

Advent II *Populus Zion* December 4, 2016

(The Latin title for each Sunday is derived from the first words of the Introit for the day.)

Reading Luther's words on the texts this day requires that one keeps in mind a bit of Luther's own take on his own times. He was a man of his time and the time was gripped by a sense of the impending end of the world. What one finds so startling is that many of the things he observes in the 16th century are just as pervasive in the first decades of the 21st century. What would he say about the fashionistas, gourmands and beer snobs who occupy our pews today? Here is what Luther says in his comments on the Gospel reading appointed for today:

Luther

5. I will not force or press anyone to believe as I do; neither will I permit anyone to deny me the right to believe that the Last Day is not far away. Just these signs and words of Christ move me [to that belief]. For the history of the centuries that have passed since the birth of Christ nowhere reveals conditions like those of the present. There has never been such building and planting in the world. Such dainty and varied eating and drinking has not been as common as it now is. Clothing has become so costly that it cannot become more so. Who has ever heard of such commerce as now encircles the world and swallows the world? There arise and have arisen all kinds of art, painting, embroidery, and engraving, which has not been equaled since Christ's birth.

6. In addition, there are such keenly intelligent people who let nothing be hidden, so that now a boy of twenty knows more than twenty doctors formerly knew. There is such a knowledge of languages and all kinds of wisdom that, it must be confessed, the world has reached such great heights in the things that pertain to the body – or, as Christ calls them, “the cares of this life”; eating, drinking, building, planting, buying, selling, keeping wife and child – that everyone must see and say either ruin or a change must come. It is not easy to think of either improvement or ruin. Dawn breaks and there is a new day, whatever it may be; it cannot be otherwise. There was never such wit, reason, and understanding among Christians in temporal and bodily things as now – to say nothing of the new interventions, such as printing, firearms, and other implements of war.

7. Moreover, not only have such great strides been made in worldly commerce but also in spiritual matters. There has never been greater error, sin, and falsehood on earth from the beginning as there has been in the last century. The Gospel was publicly condemned at Constance, the pope's lies were adopted as law in all the world, and he now flays to the bone the whole world. The sacrifice of the Mass is celebrated many hundred thousand times a day in the world; no sin may equal that. By confession, sacrament, indulgence, and laws, countless souls are driven to hell, so that it seems God has given the whole world over to the devil. In short, it is impossible that there should be greater lies, more heinous error, more dreadful blindness, and more obdurate blasphemy than have ruled in Christendom through the bishops,

monasteries, and universities. As a result, Aristotle, a dead, blind heathen, taught ruled Christians more than does Christ.

(Luther's Works Vol. 75. CPH. Pp. 92-3.)

Collect of the Day

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your only-begotten Son, that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds, through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Like many of these Collects, it is often much easier if I don't think too much about them. This one has always disturbed me. I don't know about you, but when my heart is stirred up, that is usually not one of my better days. That is usually a day when I am frightened, confused, challenged, or even hurt. What are we praying for here? A heart that is stirred up is beating fast. Those who study such things tell us that our stress system kicks in and we are essentially still running from some wild beast like our parents long ago may have had to run. Stress is not a good thing for most us.

Is the word "heart" here really better understood as "life?" Are we praying that God stirs up our life? Does that mean we are no longer complacent and tolerant of the sin in our lives? Does that mean we are no longer willing to say "good enough" about a situation that is just not good enough for God? How easy it is for us to accept our flaws and our pet sins. Do we pray here that we should be stirred up out that complacency.

Of course there are other ways that a heart gets stirred up, aren't there? My heart can race and flutter with love as well. Does your heart still "flip" when you see your bride? Is this the sort of stirring up that the prayer has in mind? Is that just another form of stress? For the chronically shy, love can be a pretty painful experience, if Garrison Keillor is to be believed.

Does this stirring mean that we are able to see/feel something that a complacent heart simply doesn't see/feel? The opposite of love is not hate, but apathy. We almost have to love the person we hate, or at least care about them and what they do. The real opposite of "I love you" is always, "I don't care."

Is a stirred up heart more open to something? Is it out of the "rut" of normal experience and suddenly able to experience and perceive the world differently? Is this a prayer really to wake up from complacency so that we are ready to receive this coming king? Do we need to be shaken up/woken up?

