

Pastor Kenneth Mars

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

Baptism of Our Lord

January 9, 2022

Text: Matthew 3:13–17

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

In the Western Church, the Epiphany of the Lord Jesus is commemorated with the journey of the Wise Men. It's a joyous and necessary reminder that the birth of Jesus was for the salvation of the entire world. The light of God broke into the darkness of man's sin and misery when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea. But that light was for all people, all nations, all cultures. Christianity cannot and dare not be defined as a national religion and certainly not an ethnic religion. Christianity isn't American, European, or Middle Eastern. It's universal. It's promises of forgiveness, life, and salvation have equal validity and truth among all people, places, and times. As Jewish shepherds and Gentile Wise Men from the East worshipped the Christ Child, so the entire world is invited to come and adore the Savior of all mankind.

The Epiphany of Jesus also reminds us who Jesus is: the divine Son of God the Father come in human flesh and blood. Shepherds worshipped the new-born Jesus at Bethlehem's manger in faithful obedience to the angelic message. Wise Men worshipped the Christ Child at a common house in Bethlehem as they followed a miraculous star. Their worship is beautifully demonstrated in falling before the Christ Child and offering Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Jews and Gentiles worshipped Jesus as God their Savior. Such is the glorious message of the Christmas and Epiphany seasons. Taken together these two seasons reveal how Jesus came to this earth, who He is, and why He came. The Child born of the Virgin Mary (how) is eternal God in human flesh (who) come to save the world (why). Is it any wonder that this season is filled with imagery of light, joy, salvation, and world-wide evangelism?!

I mentioned the journey of the Wise Men is the gospel text used in the Western Church to begin the Epiphany season. The Eastern Church, the various Orthodox Churches such as Eastern Orthodoxy, Russian Orthodoxy, Greek Orthodoxy, and so forth, begin the Epiphany season with the Baptism of our Lord from Matthew's gospel. This wonderful gospel text reveals who Jesus is and why He came. But it amplifies and intensifies the things we have learned about Jesus already from the Christmas narratives and the journey of the Wise Men. The baptism of Jesus in the

Jordan River is one of the greatest revelatory events in the life of the Lord Jesus. It truly is an amazing event. Let's consider it further.

John the Baptist was preaching in the Judean wilderness about the coming of the Messiah. He called everyone to repentance. The days of ignorance were over. The Savior is coming. The time to turn away from all sin, unbelief, and indifference had come. Those who heard and believed John's preaching were baptized in the Jordan River for the forgiveness of their sins. That's where we pick up with our Gospel reading from Matthew 3:13, "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him." This is the same Jesus worshipped and adored by shepherds and Wise Men some 30 thirty years earlier! The infant worshipped as God the Savior now appears in the Jordan River as the God Man prepared to receive John's baptism, that is, a baptism intended for repentant sinners.

That statement should make you stop and say, "Hold on!" Christ the Savior, the Virgin-born Son of God the Father is about to receive a sinner's baptism. Jesus is acting like a repentant sinner. John the Baptist objects, at least, initially. Vs. 14–15, "John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he (i.e., John) consented." This right here, dear saints of God, is one of the most important revelatory moments in Jesus' life. We must understand this clearly and embrace it in faith with our entire heart, soul, mind, and body. Christ Jesus saves the world by standing in our place as our substitute. There in the Jordan River, Jesus is announcing to heaven and earth, to all nations and all peoples of all times and places that He is the one who stands with us and for us. Whatever must be done for the world to find the forgiveness of sins, to have a right standing before the Father, and to have a place in His kingdom as beloved children of God, Jesus will do completely and fully.

And it begins with Jesus receiving a sinner's baptism for the forgiveness of sins. The mighty Son of God clothed in human flesh and blood walks into the Jordan's River declaring He is there to sanctify the waters of baptism by taking the world's sin upon Himself. Jesus becomes THE sinner. All the sins of the world now become credited to Him. Adam and Eve's original sin, all the lying, cheating, pride, bloodshed, and scandal recorded in both Biblical history and amply supplied in secular history, to our own sins of heart and mind. Even those sins of our heart and mind we are terrified to admit to ourselves. Those that haunt us in the waking and sleep hours of life. Jesus

takes them unto Himself. By standing in the Jordan River, Jesus is declaring before heaven and earth He is the Savior who bears the sins of every man, woman, and child.

