel of Baptism, and each soul sitting here today is a member of the Body of Jesus Christ. If we feel the grace, the mercy, and the comfort we have received through faith then how can we be anything less than what we have received from Christ as we go from here? This jewel we are given is presented out there through our actions of truth and grace, it is the body seen out there, it is what prepares the way of the Lord out there in the wilderness of our culture today...we are the manifestation of the grace and mercy for this fallen world. His grace, his mercy, and his comfort is NOT exclusive to us, it is what prepares the way for others to be part of that body which we are Baptized into and an active part of.

The beginning of the Good News is Jesus Christ; the continuation of that Good News is the everlasting Body of Jesus Christ, you, me, and them. As we go from here today, we go in the light of the Good News...that we have been forgiven our iniquity and that Jesus Christ will blot out all our sins...this is the body we are all a member of and what we present to others...out there. As we go from here, I pray us to please keep St. John's words in our hearts:

¹ Kolb, Robert ; Wengert, Timothy J. ; Arand, Charles P.: *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000, The Large Catechism, Fourth Part: Concerning Baptism, page 462, par 44-46

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹ God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. ¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. (1 John 4:7-13)

By the first two Advent candles, lit today, we are reminded that we are sent in the hope and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ...and we go in the light of that hope and peace as the body of Christ to be the love for this world that prepares the way of the Lord.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.