We pray for our hearts to be stirred up to make ready the way of God's only Son. The first Christians were called "followers of the Way" before the folks in Antioch coined the term "Christian." Of course that way has already been blazed when he died, and the preparation for the judgment all happened when our sins were paid for. How do we make ready for him? Why does that take a stirred up heart? The result of the prayer is most interesting. We make ready so that by His coming we may be enabled to serve God with a pure mind. I thought we were talking

about hearts here? Somehow the authors of the prayer have connected heart and mind and noticed that the heart stirred up and prepared for the coming of Christ renders the mind pure. How does that happen and what does it look and feel like when it does? If someone were to ask me, what description of that would I give? I usually think of a heart that is pure and mind that is stirred up, but that is simply my modern way of thinking asserting itself, imagining that my heart somehow obeys the master which is my mind. But that is just bad psychology which has been appropriated by the world around us and too often by us. Our minds are not the masters here, often it is our hearts and what is really odd, often it is whom we serve and that very service which is the determining factor of both our minds and our hearts. We are acculturated by what we do much more than what we feel or think. If you want to read something along these lines, I recommend Augustine's "Confessions." If you would like a more modern take on this, I commend to you the works of James K. A. Smith, a professor of philosophy and religion at Calvin College in Michigan. His latest is "You Are What You Love" and I recommend it.

Another way to phrase this is that the way/path which is ready for Jesus is an attitude of the heart. This Christ – way is shaped by him. He treated all the same, rich and poor, sinner and church goer, they were all loved by him and all ate together when he fed the multitudes. His way was marked by gracious love for all in meeting their needs. The early Christians who followed the Way practiced radical hospitality, a spirit filled prayer life which was marked by an eager expectation for Jesus to come today. Did they see every guest as a foretaste of Christ?

Some years ago when we thought about this prayer we remembered an incident in which one of us had a near accident. A fellow driver ran a red light and nearly hit this fellow at an intersection. The following intersections were surely approached with a great deal of caution all the way home. We get a little complacent when we have gone through an intersection 1000 times without an incident. But after our heart has been stirred up by a near miss, we find our senses and minds are much more focused than they were before.

But we still need to ask what is meant by making ready the way of Jesus? How does one prepare for that day? Is it the last day or is it every day? That is a false choice. We have often said in these little essays that the person prepared is the one who is about their Christian duty when Jesus arrives. Jesus is now and not yet here. Advent focuses us on the 'not yet' of Jesus, that we cannot see him with our physical eyes, but it does not forget the actuality of his presence right now. He has arrived and he will arrive. Thus, it is not the extraordinary we are called to be, but the loving, caring and Christian parents of our children, spouse, citizen, church member, etc. That is the person who is prepared for the last day, the person who is living Christ now.

Yet, there is also an extra-ordinary call extended to the Christian. The fallen world is fundamentally at odds with this returning Lord. At times we are called upon to struggle against it, both as it manifests within our own lives through repentance and as it manifests in the world around us. Can we really sit idly by while people starve and die? Can we cluck our tongues at the 12 million who died in the Nazi holocaust and be silent about the 40+ million children who have been legally aborted since Roe V. Wade? That example is just too easy. Perhaps closer to

home, do we actually engage as congregations in the community around us? Do we corporately do anything to try to make our public schools better? Do we fight the problems that are in our own neighborhoods? Do we befriend the little, least, and lost in our neighborhood? Do we have a care for the folks who are in critical need? Are there lonely people in the nursing home down the street while our congregational fellowship is rich? Do our hearts need to be stirred up so we can serve God with minds focused on his kingdom and His goals? He fed the hungry, he healed the sick, he comforted the grieving and the sinners regardless of their denominational affiliation or even if they had ever gone to Church. Are we called upon to a corporate confession of our self-centeredness? Do we pray here for this sort of stirring? Is this the sort of stirring that our congregations need? What if it is?

I think that as I consider my own ministry among the people of God, we too often have thought about these texts in terms of the individual. The scholarly term for that is “existentially” but too often that just means self-centered. Is it time to ask how we corporately, congregationally repent? My prior parish shared a long fence with a really troubled middle school. I don’t know that the students of that school were especially glad to have us there. I think for most of them, we were simply another building next to the one they called “school” and hated with a passion. How could we have supported the teachers, the students, the parents of that school? How could we have made a difference for them, instead of wondering how we were going to continue the ministry which struggled to attract folks in that town?

Readings

Malachi 4:1-6

“For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. ² But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. ³ And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts.

⁴ “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.

⁵ “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶ And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

Luther did not comment on the OT lesson in his Postil notes because he did not have an OT lesson Sunday. He preached on the OT a great deal, but that is because the local church had a daily Matins and Vespers service in which the practice was to read and preach on Biblical books read in series. He also commenting on various OT texts in his lectures as a professor of Old

Testament at Wittenberg U. Here are a few thoughts from Dr. Luther on Malachi 4 from his lectures on the Minor Prophets.

Luther

1. *For behold the day will come.* All this is being said about Christ. Those who fear God are comforting each other and are saying these things to each other. At the time when they trust in His Word, the righteous certainly have everything opposing them. On the other hand, the wicked have everything going well for them. This is not the way it will always be for both groups, but only until the hour came, etc. “The day will come,” namely, the day of Christ’s kingdom.