He will take them all to His cross. On Good Friday, three years later, Jesus sheds His blood to cleanse us from them all. The sins we have committed, the sins committed against us, the failures of doing the good. Jesus gives the saving answer for every thought, word, and deed. Never forget this glorious moment, dear saints of God. Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River for you! That marks Him as the One appointed by God the Father to carry your sins to Calvary's Cross. Baptism in the Jordan River and death by Crucifixion on Good Friday are inseparably linked. Everything that happens in Jesus' life between those two events must be understood in the light and knowledge of those two events. Every miracle, every teaching, the parables, the confrontations with scribes and Pharisees. Jesus was baptized by John in order to carry your sins and the sins of the world to His cross. Full and complete atonement has been made. What began in the Jordan River finds its climax on the cross when Jesus said, "It is finished."

And this is the message I want you all to hear this morning. This is the first sermon you have heard from me in 2022. And I want, above all else, for you to know with the certainty of Christian faith, that your entire life is redeemed by the birth, baptism, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is your life and your salvation. There is nothing in your life that is outside of Christ and His redeeming love. Nothing. Nothing at work. Nothing at home. Nothing in our society. Nothing in your soul. The fears and confusions surrounding the Coronavirus persist. Political and societal divisions continue to deepen in our land. The cost of living is rising. Our nation's health care, educational, and economic systems are stressed. Military and other public servants are experiencing anxiety in unprecedented ways. And then there is the on-going spiritual war that rages publicly and in our own lives. Satan remains the prince of darkness, the lying deceiver of the nations. None of these things, dear people of God, is outside of the redeeming lordship of Jesus. Nothing!

In simple words, Matthew describes our Lord's baptism and what happened immediately afterwards (vs. 16–17):

“And when Jesus baptized (pause – there is the salvific moment!), immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and

behold, a voice from heaven saying, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’”

Heaven was opened! The Spirit descended upon Jesus. He is anointed fully and completely by the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. The deed is done. And there will be no turning back. Jesus is the world’s Savior who bears humanity’s sin. God the Father is pleased. Righteousness and love are fulfilled in Jesus, the Spirit-anointed Son of the Father.

I will bring this sermon to its conclusion with a very personal application. Earlier in the sermon I said Jesus was baptized in order to sanctify the waters of baptism. Your Christian baptism in God’s Trinitarian name is a kind of reenactment of Christ’s baptism. The Holy Spirit descended upon you. You were forever linked to Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. The Father now says of you, “This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.” You are the baptized of the Lord. Jesus is the source of your life in this world and the world to come. Nothing, and I mean nothing, stands outside His redeeming love and grace. In your baptism, you have received the full revelation of God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, of who Christ is, and what He came to do for you. Our boasting is in the Lord Jesus Christ. In Him, you are complete, whole, and perfect. Praise be to Christ ...

✠ 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 16, 2022

Text: John 2:1–11

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

There is much that can be said about the gospel text from John 2, the wedding at Cana in Galilee. Jesus turned at least 120 gallons of water into the best wine. Why wine and not milk? Psalm 104:15 says that the Lord Himself gives wine to gladden the heart of man. And we mustn't overlook the fact that Jesus used six stone jars whose purpose was to hold water for the Jewish rites of purification (vs. 6). Our Lord takes those ceremonies and completes them. He fills them up, so to speak, with Himself. He does what all the Old Testament could never do such as give the perfection of total forgiveness, new life, and fellowship with God's in His kingdom forever.

Jesus turns water into wine in order to signify the joyous hour of salvation has come. That's what He was referring to in vs. 4 when He said, "My hour has not yet come." The hour of salvation didn't arrive in the wedding at Cana and Galilee. But water turned to the wine of gladness pointed to that greatest of hours: Good Friday and Easter. According to vs. 11, this first sign manifested His glory and his disciples believed in Him. This sign set the stage for greater things to come. As I said, much could be said about these wondrous things from John 2.

But there's something even more fundamental that is so easily overlooked: the wedding! This is a wedding feast. I looked back over most of my previous sermons on this text and I immediately noticed that I haven't given much attention to this basic truth. Jesus' first sign occurs at a wedding. Oh, I've mentioned it in previous sermons. I set the context and all that, things like wedding celebrations could last for several days and it was a great embarrassment to run out of wine, and so forth. But I've never really explored the basic fact that our Lord's first sign happened at a wedding, and a wedding feast at that. Why this context? Why not at some other feast? Like a Passover meal. This morning, I hope to rectify this oversight.

