

Pastor Kenneth Mars
St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY
Second Sunday after Christmas
January 3, 2021
Text: I Peter 4:12–19

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ ... A Merry Christmas to you all.

Today is the first worship service of the New Year. Many would like to cast 2020 into the ash heap of bad ideas. But that would be unwise. And dare I say, unchristian? I won't sugarcoat 2020. All of us, at some level, were blindsided by the events of last year. But God's Word teaches us that the times and seasons of our lives are in the hands of the Lord and are being directed by His providence. God brings both prosperity and discipline. After losing virtually everything, Job declared, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord (1:21). In I Samuel 2, we hear the prayer of that saintly woman, Hannah, as she sought the Lord to give her a child. She prayed (I Sam. 2:7–8):

⁷The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low and he exalts. ⁸He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.

And Moses, the man and friend of God, composed his sung prayer in Psalm 90 saying, "So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom" (vs. 12). That divine holy wisdom includes, according to Moses, acknowledging both "Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations" (vs. 1) and "We are brought to an end by your (i.e., God's) anger; by your wrath we are dismayed" (vs. 7). To forget or ignore the adversity of 2020 would be to commit our heart not to wisdom, but to folly.

The Lord God did not suddenly stop being our Lord and Savior. His love did not diminish in the least. Rather, by faith we know His discipline and chastisement are marks of His Fatherly love. As Christians, we receive His blessings and His discipline in faith knowing that He is calling us to examine our lives and to cast down the idols of our heart. The events of 2020 are occasions for repentance, turning away from sin and evil, and faith marked by prayer, worship, and steadfast courage and joy that transcends the afflictions of our time.

In years past, when our nation faced war, depression, epidemics, natural disasters, political turmoil, and so forth, our political and religious leaders called for the people of our country to humble themselves before God and seek His mercy in repentance and faith. That call to humility and repentance has been largely silent. To my knowledge, the president has not issued a presidential proclamation calling for days of humility, prayer, and fasting. The Senate and House of Representatives have not passed resolutions imploring the citizens of our country to humble themselves before God and to pray for His deliverance and protection. To be sure, there are various websites and a few organizations calling upon Christians to repent and pray. But these don't represent efforts from the leaders holding the highest offices in our land.

Even more tragically, I have not seen the leaders of denominations – archbishops, pope, presidents, patriarchs, and so forth calling for their members to humble themselves before God and intercede for the nation and the world. I too am guilty for not imploring the membership of our congregations to give greater attention to this most godly and salutary response to our national afflictions. For this failure, I ask your forgiveness. I so desperately wanted our worship services to be places of refuge and encouragement that I neglected other weighty parts of our faith and Christian life.

In order to make amends...I am asking our congregational members deliberately and purposefully to humble themselves before God, to confess their personal sins as well as the sins of our nation, and implore God's mercy and forgiveness. Daniel, that great OT saint, interceded on behalf of Israel, confessing the sins of his people and imploring God's mercy and forgiveness (Dan. 9). And we, as the NT Church have the apostolic command recorded in I Timothy 2:1-4:

¹First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ²for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. ³This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

In these words, I would have you notice that we are commanded to intercede for all people especially all who hold high positions of authority so that we Christians can lead a peace, quiet, godly, and dignified life. Such intercessions are pleasing to God who desires all men to come to the knowledge of the truth. So I am encouraging all our members to pick a day in each of the weeks of January especially to confess our sins and to pray and fast for God's mercy and deliverance for the people of our nation.

Do this according to the dictates of your conscience and the particular circumstances of your life. During the Friday Matins services at 8:15 a.m., we will purposefully pray the penitential psalms and incorporate additional prayers of penitence and faith along with other prayers for the wellbeing of Christ's Church, the economy, the families of our land, for healing, spiritual renewal, etc.

Dear saints of God, the comments I am making are not directed at individual persons or even particular congregations. Rather, I am looking over the broad landscape of our country and the Christian Church in light of these past 10 months. My concerns are not political or ideological but spiritual. Please understand and hear my words of admonition not as a pundit but as a pastor, as your pastor.

I am greatly concerned about our particular moment. 2020 was difficult but people, including Christians, have faced far worse. My dread comes not from the absolute severity of our trials but how our nation and the Christian Church has responded to them. Again, I am speaking in broad, general terms. First, our nation. In Revelation 16, the apostle John recorded numerous and devastating judgments God brought against the people of the world. They are called the "seven bowls of God's wrath" (16:1). After the fourth plague, the Bible records these dreadful words, "they (i.e., unbelievers) cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues. They did not repent and give him glory" (Rev. 16:8). After the fifth plague, the people of this earth "cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores. They did not repent of their deeds (Rev. 16:11). The afflictions of 2020 have not caused people to repent of their sins, to cast down their pride nor have they turned from the perversities. People are not seeking God's mercy in repentance and faith. Instead, our national hopes are centered on vaccines, governmental stimulus packages, political leaders, and so forth. God is calling all people to turn to Him in trust even as we pray for and support the myriads of people who seek to bring relief to suffering people. I am afraid that the collective heart of our country is hardening against God.