2. *And [the Sun of righteousness] will rise for you who fear.* In the Mosaic kingdom there is pure darkness. All things are hidden in mystery and are confused. Then the wicked will be separated from the righteous by something shining – obviously, by the open truth of God through the Gospel of Christ. Here you see the kingdom of Christ again described in such a way that it is the ministry of the Word. He is saying: “Indeed, a new Sun will shine, and it is not that sun which all animals see. It is the Sun of righteousness, who justifies, who sends out the sort of rays that make men righteous and free from their sins, who drives out every harmful attitude of fleshly lust. Those rays are the Word of the Gospel, which penetrates hearts, and is seen as that Sun only by the eyes of the heart, that is, by faith.

With healing in His wings. Here you clearly see that we cannot explain this as the last Day, when judgment will come. But now there will be salvation and protection under the shadow of Christ. Such, then, is the rule of Christ that He Himself is the Mediator and Protector, the way a hen protects her chicks from the hawk. Therefore, let everyone who wants to be safe from the wrath and judgment of God seek refuge under the wings of Christ. This is what the Law urges. Under the Law there is weakness and condemnation; under the wings of Christ, under the Gospel, there is strength and salvation. The Sun rises when the Gospel is preached. One hides under the wings when he believes. Therefore, although you may be a sinner, yet you will be safe when you flee for refuge under His wings. You will not fear death. The lust of the flesh will not overpower you.

You shall go forth like calves leaping from the stall. Here is the fruit of faith and of the kingdom of Christ, a happy conscience, a public confession of faith, thanksgiving, joy in affliction, preaching and the conversion of others to salvation.

Leaping. More accurately: “You shall be poured out, you shall be increased.” This is a property of joy. Sadness, on the other hand, confines. The Christian believes that the world is his. He goes out into the open. He does not head for the corners.

(Luther’s Works Vol. CPH. Pp. 417-8.)

We thought it interesting that Luther wants to treat this text as a text which is talking about right now. The righteous reign of Christ through Word and Sacrament means that he does rise with healing in his wings and we take refuge there from the fear of sin and the wrath of God. This is not talking about the end, but the now. Of course we can also talk about this as both now and future. But the preacher may want to speak of the Christian who has partaken of the sacrament, heard the absolution, and is now released from the burden of sin and like a calf from the stall is leaping about. Of course, if you have a great number of octogenarians in your parish such leaping may be somewhat muted.

We treated this text in the three year cycle in Series C, Proper 28, which falls at the end of the year, just prior to this Sunday. Those notes are edited and reprinted here.

Children's lessons on the end of the world are always a somewhat dangerous thing. Could we do a children's lesson on this? Do we have a sack full of cookies in our hand when we come before the kids? We would then ask why we light an oven. We do it because we want to bake something. We often think only of the destruction that is the end of the world, but God wants us to see past that heat and flame. Ovens are usually lit because we want something sweet and good to come out of it, perhaps a cookie, perhaps a loaf of bread. Is that another way to cast Malachi's words here? Is this oven lit for our benefit? That seems rather callous when we think of the arrogant and evildoers, but the stubble which burns in the oven is baking bread. The end of the world is not only something to be afraid of. Malachi seems to urge us who believe to look forward to it. Does that work?

This is one of those passages that at first seem to suggest that the end is a time of God's wrath against all the people. But look at verse 2. That is Malachi's audience. They go out of the stalls leaping like a calf. If you have never seen this, it is quite dramatic. We used to have a few calves when I was a child and they would be kept in stalls through the winter. When spring came and we let them out, they would go jumping around the pasture. In fact, they would be something of a danger to themselves, capable of injuring themselves in their exuberance. It was fun to watch them, but one needed to watch them because they could hurt themselves too.

Near Keene, NH Steve Vekasy tells us that a local dairy actually publicizes the release of their heifers in the spring. You can see a video of this on the web here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TellanT_AGU

How could we update this image of the calf? Could we talk about the Cubs fans who have finally won the World Series? We have all seen the photos of the chaos which ensued. I might simply point out that the good people of Kansas City were far more sedate in their celebration last year, but that could reveal far more about my baseball loyalties than anything else. Not many of us are around calves in the spring. Could we talk about an exuberant puppy/dog? The preacher might want to ask where we see uncontrolled joy and happiness in our lives and experiences.

In verse three he explains that joy. The wicked will be trodden under our feet like ashes. Those who look so strong as they oppress us today will not be so strong then. Of course the problem

with all this is that we are not really being oppressed by such an enemy today, at least not obviously. We sit in relative freedom in our churches. No one is telling us to stop. We do not have soldiers arresting our pastors and no members of our congregations languish in jail or face execution for what we believe. At most our experience of persecution is the eye-rolling of our teenage children and the fact that this culture simply ignores us. That may change and some think it is changing right now with some of the actions taken by the government. But that is still a matter open to some debate and not a clear preachable idea.