In order to answer this question, "Why a wedding?", we need to go back to Adam and Eve. God created Adam from the dust of the ground and breathed into him the breath of life. But Adam was alone with no one of equal stature. The Lord had caused all the

animals to pass before Adam; He named them all. But Genesis 2:20 says, “The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him.” Our pets and animals will never be fit for us, never our equals. Adam was alone without an equal until the Lord God put Adam into a deep sleep and created Eve from his side. In her, Adam saw his equal, one like him, sharing in his majestic glory as bearing God’s image before all creation, and yet very different. The first recorded words of the human race are these rapturous words of delight spoken by Adam about Eve: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (Gen. 2:23). Notice those words! Eve was taken from man and given to him by God. Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh. Not some other substance different from him. But of his very nature. A woman, like the man, fit for him, but gloriously different.

And the next two verses, Genesis 2:24–25, record the first wedding of the human race:

<sup>24</sup>Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. <sup>25</sup>And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

From the very beginning, God created marriage to be an institution of joy, love, and faithfulness. One man with one woman in life-long, faithful commitment to each other to the exclusion of all other suitors. Humans were made to love and to receive love even as God is love. Marriage was to be a complete union of body and mind without shame. Consider that for a moment. No shame. Not bodily shame, emotional, mental, or spiritual shame. Husband and wife joined together in perfect union without shame.

From this union would come children, the fruit of their faithfulness and recipients of their love. According to God’s plan and blessing, children will separate from their parents in some very profound, and difficult ways. Generally speaking, most children separate from their parents for the purpose of marriage. With every subsequent marriage the echoes of Eden’s first marriage continues to be heard. Man joined with woman in love and faithfulness for the purpose of bestowing familial love upon their children, which the Bible call a heritage and reward of the Lord (Psalm 127:3).

Remembering the first marriage of Eden will help us to understand the beauty of Christ Jesus performing His first sign at a wedding. It’s a return back to Eden and the primal image of marriage. God blessing husband and wife with the wine of joy and

gladness. That unnamed couple would not experience the shame of running out of wine. By God's grace, they would know the liberty of a conscience freed from the shame of sin and sorrow by the mercy and grace of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Now we have come full circle back to our Lord's statement about "my hour." Turning water into wine during the wedding feast at Cana is a preview of Christ's death on Good Friday where blood and water flowed from His pierced side. There on the cross, the Lord turned the bitter gal or the sour wine He consumed into the wine of gladness His people receive to their joy and glorification. On the cross, Jesus was winning for Himself His own bride. This is the profound teaching of the Old Testament prophets, especially Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea. But it's clear and most powerful expression is found in Ephesians 5, today's epistle reading.

In that passage, Paul teaches that wives submit to their husbands "as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior" (vs. 23–24). And husbands are to love their wives, "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (vs. 25). For when Christ died on Good Friday, He was securing for her a perfect cleansing, making her pure, without spot or wrinkle so that He could present her unto Himself in splendor. Then Paul says in vs. 28, "In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies." Christian marriages embody this salvific story of Christ Jesus loving His bride with such perfection that He cleanses her by His own blood, restores her to perfection with His divine love, and bestows upon her the beauty and radiance of His glory. To this kind of love and devotion, the church submits in all things.

And lest we miss the point, Paul makes the connection that we dare not miss. He too goes back to the beginning and quotes Genesis 2:24 in Ephesians 5:32–33, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. (*that's Gen. 2:24*) This mystery (*what mystery? of the two becoming one, the mystery of marriage!*) is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church." Marriage refers to Christ and the Church. This is why Christ's first miracle, a miracle that pointed to His death whereby He won for Himself His Bride the Church, fitting takes place at a wedding feast. What Jesus does in miniature for an unnamed newlywed couple is what He does in large on Good Friday and Easter. He takes His bride unto Himself without shame for she is perfectly radiant in His love. And He gives the wine of gladness that thrills her in body and soul for all eternity. Dear saints of God, every Christian marriage is to embody this love story of

redemption and grace. We reflect it imperfectly. But marriage is the natural place for forgiving one another. Where redemptive love is experienced.

We are now coming to the end of our time for today's sermon. As your pastor is not only my responsibility to teach you the positive doctrines of Scripture but I must also warn you. I must spend a few moments to identify some of the challenges Christians are facing today regarding marriage. Our society doesn't honor as it had in the past. We can't develop our understanding of marriage from our surrounding culture; it will inevitably lead us astray. It's being redefined in ways contrary to God's Word. Gay marriage does not exist. It is not only contrary to human nature but it makes a mockery of the entire Biblical witness to God's love to His people as a husband loving his wife.