But I also have grave apprehension over how the Church as a whole has responded. Too easily the Church gave up her worship services, her sacraments and prayers, her psalms and hymns, her festivals and holy feasts. I am speaking here not to individuals specifically but to the general response of the Church especially her pastors and leaders. The Church muted her voice. Our spiritual leaders and I include myself in this indictment, have not been the shining light of courage, faith, repentance, and strength God ordained us to be. Earlier in the book of Revelation (ch. 2-3), the exalted Lord Jesus called the 7 church of Asia Minor to repentance and faith. The warnings He

spoke to them were stern. Repent and strengthen what remains. Rekindle your first love for Christ and the gospel. Hold fast in the face of persecution. Refuse to accept false teaching. Our Lord's admonitions were coupled with severe warnings. Repent lest Christ remove their lampstand from His midst, lest Christ war against them Himself, lest their names be blotted out of the book of life, and so forth. This time, at the beginning of the New Year, is the right time to hear God's Word in repentance and faith. The apostle Peter in today's epistle text has these words of warning we need to hear and take to heart:

¹⁷For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸And "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" (citing Prov. 11:31) ¹⁹Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

Today, we entrust our souls to our faithful God and creator while doing the good that God Himself has set before us. Through the grace of the Lord Jesus, we turn to our heavenly Father in humility and courage to receive His forgiveness and grace. 2021 begins with the absolute, rock-solid assurance that the good work of salvation will be brought to its completion in our lives. God began it; He will finish it. Philippians 1:6 declares this to be so. This New Year may bring adversity or prosperity, most likely a combination of both. But our God is working for our good all the same. He remains our heavenly Father who gives us life, breath, and all we have. More importantly, He gives us faith, forgiveness, and new eternal life through His Son by the grace of the Holy Spirit. To all the adversities of the past, present, and future, we say boldly: God the Holy Trinity is faithful and stands with us and for us. Christ Jesus rose from the dead to make us His own dear people. And He's coming again in glory to bring us to our eternal inheritance. We need not be afraid, dear saints. Praise God from whom all blessings flow. The Lord has been our dwelling place for all generations. Christ Jesus is with us even unto the end of the age.

A blessed New Year to you all...

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Pastor Kenneth Mars
St. John's Lutheran Church – Kimball, NE
The Epiphany of Our Lord
January 6, 2021
Text: Matthew 2:1–12; Ephesians 3:1–12

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ ... A blessed Epiphany to you all.

St. Augustine, a 5th century North African bishop and theologian and rightly called the father of the western Church, is often cited as saying, “The Old Testament is the New Testament concealed, the New Testament is the Old Testament revealed.” It’s a clever, memorable way of saying that the Old and New Testaments of the Bible have the same subject: Jesus of Nazareth, Son of God and Savior of the world. In the Old Testament, a universal Savior of all nations was promised but His identity was concealed. Whereas in the New Testament, the promised Savior is now revealed to be the Lord Jesus Christ.

This festival, the Epiphany of Our Lord, is the annual celebration of this most important truth upon which all mankind’s eternal destiny rests. The Child born in Bethlehem to Jewish parents and worship by Jewish shepherds is also the universal Savior of all nations, Jews and non-Jews alike. The Lord God called Abram out of the pagan idolatry of Ur of the Chaldeans so that through Abram’s seed, all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Such was the promise given to Abram in Genesis (Gen. 12 & 18). Through Abraham’s family, a Savior would be born who would be a blessing not only to Abraham’s lineage but to all people of the earth. A Savior was indeed promised but His identity remained concealed. “The Old Testament is the New Testament concealed.”

But in the fulness of time, God the Father sent His archangel, Gabriel, to a lowly Jewish maiden in Nazareth of Galilee. Through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, Mary will conceive in her virgin womb the Savior, the incarnate Son of God. Nine months later, Mary’s Son was born in Bethlehem of Judea as the prophets foretold. The angel proclaimed to frightened shepherds who watched their flocks by night, “Behold I bring you good news of great joy that will be for *all the people*. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Lk. 2:10–11). His name shall be called Jesus, which means, the Lord saves.

Christ Jesus was the Savior of all nations on the day of His birth. But there were no nations present for His birth, no Romans or Greeks or Egyptians or Asiatics, only people from the chosen nation of Israel. All of that changed when the Wise Men from the East arrived in Bethlehem many months later.

There is a good deal of mystery surrounding the journey of the Wise Men. Who were they? Where did they come from? Why did they follow a star to Israel? Matthew's gospel reveals that these men came from the East, probably the region of the ancient Babylonian kingdom; they were Magi, translated as Wise Men in our English text; and they followed a star believing it indicated a king of the Jews had been born. It's quite likely that the knowledge of a coming King of the Jews who would be the Savior of all people came through the prophet Daniel who was one of the faithful believers of Judah carried into Babylonian Captivity. The Bible records that after Daniel interpreted King Nebuchadnezzar's mysterious dream, the "king gave Daniel high honors and many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon" (Dan. 2:48). Daniel was the chief wise man who taught all the wise men of Babylon the wisdom of God found in the Old Testament. That wisdom included Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream which included this prophecy:

⁴⁴And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever,
⁴⁵just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold...The dream is certain, and its interpretation sure" (Dan. 2:44–45).