But just because we are in a comfortable enough spot that we might argue about whether we are persecuted or not does not mean we do not have an enemy. It means he is working far more subtly, and perhaps more like it was in the time of Malachi. Malachi may not have actually lived at a time of violent persecution, but a much more subtle and acidic attack on the faith of his people. Is our oppression just as real and more deadly for its subtlety? How does it get expressed? Is it a culture that has made it gauche to speak of God at the Christmas party? If you really want to be left alone at that Christmas party, forget using big words like “penultimate.” You can just about guarantee isolation if you simply start talking about the one who was born in that manger, the Christ whose name is at the heart of this coming holiday, unless your entity has succumbed to political correctness and called it a “Winter Holiday.” Even at the church Christmas party you might find folks rolling their eyes. “Do we always have to bring that up?”

Is our enemy the oppression of a media driven culture that does not persecute us as much as it simply ignores us. When I was a child the tallest structures in town were the steeples, the water tower and the grain elevator. That had some tremendous implications for preaching sacramental theology. Here was cross, water and bread in everyone’s view. As we look out over our own landscape today, does Christianity even register a blip on the radar of most people? Have our steeples disappeared from the skyline in a sense? Has it been replaced by the towers of banks and the high rise apartments of the self-absorbed? Does Christianity ever even show up in the films and television shows we watch, the books we read, or the papers to which we subscribe? If it does are we glad for the portrayal? I am not sure that I can find it very often, or if I do it is a nicely contained little bit in the living section of the Saturday paper, handily circumscribed within its boundary. When does the word have its free course? When is it allowed to challenge my life? When do I stand shivering before it?

In the last verse we get this enigmatic statement about turning members of families back to each other. Does this last verse mean a restoration of basic relationships? Is it about the family that prays together stays together? Is this descendants connected with ancestors (All Saints sort of thing)? Is this Malachi’s concern? Does the preacher do well to talk family here as though the end of family is the end of the world? Arguably the world will be in serious distress if family dissolves.

The result of this is even odder. Is Malachi suggesting that God won’t destroy this world? Is this simply God reserving the creator’s right? He made it, he can destroy it. These are the very last words in the Christian OT. But interestingly it is not the last word in the Jewish ordering of the

OT. The last book in the Jewish OT is Chronicles which ends with the people of God in Exile. The Christian ends his OT looking for this messiah, this messenger, this one who is to come. The Jewish reader ends his text with the people in an exile they deserved, finding their salvation in the community of God's exiled people.

Psalm 50:1-15

- ¹ The Mighty One, God the LORD,
speaks and summons the earth
from the rising of the sun to its setting.
- ² Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty,
God shines forth.
- ³ Our God comes; he does not keep silence;
before him is a devouring fire,
around him a mighty tempest.
- ⁴ He calls to the heavens above
and to the earth, that he may judge his people:
- ⁵ "Gather to me my faithful ones,
who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!"
- ⁶ The heavens declare his righteousness,
for God himself is judge! Selah
- ⁷ "Hear, O my people, and I will speak;
O Israel, I will testify against you.
I am God, your God.
- ⁸ Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you;
your burnt offerings are continually before me.
- ⁹ I will not accept a bull from your house
or goats from your folds.
- ¹⁰ For every beast of the forest is mine,
the cattle on a thousand hills.
- ¹¹ I know all the birds of the hills,
and all that moves in the field is mine.
- ¹² "If I were hungry, I would not tell you,
for the world and its fullness are mine.
- ¹³ Do I eat the flesh of bulls
or drink the blood of goats?
- ¹⁴ Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving,
and perform your vows to the Most High,

¹⁵ and call upon me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.”

Romans 15:4-13

⁴For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. ⁵May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, ⁶that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

⁸For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

“Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles,
and sing to your name.”

¹⁰And again it is said,

“Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.”

¹¹And again,

“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and let all the peoples extol him.”

¹²And again Isaiah says,

“The root of Jesse will come,
even he who arises to rule the Gentiles;
in him will the Gentiles hope.”

¹³May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

Luther

1. It is very likely that whoever cut out this Epistle reading did not understand much about Paul, for he begins too high and too low. The part, which says, “Whatever was written,” etc. [Rom. 15:4], belongs to the previous text. It should have begun with the words “may the God of endurance,” etc. [Rom 15:5].

(PB says: Having myself often made the same sort of comments about the editors of the pericope system, I am glad to see that I am in such good company as Dr. Luther!)