Cohabitation is devastating marriage. For it wants to take the benefits of marriage without the absolute commitment marriage demands. This too is contrary to Christ's absolute faithfulness to His Bride; there is no hint in Jesus of Him saying to the Church, let's live together in order to see if we can work everything out, otherwise we can go our separate ways. He suffers and dies for her in absolute loving commitment. If this weren't sufficient warning to teach our children and grandchildren to avoid cohabitation like a sickness, then one should also note that all the measurable criteria for evaluating a "successful marriage", things like less spousal and child abuse, greater income stability, reduced likelihood for divorce, and so forth are significantly reduced by cohabitation. In other words, couple who cohabit are more likely to experience abuse for themselves and any children involved, have less income stability, and face a much greater statistical likelihood of divorce if they eventually marriage.

The sexual revolution of the 1960's has turned sex from a marital act of love leading to the procreation of children, who in turn receive the love of their parents, into mere entertainment and self-expression. The result is that having children has been marginalized. They are no longer seen as the heritage and reward of the Lord but burdens to be planned and scheduled at convenient times in life. We must not miss the historic and thematic connection that the rise of abortion, the expected use of contraceptives, and the mainstream acceptance of pornography – all fruitless expressions of sexuality – have had on marriage and the family. What does having children have to do with Christ and His Bride the Church? The apostle Paul, in Galatians 4:26, calls the Church the mother of us all. Mothers bear children.

More could be said about the pain of divorce. And why Jesus and all of Scripture teaches against it. Other challenges include: serial dating and the hook-up culture that our teenagers and young people are facing; blended families, various forms of abuse, and so forth. All of these situations have touched us in one way or another. None of us are unaffected. I speak to you all as your pastor; I want God's very best for you all. There is much that I have said that could be misunderstood. Please visit with me more if you have questions or concerns.

The biblical vision of marriage – its divine nobility, sanctity, and beauty; its fruitfulness – needs to be recovered by the Christian Church. Otherwise, Christ's first miraculous sign at the wedding feast in Cana becomes almost incomprehensible. And we lose out on the blessings of the Lord. Each and every marriage, especially between a Christian man and woman, is a living embodiment of God the Father blessing His children with real, tangible love and faithfulness to be experienced in the sanctify and joy of marriage. My hope is that all of you will leave this service knowing that we are not simply against this or that things. But we are for marriage, for family, pro-life, pro-church, and pro-saving gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

My goal in this sermon was to fix an oversight in my past preaching. To preach on what marriage is. The living image of Christ and His bride, the Church. And why turning water into wine at a wedding feast was the fitting context for our Lord's first miracle. It pointed to His death and resurrection where He gives His bride the wine of gladness. Marriage is a picture of God's love for His people. From the beginning of time, the Lord intended to be married to His beloved people. You are the beloved of the Lord. The radiant bride of Christ. In the love of our Bridegroom, let us live with joy and hope.

✠ 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

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

January 23, 2022

Text: Matthew 8:1–13

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

Naaman was a mighty man of valor in the Syrian army. He had won many battles, vanquished many foes, and had his share in the spoils of war. The Lord had even given Naaman victory over the armies of Israel. His life was the perfect military career until Naaman contracted leprosy. He was now facing the very real prospects of a slowing agonizing death and the loss of all power and prestige. But we learn in the OT reading (II Kings 5) that Naaman learned of the prophet Elisha. The Syrian king, Naaman's commander-in-chief, sent him to Israel with an indecent amount of money in order to pay Elisha for healing Naaman.

This is an incredible history. In youth catechism classes I encourage students to imagine being a mighty, powerful general used to getting his way. You contract a deadly disease but there's a healer in one of the countries you've defeated in battle. Imagine going to Elisha's humble house to pay handsomely for your healing only to be ignored by the prophet. Instead, Elisha sends out a servant to tell Naaman to go dip himself seven times in the muddy Jordan River. No religious ceremonies. No waving his hands or calling on God's name. Just some strange instructions conveyed through a servant! The audacity! Doesn't he know who I am? Naaman storms off in a rage!