That eternal kingdom will arise in Israel. The interpretation is sure, Daniel taught the wise men of Babylon. And it is reasonable to conclude that Daniel also taught the Babylonians the oracle recorded in Numbers 24:17, "... a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel..." And Daniel certainly would have known Isaiah's prophecy that a Virgin would conceive and give birth to a Son, Immanuel (Is. 7:14). These prophecies were not fulfilled in Daniel's lifetime. But approximately 600 years later, the wisdom of Daniel endured in the training of the Wise Men from the East who saw the miraculous star shining in the West. That is the signal. The star of Jacob. The King of kings and Lord of lords has been born of a Virgin from the family of Abraham and David. Wonderful and marvelous things will take place in the land of Israel. But much remained concealed...until Jesus was born.

Then, praise be to God!, that which was concealed in the Old Testament was revealed. What we call the New Testament is simply the proclamation that everything the patriarchs, the prophets, and Gentile Wise Men believed is now fulfilled in the birth and ministry of Jesus. Such a marvelous conclusion is not simply the pious reflections of saints and theologians, but the witness and testimony the Lord Jesus Himself. The gospel of Luke records this encounter between Jesus and the two disciples on the Emmaus road after His resurrection from the dead (Luke 24:25–27):

²⁵And (Jesus) said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” ²⁷And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, (Jesus) interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

The New Testament proclamation of Jesus the universal Savior of all mankind is the revelation of what was concealed in the Old Testament. Dear saints of God, we need not travel hundreds of miles on camels bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to worship the fullness of God’s revelation to the world. Rather, Jesus comes to us, the people of all the nations of the earth in the 21st century, by the grace of the Holy Spirit through His Word and Sacraments. God the Father sent His Son into this world to live, died, and rise again to save His people from the darkness of their sins, the tyranny of the devil, and the unbelief of their own sinful natures. Now that Jesus has forever spoken on our behalf and made atonement for our sins, He sits at the Father’s right hand in glory. From there, He comes among us by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

St. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, wrote to predominantly non-Jewish Christians in the Roman city of Ephesus (3:6), “This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs (meaning, fellow heirs with believing Jews), members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” Those last words are key, “through the gospel.” The preaching of Christ as the crucified and resurrected Savior of the world is the Gospel, the power of God unto salvation to all who believe, both to the Jew and to the non-Jew. Through Christ’s Gospel proclaimed in Christ’s Church, the Holy Spirit creates one, united people from all nations, tribes, peoples, and languages (Rev. 7:9–12). Paul proclaimed in today’s epistle text, “...through the church the manifold wisdom of God might be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Eph. 3:11). All believers in Christ form one, redeemed people: the holy Christian Church consisting of believers from all ages, places, times, and cultures.

The mystery that was concealed in the Old Testament is now revealed. All men, women, and children, have a Savior who comes to them in grace and love. This is our privilege and our honor as the people of God in the New Testament. Each of us, in our unique callings and stations in life, are witnesses to Christ Jesus. We are Christians who confess saving faith in Jesus. May the light of Christ Jesus shine brightly in our midst through the precious Gospel so that the peoples of our communities, nation, and world may, like the Wise Men of old, fall before Jesus in joyful worship and faith.

A blessed Epiphany to you all!!

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

The Baptism of Our Lord

January 10, 2021

Text: Matthew 3:13–17

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Last Sunday, I admonished our congregations that the turmoil of these past several months is a signal for us to repent of our personal and national sins. In that admonition, I encouraged you all to pick a day in the week for deep, personal reflection on God's Word with an attitude of repentance, that is, confessing and turning away from sin. And then, seek God's mercy trusting that God the Father will keep His promise to forgive everyone who looks to His Son Jesus in humility and trust. As far as you are able, incorporate a time of fasting into your days of repentance. Christians have always responded with repentance and faith during times of crisis and adversity. In the gospels, Christ our Lord commands us to do these things.

People asked Jesus about the atrocity Pontius Pilate committed when he mixed the blood of Galilean Jews with their sacrifices. Our Lord's answer is startling. Luke 13:2–3, "And Jesus answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." Our spiritual response to all forms of evil is repentance, that is, turning away the evil of human pride, rebellion, and hatred that causes such horrible events. But our Lord continued without interruption by introducing a different kind of tragedy. Vs. 4–5, "Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." Those 18 people were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Again, our response is repentance and faith. That's our default reaction for that, in truth, is the daily Christian life. Daily repentance and renewal in faith. Confessing sins and receiving God's forgiveness in Christ.

Well, I encouraged us to take this very specific course of action last Sunday. And then the extraordinary events of January 6th took place in Washington DC. The actions of mobs seldom produce anything good. The Lord Jesus preached in the Sermon on the Mount that His people are to be the salt of the earth and light of the world (Matt.

5:13–16). This means, dear saints of God, that we are to be the soul and conscience of the world. The unbelieving world is to see our good works of faith and love and give God glory as a result. In light of all the turmoil we've seen, let us commit ourselves all the more to love for our families, our neighbors, and our church. And love for our opponents and enemies. Let us remain engaged in the civic realm supporting the various good and worthy institutions as we are able. That commitments of love must always include prayer for home, church, and community. Finally, it includes living according to the truth with courage and joy. We cannot and will not conform our lives to folly and lies. We Christians are people committed to living according to the truth at every level of human experience.

And that truth begins and continues with what we celebrate here today in the gospel text from Matthew 3 in which our Lord is baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. The connection between a life of repentance and faith and the baptism of the Lord Jesus is more intimately connected than you might initially think.