4. Paul here teaches us to have patience and to bear with the weak, and not to act so harshly toward them, but rather to think for a while as they think, become weak with them, and not cause discord in faith over eating and drinking or any other temporal thing, until they grow stronger in faith and recognize their freedom.

Nevertheless, the apostle makes a distinction in this matter and teaches those [Romans] that two kinds of people are to be identified in this matter. Some are weak in faith, of whom we have spoken, of whom alone St. Paul is here speaking. These are good, godly, simple people, who would like to do better if they knew how or could; they are not stubborn in their minds; they are lacking in nothing more than that their conscience and faith are too weak. They cannot get out of the established teaching and customs.

The others are stubborn and are not satisfied to lead such a life themselves, but they urge, teach, and lead others also into it. They assert that this is right and must be so, and do not want to hear the real truth of Christian freedom but strive against it. These are the ones who cause the others be weak. With their teaching they damage the weak consciences and ensnare them into thinking that it has to be that way. They desire to bring the simple consciences under them and make them obedient. St. Paul does not speak about them here, but elsewhere he teaches diligently to oppose them and always do the opposite (Titus 1:13-16).¹

5. Therefore, in this matter there is no better rule than love, and you must treat these two kinds of people the same way you would treat wolves and sheep. If the wolf has bitten the sheep almost to the point of death, and you were to proceed with rage against the sheep, declaring it wrong for the sheep to have wounds, that is should be healthy; and you were to compel it forcefully to follow the other healthy sheep to the pasture and to the fold, giving it no special care – who would not say that you were out of your mind? The sheep might well say: “Certainly it is wrong me to be wounded, and I should definitely be healthy, but be angry at the one who did this, and help me to get healthy.”

See these Romans should also do this and earnestly oppose the teachers and wolves. But they are to accept the weak consciences damaged by such teachings, not impel or ruin them, but gradually heal them, and eventually drive out that teaching. Meanwhile, they are to let them be and think with them what they think and not confuse them. (Luther goes into a lengthy excursus into the 16th century situation with Papal demands for externals and how this has

¹ PB – The person who is forcing the weak, simple Christians into human made regulation may have been on Luther’s mind throughout the writing and editing of these Postils. He speaks of the Roman Catholic traditions in the section which follows, but he may also have had some on the other end of the spectrum in mind. Initially he was writing this material while in the Wartburg in 1521-2. At the same time Karlstadt was forcing the citizens of Wittenberg to follow his new human regulations. (See the *Invocavit Sermons* he preached upon his return.) But in his multiple re-edits and re-publication of this material he would continue to struggle against those inside the reforming movement who sought to replace Catholic rules with Protestant rules. Luther always put both into one basket. (See *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, LW 40.)

damaged the people. He casts the Catholic hierarchy as raging and blubbering at the work of Luther and others to bring about a true Christian freedom.)

10. Therefore, in this whole matter the Christian must be aware of these two kinds of people. The weak are to be instructed patiently in a friendly way. But the raging and blubbering are to be earnestly driven out. We should do and teach everything that hurts and is against them, leave alone and be silent about everything that is agreeable to them, and honor their excommunication with a large donkey apple. Christian love teaches all of this beautifully; each one would want to be treated in this same way. There is not one of us who, when he has erred because of this weakness of conscience, does not want people to give him time and not suddenly tear him down, but rather to be instructed in a friendly way, to be shown patience for a while so he may struggle against the wolves. Therefore, Christ treats us that way and wants each to treat the other the same way.

(Luther's Works Vol. 75. CPH. Pp. 64-68)

We thought Luther's comments were really helpful here. Paul is asserting that the most important thing of all is that Jesus died for this person and rose again. That reality changes everything. We like to think that the old realities of race, history, and religion are so important. But Luther picks up on the fact that this is not so. He urges us to a humble look at the other person, taking up a weakness or problem rather than condemning him for it. Is there a sermon there for us? How hard is it for the folks at the university in Ohio today to say that about the gunman or his community? How hard is it to say about the homeless who sleep on the front steps of our church or the neighbor who really bothers us? How hard is it to say about the person who voted for the other candidate or the person who holds religious or political views that are very different from our own? Luther offers us very wise words – are they wisdom for our age too? We thought so.

(Phil's notes from the three year series which has the same epistle reading:) This section in Romans is quite appropriate for the day. It revels in the now and the not yet of our existence. Paul wrote these words to a community he never visited. He wants them to support him on a missionary journey to Spain, but before he can ask them to be his sending congregation he needs to let them know what he teaches. Perhaps there is some misinformation out there or perhaps this is best understood as the case narrative for a grant request. In any event, Paul speaks of some things generally in this last section of Romans, not about the congregation specifically but about all congregations. He is writing these words as he sails for Jerusalem with the offering for the saints there at the end of his third missionary journey. He has just toured through Galatia, Corinth, Ephesus, and the rest of his congregations and undoubtedly seen many problems similar to what he found in Corinth. As a case study for what his Gospel means, he chooses to discuss the new relationship that now obtains between the Jew and the Gentile.