Eventually, cooler heads prevailed and Naaman went to the Jordan. II Kings 5:14 says, "So Naaman went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God, and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean." Naaman learned something about God that we would do well to remember. God gives His blessings according to His divine ways. The living God of heaven and earth is not subject to our ways and wisdom; we are subject to Him. In this situation, the Lord chose to give His healing through a word of promise attached to the muddy waters of the Jordan River. Naaman didn't even get to pay for his healing. But Naaman also learned that God's works and ways are good and holy and righteous. And He desires to grant us the salvation and blessings we seek. But God reveals Himself to us graciously in the manner of His choosing.

This OT reading is the perfect companion to the gospel text from Matthew 8:1–13. Today, we won't give much consideration to our Lord healing the leper; our time will focus primarily on the healing of the centurion's servant in vs. 5–13. But this needs to be said about the leper. When he implored Jesus, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean" (vs. 2), Jesus answered with beautiful and powerful words of love and grace, "I will; be clean" (vs. 3). Never forget dear saints of God that our Lord Jesus Christ willingly reaches out His divine hand and touches us in our misery, in the filthy uncleanness of our sin, in the midst of our raging doubts and anger and fear, etc. And His touch is the touch of healing, of calm, of compassion, of forgiveness unto eternal life, of acceptance as His beloved children. So, this mini sermon within the sermon is the promise that our Lord Jesus Christ is more than willing to save, love, redeem, and restore you and everyone. "I will; be clean."

For the rest of our time, however, I want to focus more on Jesus' ministry to the centurion and his paralyzed servant. The centurion and Naaman are similar in that both needed divine intervention. They differ in how they approached the Lord. Naaman went to Elisha in pride, self-determination, and religious expectation. We know this for Naaman arrived at Elisha's with his large military retinue; he was willing to pay a kingly sum of money for his healing; he was more than ready to perform great feats of daring to secure his healing; and he had every expectation that Elisha would come out and do some religious-looking actions in order to bring about the healing.

Note the difference in how the centurion approaches Jesus. The centurion comes in humility without any pretensions to rank, power, or privilege. Luke 8:5 describes the centurion appealing to Jesus with these words, "Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly" (vs. 6). He simply describes the situation to Jesus; he makes no requests, no demands. It's as if the centurion was simply describing the situation while waiting for the Lord to act; it's an example of praying, "Thy will be done." We learn from the parallel account in Luke's gospel (7:1–10) that the centurion was a wealthy man. For he built a synagogue for the Jews out of his own funds! But he offers no payment for the healing. The humility of the centurion is seen in what he does NOT do. Unlike Naaman, he does not go blustering about displaying rank, privilege, wealth, and power.

We would do well to learn from the centurion's example. For we all come to Jesus in our need. Whether that be our own personal need. Or the need of someone we love. The Bible teaches us from cover to cover that the Lord accepts the humble of heart

and rejects the proud and arrogant. After almost every sermon, we immediately sing those great words first sung by a broken and humble king David (Ps. 51:10–12), “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from Thy presence, and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation, and uphold me with Thy free spirit.”

The centurion comes empty handed and in desperate need. He looks to Jesus to be gracious and kind. Do not be afraid to identify with the broken, the needy, the powerless, the outcast. For our Lord Jesus came to heal the sick, to give life to the dying, to forgive sinners of real, deadly sins, to give the status of “sons of God” to prodigal sons like you and me who abandoned the Father’s house in sin and rebellion. In spite of all his power, wealth, and privilege, the centurion of Capernaum came appealing to Jesus as a humble beggar. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, hear God’s Word today and come to Jesus with your heart’s need trusting solely in His goodness and desire to bless and redeem. You must know that Jesus will answer. But He will do so according to His own ways. He is the crucified and resurrected Lord of glory. Whatever He does and however He does it, it will be for your good according to His steadfast, unshakeable love.

The centurion’s humble faith is also evident in how he responds to our Lord’s offer to come to his house. This is one of the most extraordinary events in the Bible. The centurion describes the need. The Lord Jesus responds with the offer to come and heal the servant (vs. 7). Everything looks good! But the centurion something most unexpected. It’s almost shocking. “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof...” (vs. 8a). The centurion speaks the truth that no one else utters in the gospel narratives. The centurion isn’t worthy to have Jesus go out of His way to heal the servant. I don’t deserve this Jesus. Nor does my servant. The closest recognition of this truth is Peter when he caught the great catch of fish at Jesus’ command. Peter’s response wasn’t a hearty thanks. But rather, “Depart from Lord, for I am a sinful man” (Luke 5:8). I am not worthy to have this great gift of fish, of healing for my servant, of forgiveness, or heaven. But the Lord makes us worthy by His grace and love. Even as He makes us clean by His precious blood shed on the cross. Even as He fills us with the Holy Spirit to make us living temples of God.