We must begin by understanding what the baptism of John was all about. The verses just before today's text describe what John the Baptist was doing: (Matt. 3:1–11):

¹In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,
²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” ... ⁵Then Jerusalem and all Judea
and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶and they were baptized
by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁷But when he saw many of the
Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of
vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit in keeping
with repentance... ¹¹“I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming
after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize
you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

John's ministry was a clear and straightforward preaching of repentance. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” The day of salvation is coming. John was called by God to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. The way of preparation is repentance, recognizing sin, confessing it and then being baptized for the forgiveness of sins. Matthew's gospel doesn't say that John's baptism gave the forgiveness of sins but Luke's gospel explicitly calls John's baptism “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3). John's ministry called all men, women, and children to be ready and prepared for God's kingdom by recognizing their sins, turning away from them in repentance, and being baptized for the forgiveness of their sins.

Repentance and faith unto forgiveness always go together, hand in glove. That's what life in God's kingdom is all about, repentance and saving faith in Jesus. Forsaking sins and being forgiven of all sins. That is the glorious liberty only we Christians have! The awful weight of sin – our sins, the ones we've committed, and those that have been committed against us – has been lifted from our soul and conscience. Through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior, the awful burden of sin is removed. Such is our liberty and freedom in Christ Jesus! And this glorious message of true freedom is what we Christians continue to share with the world, with everyone we meet: our family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and strangers we meet as we go about our daily life.

But did you notice that when John was speaking directly to the people coming out to his baptism that he admonished them to “bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (vs. 8)? In other words, repentance is never a one-and-done type of thing. Repentance and faith are on-going. And they bear fruit in how we live. So there is one connection to the admonition I have been giving the past couple of weeks regarding how we Christians are to respond to the various adversities of our time. Repentance and faith are how our Christian life began. It continues to bear fruit at every stage of our life until the Lord calls us to our eternal rest. Turning away from sin, receiving forgiveness, and living godly lives of faith is our bread and butter. It's simply who we are as Christians.

And yet, there is one more connection that needs to be made. We have yet to even speak about Jesus being baptized. John the Baptist recognized the strangeness of the situation and at first, didn't want to baptize Jesus. Vs. 14, “John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’” John's baptism was for sinners needing to repent and be forgiven. Jesus has no sin, neither original nor actual. There are no sins which He must confess. John recognized this about Jesus. My baptism is for sinners and you, Jesus, are no sinner. You are the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Matt. 3:11). You need to baptize me!

But Jesus commands John to baptize Him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” (vs. 15). Jesus submits to John's baptism of repentance in fulfillment of God the Father's righteous will to save this world filled with sinners. In other words, Jesus identifies with us human beings. Though He has no sin, He receives a sinner's baptism in order that He, Jesus, can be the Savior of sinners. From this point forward, Jesus begins His ministry as the Holy Spirit-anointed, well-pleasing Son of God the Father Almighty who saves the world by bearing their sins.

Or as John's gospel beautifully and powerfully says about Jesus when He went to be baptized, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Our life of repentance and faith in Jesus is grounded in the glorious truth that Jesus was baptized in the Jordan to save us. Our repentance and faith always take us back to the place where our sins and the sins of the world were paid for: Mount Calvary where Jesus shed His blood and died to atone for the sins of every man, woman, and child. Our Christian baptism in God's trinitarian name is an on-going participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus. All righteousness was fulfilled in Jesus. He's the Savior. And He baptizes us with the Holy Spirit and fire. Thus, we Christians are living temples of the Holy Spirit.

So, when we see the evils of our world, we Christians follow the life and pattern of Jesus. He did not shrug them off and refuse to be touched by them. Quite the opposite. He took them upon Himself and made atonement for them. We Christians bear the sins of the world, not as an act of atonement, Jesus alone did that, through repentance and faith. At the very beginning of this sermon, I said that we Christians are called to be the soul and conscience of the world. We speak and live the truth. Because Christ Jesus is the truth come to this earth to be the world's Savior. Living a life of repentance and faith means being intercessors for the world. Such prayers of intercession are pleasing to our Father who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth as I Timothy 2:1-4 teaches.

In calling us to repentance and faith, I am simply admonishing us to be Christians. To live in the glorious liberty of Christ's gospel, the forgiveness of sins and the renewal of life. May God the Father grant us growth in His kingdom through the merits and mediation of Christ Jesus by the grace of the Holy Spirit...

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

January 17, 2021

Text: John 2:1–11

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Of the four Biblical gospels, John provides the deepest, maybe even the most mysterious, description of the life and works of Jesus. Sometimes you have to dig a bit deeper in order to see what John is really trying to say about Jesus. Today's reading from John 2:1–11 is a prime example. On the surface, Jesus attending a wedding in Cana of Galilee and turning water into wine doesn't seem to be all that remarkable. Don't get me wrong. Turning water into wine is a miracle. It proves that Jesus is the divine Son of God. Later in His ministry, Jesus will miraculously feed 5,000 men not counting women and children, with 5 loaves and 2 fish. In both cases, however, the reason for the miracle wasn't to feed people a quick, free meal or even to save a newlywed couple from the stigma of running out of wine during their wedding feast. The last verse of today's gospel text provides this fitting conclusion, "This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him" (vs. 11). There's the key! This miracle revealed Jesus' glory in such a way that the disciples believed in Jesus as their Messiah, their Savior.