These words are the conclusion of that lengthy section which really began several chapters before (Rom. 9.) Paul prays that they would sing together with one voice in praise of the God who has saved them all. It is ordained in Scripture and Paul earnestly prays for it. It is a real and attainable goal for them; indeed most of the churches are filled with Gentile Christians who are not being exhorted to follow Jewish ceremonial laws.

And then the last verse is really sweet: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope.” You could do a whole sermon just on that one little verse and it would be a great Advent sermon for this second Sunday of Advent. This Hope is integral to the whole season. The God of hope fills us with joy and peace as we wait on the Lord. That waiting is always abounding in Hope, we are looking for good things to come, perhaps unrecognizable as Isaiah sees it, but good things to come. We hope for it! We probably need to do a little education on the word hope here. The Greek “elpis” was much stronger than many use the word today. “I hope my friend comes to see me today” almost implies an expectation that he won’t. In Greek, the word is much stronger than that. Hope implies that you really expect this to happen, it just hasn’t yet. I rather like to think of it as working all week, and, upon the promise of the employer, “hoping” that he will pay you. We would much more likely use the word “expect” for that sort of situation. However, “may the God of Expectation fill you with all expectation” just doesn’t cut it for Sunday morning reading, does it?

My friend Herb Hoefler talks about the Christians in India, he says that you can tell that they have hope. You can see in them as walk down the street, they simply smile, walk with confidence, they have hope. What does hope do for us that Paul wants us to be filled with it? Despair shuts the door, and hope is the window that lets the light into our lives. Hope, while not tangible, is potent. They cannot get a grasp on it and rip it from us, but it frustrates our enemies no end.

Faith hopes. It is one of the things that faith does. Negro spirituals were written by folks who had nothing, were being crushed under their burdens, and they had hope. The last verse of our reading tells us that the God of hope fills us with joy and peace in believing, so that in the power of the Holy Spirit we abound in hope. The joy and the peace lead us right back to the hope, our God is a God of hope. Hope trumps joy and peace, it gives them to us, but even when joy and peace are impossible, or seemingly impossible, hope abides. It is the bedrock thing that faith, the relationship we have with God, does. Paul speaks about perseverance/endurance earlier in this passage. The hopeful are indomitable. Torturers and oppressors are always seeking to crush a person’s hope. When they have done that, they have won, but it is exceedingly hard to do, and the smallest glimmer of contrary news will bring hope roaring right back. Whether the oppressor is cancer or some jailer, hope is really resilient.

We might also be attracted to the “welcome one another” exhortation in vs. 8 and the exhortation to love one another and get along with each other. This seems to be picking up on the prayer of the day that our stirred up hearts would make ready the way of Christ. This could be a very practical sermon. But in order for this to work, we need to proclaim the one who gives the hope which is the engine that drives that radically re-imagined life that Paul sees here. He

prays in the last verse that the God of encouragement would give them his gifts in order to overflow their hearts/lives with hope. If we just proclaim the way of the new life without proclaiming that gift of God, then we are no different than any moralizing religion. All religions encourage me to live a better life. But Christ gives me something which enables me to live that life.

Sermon Idea on Epistle Lesson: Living Advent (That the Holy Spirit would lead the hearer to live Advent as God's hope-filled, loving person.)

This sermon wants to combine the two themes of Luther's notes about love and my own observations about hope. The Lord through the texts today calls us to live Advent lives which find expression in love and which are lived out of the fervent expectation of Christ fulfilling his promises made to us.

This sermon will also seek to baptize some of the things which are happening in the world around us which are good and which deserve to be seen as the presence of Christ sacramentally working among us, including the loving life of the hearer. The hearer will be exhorted to look for and find the promise making and keeping Christ in the everyday and very human experience of being a Christian in this time. Seeing Him now and connecting that perceived Christ to the second coming of Christ will be critical to the success of this message as it calls the hearer to a life of Advent love and hope.

The Christian is called to faithful (trusting) hope and love. Jesus has made some amazing promises to us and these stand at the heart of this message. He has promised to be present in our lives, always (Matthew 28). He has promised that our words of forgiveness resound in heaven (John 20, Matthew 18). He has promised that we are always in his strong, loving hands (John 14-16). He has promised to come again to rescue us from all our enemies (John 14:1-6). Hence we have the hopeful expectation of Christ of which Paul writes today. Jesus is faithful; he keeps his promises. We see him in all sorts of things today as Christians and the world around us at work. Primarily that picture of Christ is found in expressions of his love, both in our lives and in the world around us.