So the centurion instead, speaks the greatest words of faith in the Bible. Listen to the rest of vs. 8b, “...but only say the word, and my servant will be healed.” Lord, it’s unnecessary for you to come into my unworthy house. Instead, just speak your

authoritative word, whatever word you choose to speak, but just speak it. And that will be enough.

Naaman wanted Elisha to come out and wave his hand over the leprosy and call upon God's name. He thought he deserved some kind of religious ceremony. And I've got plenty of money. An entire kingdom stands behind me. But that was not the way of the centurion of Capernaum. A word spoken by Jesus will suffice. You know, dear saints, Jesus has spoken a number of things about us: created in His image, uniquely and irreplaceable, forgiven saints, children of God, inheritors of God's kingdom, etc. Are we to be like Naaman and demand some kind of supernatural proof? Or will we be content with Christ's simple word of promise? For I must confess, that what I experience in my day to day life – and I suspect this is true for you too – is failure, defeat, doubt, anguish, outright anger at God and man both.

And yet Jesus speaks to all of that and says, "I have died for it all. And risen from the dead to make all things right. That you may be my beloved people now and for eternity." Will we trust the simple word of Jesus knowing that whatever He says is sufficient? When we trust Jesus, especially when experiencing all the uncertainties and pains of life in this world, our Lord says, "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith" (vs. 10). In other words, Jesus declares such faith to be great and precious in His sight even as you are precious in His sight. Dear saints, be strengthened and encouraged by the word of promise given by Jesus. It is more than enough.

✠ 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

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

January 30, 2022

Text: Jonah 1:1–17; Matthew 8:23–27

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

In the 790's BC, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob commanded His prophet, Jonah, to go to Nineveh and cry out against it. Their evil had come before the Lord God Almighty (Jonah 1:1-2) like a stench in His nostrils. This was no easy task. Nineveh was about 500 miles from Joppa in Israel and must be traveled by on foot or a beast of burden. Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, a deadly enemy of God's people. Many Israelites had been slain by Assyrian swords, spears, and arrows. Some 60 or 70 years after Jonah's ministry, in 722 B.C., the Assyrians would lead northern Israel into slavery and captivity after they destroyed Samaria, Israel's capital; those ten tribes of Israel would be forever lost. Jonah was commanded to go preach to that kind of people, 500 miles away in their capital city.

Maybe we can understand better why Jonah tried to run from God's presence heading to Tarshish rather than Nineveh. Three times in the reading from Jonah 1, it says Jonah was fleeing from the presence of the Lord (vs. 3 [2x], vs. 10). Jonah's troubles happened because he ran away from the Lord in disobedience.

Trying to run away from God is a rather foolish, silly idea. And it gets Jonah into a heap of trouble. We should ask ourselves if we are running from the Lord? From His good and gracious will for your lives? Our running from God may not look as dramatic as Jonah's disobedience. Our running is generally more subtle and discreet. Even though God's Word commands us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and body (Dt. 6:5, Lk. 10:27) and that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves (Lev. 19:18, Lk. 10:27), we frequently try to qualify God's command and will for our lives. Must I love my enemies, pray for them, and do good to those who spitefully use us? (Matt. 5:43–48). Do I really need to love God by gladly hearing His Word and holding it sacred so as to go to church to hear His word, receive Christ's body and blood in faith, give tithes and offerings, pray, sing, and encourage my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ?

Let's make this a bit more concrete as we consider our priorities. How do we order our lives? The entire Law of God is summarized in love for God and love for man. Is it possible that we hide from the God-given obligations by running after various forms of distractions? Shopping, movies, work, computer screens, gaming, books, clubs, social activities? Or do we order the days of our weeks so that the daily hearing of God's Word and prayer are of the first priority culminating in an absolute commitment to regular, faithful worship around God's Word and Sacraments. And a similar first-priority commitment to loving our neighbor by giving the time and attention they each need? It begins with our families, then God's people in the church, and then to the larger society. I am talking about establishing godly, first-order priorities. Faith and love toward God manifested in the ways He commands. Love toward family, to the members of the church, especially our local congregation, and then the broader community. Our lives and families are all very different. How we go about ordering our lives will look different in the details. But the Biblical priorities remain the same. Love for God above all things and love for our neighbor. Even when it's hard. Or it appears the Lord is guiding you into very difficult or uncomfortable situations. There was nothing wrong with Jonah getting into a boat for Tarshish except that God said go to Nineveh. Running from God is a sin; it always leads to more trouble.