Let's take a closer look at this beautiful text. We begin by realizing that the apostle John doesn't really call this a miracle. He says that this is the "first of (Jesus') signs." In John's gospel, signs are real-life events that teach you something about Jesus that you wouldn't know otherwise. These signs reveal who Jesus is.

This first sign reveals to us and the world that Jesus is the Son of God who comes to save His people from sin, death, and spiritual oppression. But you wouldn't know that about Jesus without the signs. Our Lord looked rather ordinary and common, like any other first century Jewish man. He performs signs to show us that the Word who was with God in the beginning (John 1:1) has now become flesh and dwells among us. In the Word made flesh we see His divine glory, the glory as of the only Son of God, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). By turning water into wine, the disciples saw the grace and truth of God's Son come in human flesh to be the world's Savior. (*Catechism students: Jesus is true God and true man in one person!*) And they believed in Him. John shared this first of Jesus' signs so that we too might believe in Him as well.

John begins unraveling this “first sign” by saying that “on the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there” (vs. 1). The reference to the third day can mean at least three things: the third day of the week – Tuesday, or maybe the third day since Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist described in John 1:29-34, or possibly the third day of the wedding celebration. You see, weddings in those days lasted up to a whole week and everyone in the town was invited.

On the surface, the “third day” is merely a time reference of various events. But John regularly and frequently writes with layered messages. When we Christians hear the phrase “on the third day” what immediately comes to mind – especially when we’re worshipping in Church or reading the Bible? You got it: the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead. This first of Jesus’ signs happened in real time and space, either referring to the third day after His baptism, or the third day of the week, or the third day of the wedding. But John is also teaching us that this first sign is connected to Jesus’ greatest sign: Jesus’ death by crucifixion and resurrection from the dead on the third day.

Lest we think this is a bit of fanciful, imaginative Christian piety, we need to heed our Lord’s words in the text of Scripture. In vs. 4, Jesus mentions “my hour.” That too is more than a time reference. But let’s look at the context in order to understand what Jesus is talking about when He says “My hour.”

Mary, the mother of our Lord, the Lord Jesus Himself, and His disciples were all attending a wedding in Cana of Galilee. New Testament era Jewish wedding were big, community events that lasted up to a whole week. Generally, the groom was expected to shoulder the expense of the entire wedding with its feasting and celebrations. To run out of food or wine was a social disaster of immense proportions. These were small, tight-knit communities. A public embarrassment might well be life-long: “You weren’t prepared for your wedding, the most important day of your life. You ran out of wine!”

Mary sees what’s about to happen and goes to Jesus. “They have no wine,” says Mary in vs. 3. Jesus’ response is somewhat distant and detached, “Woman, what does this have to do with Me?” (vs. 4). I’m not here to fix every little problem that comes along. It’s right here in the midst of this real but rather ordinary adversity of human life that Jesus provides the link to His death and resurrection. He says, “Woman, what does this have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come” (vs. 4).

The “hour” that Jesus is referring to is His death and resurrection. My moment, THE moment, hasn’t yet arrived. In John 13, the apostle wrote, “Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” Jesus’ crucifixion was just a few days away in this text. The hour was upon Him. And then later in John 17:1, Jesus prayed these marvelous words on the night of His betrayal, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you.” Not long after praying those words, Jesus was arrested. John chapters 18 – 20 record the events of Jesus’ betrayal, arrest, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection from the dead on the third day. The wedding at Cana is not the hour for Jesus’ glorification. But everything Jesus does now points to Good Friday and Easter.

Mary knows that Jesus will do something about this small problem of running out of wine. She believes in her Son as the world’s Savior. So she turns to the servants and says to them, “do whatever he tells you” (vs. 5). Those are outstanding words of faith and truth. No matter how strange the instruction, do what Jesus says. Mary’s words remain true for us into the 21st century. St. John’s/Immanuel are here to do what Jesus says, to believe what Jesus says we are to believe, to hope in what Jesus says we are to hope in: forgiveness, life, salvation, joy unto salvation, and peace beyond understanding now and into eternity. The hour of Jesus’ glorification, His death and resurrection from the dead on the third day are to be proclaimed until He comes again in glory. We do these things because Jesus commanded us to do so. Whatever He says and does forms the content of what we believe. And how we live and die in the hope of eternal life.

Well, we need to get to the actual sign of turning water into wine. According to vs. 6, six stones jars used for “Jewish purification rites” were shown to Jesus. The water was either used by the guests to wash their hands or possibly for the bride’s ceremonial bath leading up to her wedding night. Either way, John is once again showing us something written on different layers. The Old Testament law required various washings but they never did the job perfectly. You always got dirty again, needing to be ceremonially washed another time.

The Old Testament, with its imperfect system of elaborate washings, ceremonies, fastings, worship festivals, is now filled-up completely with the new wine of Jesus. His New Testament wine is better and greater than the Old Testament wine. Jesus’ gospel ministry of death and resurrection fulfills the OT types and shadows.