1. We forgive one another with Christ's love. Christ is often most visible inside the community of faith as we bear with one another, relieve the neighbor's burdens and lovingly care for each other.
2. Christ has not abandoned to poor. We see it in the bell-ringers and others who work in this season to feed the hungry and share the abundance with the needy. We may not theologially always agree with all of them, but so what!? God is feeding hungry people. That is good. Luther would say God could even use the Turk to achieve his First Article ends. God works through the structures of government as well to take care of many hungry and needy folks. Rejoice in that! He is feeding far more than the 5,000 of the loaves and fishes account in the Gospels.

3. There is joy despite the world. Yes, some of this is crass commercialism which is tied to the bottom line of mercantile interests, but that is not all there is. It is good that people are just happy.
4. We see people helping one another. Sometimes we see people who are themselves suffering doing profound acts of mercy and kindness. Just stopping by and checking on a neighbor down the hall in the nursing home is little picture of Jesus. These are not all grand gestures.
5. Could we point to the hospitals and nursing homes where people are being cared for? This looks a lot like Jesus who healed and helped the downtrodden. Many of those places have a religious name attached to them, even if they are no longer owned by a church. But is Jesus healing people there?

This vision of the Christ who is in the world today is then wedded to the expectation of the Christ to come. Nothing in the visions we see out there today is perfect. The good is never enough. There are too many hungry, needy people. Too often the fellowship is flawed, and too often the joy is overwhelmed by the sorrow. Doctors never work themselves out of a job. Which is why the other promise of Christ is so important. The vision we have of Christ is hardly the end of the story. The end, the final chapter, the conclusion of the story of this creation involves Jesus asserting his righteous reign for all to see. That serves to enlarge and recast our little acts of love, our humble deeds of righteousness, and the goodness which we see in the world around us. It is not the bleak and failing goodness of a world which is descending into darkness but the brilliant foretaste of Christ's glory to come.

The Advent life of prayer, generosity, forgiveness, and compassion to which we are all called in this season is nothing less than the opening blasts of Christ's eternal kingdom, a kingdom which advances, though mysteriously and often out of sight, through one darkened corner of the world at a time. On the last day it will be brilliant and beautiful and all will see it. We will all know that what we did in his love now was and is part of that kingdom.

Luke 21:25-36

²⁵ “And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, ²⁶ people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

²⁹ And he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. ³⁰ As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. ³¹ So also, when you

see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³⁴ “But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. ³⁵ For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

What shall we do with verse 32? What does it mean that this generation will not pass away? Clearly we are 2000 years out from Jesus speaking these words, the generation which heard them have long since died. But most of them were dying when Luke wrote this too. It is true that not all of them had yet died, but most of them had. What are we to make of this passage?

Several answers might be made to the Christian who wonders about this.

- 1. Read this historically: We are talking about the generation of those who witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, both in the literal and the metaphorical sense (Jesus body as the true temple.)*
- 2. Read this mystically: that as long as Luke is read there is always a generation of people who are believing and holding to this word, hence the generation of hearers has not passed away because we just heard this.*
- 3. Read this missiologically: The generation is really the folks who are of “this generation” as he speaks in other places about folks who are not of the Church. These are the folks who are not of the Christian body. Is Jesus speaking of the reality that Christianity will always have someone to talk to about Jesus.*

Luther

37. (Commenting on vs. 28.) Here you may say, Who can life up his head in the face of such terrible wrath and judgment? If the whole world is terrified at that day, and hangs its head and looks down on out of terror and fear, how are we to life up our heads and raise them, which without a doubt means joy and longing? Answer: All of this is spoken only to Christians who are truly Christians, and not to heathen and Jews. But true Christians suffocate in great temptations and persecutions from sin and all kinds of evil, so that this life becomes bitter and loathsome to them. Therefore, they wait and long and pray for redemption from sin and all evil as we also pray in the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy kingdom come” and “Deliver us from evil.” If we are true Christians, we will earnestly and heartily pray this prayer. But if we do not pray heartily and earnestly, we are not yet true Christians.

38. If we pray correctly, then we must regard these signs, however terrible they are, with joy and longing, as Christ exhorts: “When these things begin to take place, look up.” He does not

say, “Be filled with fear or hang your heads,” for what we have prayed for so earnestly is coming. If we earnestly want to be freed from sin, death, and hell, we must desire and love this coming.

St Paul also says, “He will give the crown of righteousness no only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing” (II Timothy 4:8). What will He give to those who hate and dread it? Without doubt, [He will give] hell as to His enemies. Again: “We should wait for the coming of the glory of our great God” (Titus 2:13). Again: “Be like people who are waiting for the lord, when he comes home from the wedding feast” (Luke 12:36).