Let's consider our Lord's disciples in Matthew 8. Their situation is somewhat similar to Jonah's; they find themselves on a boat out in the waters during a "great storm." It seems their boat is about to sink, like Jonah's. And in both situations, there is someone sleeping, Jonah and Jesus. In both situations men are afraid and praying for help lest they die. The men in both boats survive due to divine, miraculous intervention. The divine solution in both cases is that someone is cast over into the depths.

Jonah got into trouble because He disobeyed God's good and gracious will. The disciples get into trouble because they obeyed God's will! You heard that correctly. In Matthew 8:18, the Bible records that Jesus gave orders to go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Then, in vs. 23, Jesus gets into the boat and His disciples follow Him. The disciples followed Jesus into the boat and set sail for the eastern shores of the Sea of Galilee. And then the storm hits! Jesus sleeps. And these grown men, at least 3 of which were professional fishermen used to sailing on the Sea of Galilee, believe they are about to die. All because they obeyed and trusted in Jesus.

We Christians sometimes have the idea that trouble comes to us only when we sin and disobey God, kind of like Jonah. But that's a mistake. To be sure, God does discipline us when we sin. Thanks be to God that He does not leave us in our sin and unbelief. He calls us back to Him in repentance and faith.

But what are we to make of things when we get into trouble for obeying God's good and gracious will? The apostle James, according to Acts 12, was martyred by King Herod through James was obedient to Christ's command to preach and strength the young Christians in Jerusalem. The elderly apostle John was exiled to the rocky island of Patmos for preaching about Jesus (Rev. 1). Early Christians were martyred, imprisoned, harassed, and abused simply because they worshipped Jesus. The epistles of I Peter, Hebrews, and Revelation are largely written to Christians suffering for their obedience to Christ. The Lord Jesus said this would happen, "If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you..." (John 15:20). Where is the Lord in all this? Does He care?

The disciples thought the Lord Jesus didn't care about them; He's asleep! How can He sleep at a time like this?! But we mustn't overlook the simple truth that Jesus is with them in the boat. Let this be plastered before our eyes, Christ Jesus is with us in the storms as well as in the sunny days. It may seem that God has gone to sleep. But the truth is that Jesus remains with us. The only way that boat was going to sink was for Jesus to sink with it. Wherever Jesus goes, we go; whatever happens to Him, happens to us.

But let us not forget who this Jesus is. After a long, hard day of ministry, Jesus sleeps deeply. Matthew's gospel reminds us that Jesus is a true, natural man who had a body and soul; He required food and drink, sleep and all the other natural things of human life, except without sin. But this true man, when awakened, rebukes the wind and the waves. They obey Him for He is also God, the Lord and master over the wind and the waves. Jesus is God and man in one person; fully divine and fully human. This Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man, is always with us.

Earlier, I told you not to forget that God's divine solution was that someone was cast overboard. Jonah was cast over, swallowed by great fish, and spent three nights in the belly of the fist. In Matthew 12, Jesus teaches that God's greatest sign is like Jonah's three nights in the fish's belly. For the Son of Man, Jesus, must be cast out into the depths of death and the grave for three days after having made atonement for the sins of the world. Divine peace came to the world through the sign of Jonah: the death and

resurrection of Jesus. When we're tempted to think God doesn't love us or care for us, remember that Jesus, God's Son, went to hell and back for your sakes, because of His great love for you and this world.

For us who desire to be Christian, we learn a most wonderful and glorious lesson. When the storms rage against us, Christ Jesus is not only ready to help us but remains with us in the midst of it, through thick and thin. He faced the forces of death and hell; He suffered and died for our sins; He rose again from the dead to give us life in this world and eternal life in the world to come. He sends the Holy Spirit to reside in our hearts and minds to be our Comforter and Advocate. This Jesus has promised to be with us always and to use our joys and sorrows, our successes and failures for our present and eternal good. He may discipline us, as He did Jonah and His fearful disciples. But He works all these things for our good and for His glory.

✠ 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.