We learn this from the master of the feast. After tasting Jesus' wine, he says, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now" (vs. 10). Jesus gives the good wine. It's better than the wine given by Moses, the kings and priest, and even the prophets. The OT was good. But the best has come. The hour of salvation and glorification has come in the person of Jesus, the divine Son of the Father in human flesh. And don't overlook the abundance of new wine! 120-180 gallons. There's more than enough of Jesus and His salvation to go around. Drink deeply without regret.

Calvary's wine is God's best. One of the disciples of the Christian faith is to train and develop our tastes. What I mean is that by the grace of the Spirit we are seek the good things of God. King David sang in Psalm 34:8, "O taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps. 34:8). The apostle Peter uses the imagery of eating to admonish those early Christians to remain faithful. "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good" (I Peter 2:2–3). The pleasures and sins of this world provide poisonous junk food compared to the rich food of faith and salvation found in Christ and His Word. So we gather week after week to feast on Christ's body and blood, to fill our ears with His Word, to sing His praises, and to rejoice with one another in the common salvation given to God's people in Christ Jesus.

If you are tired of life-less, dull, and tiresome attempts at spirituality or the many forms of self-help the world continues to offer, then come and drink the best that God has to offer: the wine that flows from the pierced side and wounded hands and feet of Jesus. God's best is found in Jesus and in what He has to offer through sacramental signs of forgiveness, life and salvation that flow from His holy Word, Baptism, liberating absolution and joyful meal of Christ's body and blood. These are God's very best. Joy and abounding peace are found in these signs.

Jesus manifested His glory so that you too can believe in Him. Seeing the signs of Jesus' glory, may you too "believe in Him" (vs. 11).

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

The Transfiguration of Our Lord

January 24, 2021

Text: Matthew 17:1–9

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The Transfiguration of Our Lord is a transcendent, powerful moment in the life of Jesus. As well as for Peter, James, and John, three of His apostles. On the Mount of Transfiguration, the Lord's divine glory is revealed in beautiful splendor. God the Father speaks from heaven. The majesty of Jesus shines through His sinless face with the brightness of the sun. It's the kind of event that signals great things will be accomplished by a great Man and His followers. Great things will be done. But not in the way we expect. The danger is that we hear the Father's commendation, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" without regard for why the Father is pleased with Jesus. We must understand our Lord's transfiguration in the light of the previous events recorded in Matthew 16. Heaven and earth are at stake in rightly knowing this truth of who Jesus is and why He is pleasing to the Father.

The immediate context just before today's text is Peter's great confession of who Jesus is. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (16:16). The Church of Jesus, our saving faith, the forgiveness of sins, the grace of the sacraments, the resurrection of our body and the hope of eternal life, everything we hold most sacred, are based upon the truth this confession reveals. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. These words tell us who Jesus is and what He came to do. From eternity, the Son is begotten of the Father. The Lord Jesus Christ is God's eternal Son now in human flesh and blood. He is both God and man in one person. That is the sum and substance of Peter's confession of who Jesus is.

This incarnate Son of the Father is also the Christ, the One anointed with Holy Spirit to be the Savior of the world. In those few but powerful words, the Church's confession of who Jesus is – the incarnate Son of the Father, and what He did – save the world, is firmly established.

Jesus is the eternal Son of God the Father in human flesh and blood. This is the divine testimony to who Jesus is. Christ Jesus is true God, begotten of the Father from eternity and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary. The two natures of Jesus are discernable in His transfiguration. For the brightness of divine majesty, His divine nature, shines through the human body of Jesus, His human nature. Matthew says Jesus “was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light” (vs. 2). God is now revealed in the man Jesus. God of God, light of light, very God of very God, begotten not made but born of the Virgin Mary through the conception of the Holy Spirit. The infinite, eternal, transcendent God is now revealed in the man Jesus.

And yet, God’s Son was sent by the Father and anointed with the Holy Spirit to be the world’s Savior. That’s what it means for Jesus to be the Christ, anointed, chosen for this purpose of redeeming the world. And yet, Christ’s work of saving the world must happen in a particular way. Jesus Himself declared that He must go to Jerusalem, suffer many things from the priests and scribes, be killed and rise from the dead on the third day. This is the redemptive work of the Christ, the Son of the living God. And those who would follow Him, must deny themselves in repentance, take up their cross, and follow Jesus in faith. That is the life of Christian faith and devotion. Any attempt on our part to save our lives will result in losing it for eternity. But losing our lives in Christ, the crucified and resurrected Savior, means finding it (Mt. 16:21–25).

Yes. Jesus is the beloved Son of the Father come in human flesh. That is most certainly true. And yet, we must not be content with only confessing who Jesus is. We must also know and believe with heart, soul, mind and life, that Jesus is our Savior who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, was buried, and rose again from the dead on the third day in order to claim us as His own dear children. We mustn’t forget the testimony of the Father we hear just two weeks ago when we considered Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River. When Jesus received a sinners’ baptism, He was anointed by the Holy Spirit to be the Savior of Sinners. There, standing in the waters of the Jordan, God the Father spoke from heaven declaring, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased” (Matt. 3:17). That baptism in Jordan’s River set our Lord on His path to Jerusalem which included the Mount of Transfiguration. The reason why the Father is pleased with His Son is that He willingly and lovingly fulfils the Father’s will and purpose in saving the world through suffering, death, and resurrection. Through Jesus’ willing obedience to the Father, we are made sons and daughters of God. Born again in Christ through baptism and faith, we are heirs of the Father’s eternal kingdom. Is it any wonder then why the

Father is pleased with His beloved Son? He is the perfect, obedient Son who accomplishes the impossible for us and our salvation. Thanks be to Jesus.