39. But what do those do who are filled with fear and do not want Him to come when they pray: “Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done, deliver us from evil”? Do they not stand in the presence of God and brazenly tell Him lies against themselves? Do they not strive against the will of God, who wants to have this day for the redemption of His saints? Therefore, we should be careful not to hate or dread that day. Such dread is a bad sign and belongs to the damned, whose hard minds and hardened hearts must be terrified and broken, if they are to improve.

40. But to the believers that day will be comforting and sweet. That day will be the same time the highest joy and safety to the believer and the deepest terror and flight to the unbeliever; just as also in this life the truths of the Gospels are exceedingly sweet to the godly and exceedingly hateful to the wicked. Why should believers fear and not rather exceedingly rejoice, since they trust in Christ who comes as judge to redeem them and is their portion?

41-43 (Luther exhorts them to lay aside fear because it doesn't work to make us godly.)

44. How could He exhort, comfort, and strengthen you in a more delightful way? First, he says, “You will hear of wars, but you should not be frightened.” When He tells you not to be frightened, what else is that than His command that you be of good cheer and discern the sign with joy? Second, He tells you joyfully to look up; Third, to lift up your heads; and fourth, He calls it your redemption. What can comfort and strengthen you if such a word does not? Do you think He would lie to you or would deceive you into a false confidence? Dear friends, don't let such a word be spoken in vain; thank God and trust in it – there is no other remedy or comfort if you cast this word to the winds. It is not your condemnation but your redemption of which Christ speaks comfortingly. Will you turn His words around and say, “It is not your redemption but your condemnation”? Will you flee from your own salvation? Will you not greet God who comes out to meet you, nor thank Him who greets you?

45. Without a doubt he has spoken this comforting word also for the fainthearted, who, though they are godly and prepared for the Last Day, are yet filled with great anxiety and [thus] hinder their desire for this coming, which is especially found at the end of the world; therefore, He calls it their redemption. For at the end of the world, when sin will so terribly hold sway, and along with sin the second part (the punishment for sin with pestilence, war, and famine) will

also hold sway, it is necessary that believers have a strong confidence and comfort against both afflictions: sin and its punishment.

(Luther's Works. CPH Vol 75. Pp. 103-105)

Sermon Idea for the Gospel Reading: Lift up your Heads! (That the Holy Spirit would encourage the discouraged Christian.)

This sermon is really designed for the Christian who is discouraged and there is plenty for the preacher to point to which might articulate that discouragement in this season. You don't need to make them discouraged, but to articulate their existing discouragement. Is it here at church? Is it out in the world? Is it as close to home as home itself or even our own personal health? The preacher does not need to cast his net too far to gather in plenty of discouraging fish.

Luther, unlike others, suggests that this word of encouragement is for today, not some other time of Christ's second coming. Yes, it is also for that day, but Luther doesn't want his hearer to wait for this joyful response to the world around us. He would have us look at the terrors of the world around us and rejoice, for these are the signs of Christ's redemption coming.

In a sense, Jesus is recasting the way that we look at the whole world around us. If everything is reduced to what our eyes can see and our minds comprehend, our world is in a terrible state of affairs. If we manage not to nuke each other out of existence, we will so poison the planet it will become uninhabitable or we will manage to mess it up otherwise. If that doesn't get us, it almost feels as if entropy will. The schools cannot educate the children, it seems. The government gets more and more inept and wasteful. The roads are crumbling. We are regulating ourselves out of any productivity. The Republicans are careening toward one extreme and the Democrats toward the other. The choices seem to be equally bad.

Jesus says lift your heads and look up and beyond what your mortal eyes can see. Luther notes that he is exhorting us to look with the eyes of the heart, the eyes of faith. Consider Luther's ideas for why we should do that. Christ has died for the lot of this and his death means that nothing that happens to me is punishment anymore. It may be consequences of sinful and foolish behavior, but it is no longer a punishment. That is done. What is more, the very thing that seemingly destroys me, even death itself, is not able to destroy. The grave becomes the portal to life, the destruction simply clears the decks for the new creation. It is simply the wrecking ball which clears the lot so God's new thing can take its place.

Of course this is an exhortation to believing the very promises of God, as Dr. Luther notes. The Christian strides confidently into the world because the whole world belongs to him. (See notes on Malachi 4.) There is no problem or affliction which exceeds the work of Christ on the cross. He came to dry every tear so, though we weep them now, we also know that his redemption and salvation will reverse and redeem this day of sorrow. This is not a call to like suffering or delight in the pain, but a call to see it for what it is, the reason that Jesus came, died and rose. But he has

come, died, and risen again and that means that this affliction of today is conquered and doomed to its own destruction in Him.

Therefore, lift up your heads.