The Lord Jesus told Peter that his godly confession was given to him by His heavenly Father. Peter did not discover this truth through His own wisdom and contemplation. This too is a great marvel. In grace and mercy, God the Father reveals to us His Son as the Christ through the precious gospel which is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe. Christ Jesus, the anointed Son of the Father, is the world's Savior and rightful Lord. All who trust in Him and His work of saving the world, will be forgiven of their sins and saved from eternal judgment. Saving knowledge of Jesus and faith in Him are gifts of the Father through the Spirit. Peter's confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God, recorded in Matthew 16 is confirmed by God the Father Himself on the Mount of Transfiguration, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." The Father is pleased because Jesus is His Son fulfilling His redemptive will to save the world, you and me, *and these young saints who will be confirmed in a few short moments.*

(Reword this to fit Immanuel): Before this altar today, our catechism students will confess their faith and devotion to the one true God. And by the grace of the Father, they have been led to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the beloved Son of the Father and anointed by the Holy Spirit to be their Savior from sin, death, the devil, and every evil. We, the Church of Jesus, share a common confession; we all enjoy the same baptismal faith. Our task is to encourage and remind them of the faith into which they have been baptized into the life of God the Holy Trinity; to remind them of the faith they confess this day, to encourage them to remain faithful and true, even unto death, rather than deny the Lord of grace and mercy. We are to remind them that Christ Jesus is the one who bore their sins. He endured the agony of hell on the cross – in love for us poor sinners – that we might be set free from the torments of a guilty, wounded conscience in this world and the sufferings of eternal judgment in the next.

(St. John's only): Pray for our confirmands and one another. Not just today. But regularly and frequently. Teach them what it means to be Christian men and women. Exemplify for them the life of being godly husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, workers and citizens. You godly men, take Trey and Wyatt under your care and attention to show them the truth of what it means to be men of faith. You godly women, embrace Lydia, Sirena, and Abigail so that they know the beautiful of Christian femininity and godliness. You older parents and grandparents, encourage their parents that their labors are not in vain.

We do noble work of encouragement because Christ Jesus took upon Himself our human nature. He redeemed our lives, body, soul, mind, and will. Jesus is the Christ over the entirety of our life as He leads us into His glorious eternity.

God the Father spoke His words of commendation about His Son to Peter, James, and John. Those 3 disciples not only saw the transfigured Jesus but also the glorified Moses and Elijah. Peter wanted to make three tents, three shrines, if you will. One for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. It's not entirely clear what Peter was thinking but the effect was to place Jesus on an equal footing with Moses and Elijah.

God the Father wouldn't stand for it. "Listen to Jesus" was the Father's command. Jesus is greater than the prophetic message pronounced through Elijah and the prophets. Our Lord is far superior to the Law and the Prophets for He, and He alone fulfills them. So listen to Jesus. All others must bow to the authority of the Lord Jesus, that includes the exalted Moses, Elijah, and anyone else you might think to mention.

Many years later, the apostle Peter reflected upon this experience in his second epistle. He remembers the Majestic Glory who said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (II Pet. 1:17). And yet, Peter concludes that "we have something more sure." More sure than even the experience of Jesus' transfiguration! We have the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place" (II Pet. 1:19). God's inscripturated Word is more sure than any sublime experience of mystic visions or any overwhelming sense awe or myriads and myriads of miracles. What is taking place here today in the reading and preaching of God's Word, in the reception of Christ's body and blood, in the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, in prayers of faith and holy fellowship is more sure than any kind of Transfiguration experience!! The Father Himself says listen to Jesus.

Jesus is the well-pleasing, crucified and resurrected Son of the Father. We listen to Jesus because we know who He is and what He did for us. He tells us that we are embraced in His nail scarred hands. And nothing can take us out of them. Rejoice in the Lord, dear saints.

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Septuagesima

January 31, 2021

Text: Matthew 20:1–16

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The sermon hymn for today, “Salvation unto Us Has Come” is one of the great hymns in our Church. It was written by Paul Speratus in 1523 while he was imprisoned for preaching the free gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Christ without the works of the law. It was reported that Martin Luther wept with joy and thankfulness when he first heard this hymn sung. Speratus was eventually released from prison and continued to preach the gospel of salvation in Christ which he so beautifully summarized in this great hymn. Consider the first stanza:

Salvation unto us has come By God's free grace and favor;
Good works cannot avert our doom, They help and save us never.
Faith looks to Jesus Christ alone, Who did for all the world atone;
He is our one Redeemer. (LSB 555.1)

The salvation of sinners comes by God's free grace and favor. We know this Biblical truth. It forms the cornerstone of everything we believe as Christians. But have we lost the wonder and surprise of this Gospel message? Salvation comes to us sinners by God's free grace and favor found in Christ Jesus alone. Grace is the key word: Divine, undeserved favor. Today's text from Matthew 20 teaches us about this marvelous, divine grace. By the mercy of the Spirit, may we truly see anew how glorious God's grace is for us sinners.

The Lord Jesus gives a parable that is quite straightforward. It teaches us about the kingdom of heaven. A master, who represents God the Father, is needing workers to bring in the harvest of his vineyard. He finds workers at the beginning of the day, roughly 6 am, and makes an agreement with them. They will be paid a standard wage of one denarius for 12 hours of work. Throughout the day, the master finds more workers. Some begin at 9 am, some at noon, others at 3 pm, Finally, he even hires workers at 5 pm and sends them to work for the last hour of the day. At 6 pm, all the workers are lined up in order beginning with those hired last until those hired first so that they can be paid their wages. And this is the shocking thing. All workers,

regardless of how many hours they worked are paid the same wage. One denarius. That's the grace of God which caused Paul Speratus to write his marvelous hymn. Salvation unto us has come by God's free grace and favor.

You can well imagine those who have worked 12 hours are angry at the master for paying them the same as the ones who worked by 1 hour. In vs. 12, we hear their response. "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat" (vs. 12).

And that's point. Jesus tells this parable so that we can know that the kingdom of heaven works with principles that are quite different from the practices and standards of the world. What seems right and just for worldly affairs is out of step with the way God operates His kingdom. In the God's kingdom, the Father does things by grace. All Christians believe in the same Christ, the same Gospel and all share in a common salvation. In the world, there must be inequality because each person is different; each possessing particular talents, abilities as well as unique weaknesses and frailties.

For example, the farmer works very different hours and has very different demands than the dentist working in an office. The fireman can't schedule his work nor can he stop fighting a fire because it's five o'clock and time to go home. He must be ready at all times and stay until the job is completed. The store owner, on the other hand, can schedule appointment and set definite hours of business. Sometimes it may even seem to be unfair.

But in Christ, the farmer, the teacher, the president, the apostle, the prophets, all stand together as equals under God's grace. Each receive the same water baptism for the forgiveness of sins. In Christ, the slave is equal to his master; the last is made equal to the first (vs. 16). The amount of time and work done in and for the kingdom doesn't factor into rewards and status. The life-long Christian possesses the same promise of salvation and eternal life as the gross sinner who repents and believes only seconds before death. The reward of heaven is based upon the goodness and love of Christ alone and not upon the accomplishments of the individual. The kingdom of God is a kingdom of grace, undeserved divine favor established in the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's this grace that creates the grumbling in the first group of workers, according to vs. 11. It's just not right to work 12 hours and be paid the same as the one who only worked 1 hour. Our sensibilities are violated by the conclusion of the parable. Even

after the first group voices its complaint, the landowner only gives what he promised at the beginning. Grace will prevail from beginning to end.

We must keep in mind that it's the master of the house who goes out to find workers, that includes even the first group. God seeks the lost and brings them into His kingdom. Not the other way around. We sinners don't find God and prove ourselves worthy to enter into the vineyard. All of the workers must simply trust in the goodness of the master. The application for us in the Church is crystal clear. Everyone who enters the kingdom of God through faith in Christ, whether early or late, receives the same grace. Some come early. They are baptized as infants and remain in the church their entire lives. Others come in the middle of their lives. Some late, maybe just days or weeks before they die. But they all receive the same grace in Christ. All their sins are forgiven in Christ Jesus.

At the end of the parable, Jesus asks two questions, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?" (vs. 15). The questions have an implied answer. But Jesus leaves it unsaid so that we can wrestle with their implications. How you answer depends upon whether or not you understand Christ's teaching on grace. For grace is defined in parable (vs. 4) as whatever is right in the eyes of the master who represents God. Or, it's quite possible that we think God the Father should operate according to principles of justice and merit. Those who have done more should be rewarded more.

The Biblical Gospel teaches us that "whatever is right" in the eyes of the Father is based upon the love and mercy of His Son who died for the sins of the whole world. Ultimately, that's where God's grace is defined. In His Son suffering and dying on the cross to atone for our sins and the sins of all people. He alone is the one who died and rose again in order that sinners might be declared to be righteous in God the Father's eyes.

It's this teaching, that sinner stand righteous and forgiven before God on account of Christ alone, that the Church either stands or falls. Loss this teaching and the Church ceases to be the Church. With this glorious truth, the Church triumphs and stands forever. The Christian Gospel doesn't really ask or answer the question of what is fair. Rather, it simply says what Jesus did for us and for our salvation is "what is right." All sinners who trust in Jesus share equally in His grace. And therein we rest. Christ Jesus has spoken on our behalf. For you, for me, for those next us. For the unbelievers

who don't yet know Jesus. For the enemies of the Church. For everyone. Jesus died for all their sins by grace.

We Christians live under God the Father's pronouncement, "whatever is right I will give you." Therein we are content. And joy of joys! We learn in the Scriptures that "whatever is right in the Father's eyes" includes all of heaven and earth. That is no exaggeration. I Corinthians 3:21-23 says:

²¹So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, ²²whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, ²³and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

By God's grace established in Christ, all things are ours. Not because we earned them. No. They are given to us by God's free grace and favor through Christ Jesus our Lord. That is what is right in the Father's eyes. Christ Jesus is the Lord of grace. Faith looks to Christ alone who did for all the world atone. He is our one Redeemer. May we always rejoice in His wonderful, amazing grace.

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.