

Pastor Kenneth Mars

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

The Transfiguration of Our Lord

February 6, 2022

Text: Matthew 17:1–9

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

Moses was a privileged man. The Lord God of heaven and earth used Moses to record God's act of creation culminating in the creation of man and woman, to record man's early history including his fall and his subsequent actions, to bring Israel out of Egyptian bondage, to record God's Law including the 10 Commandments, and all of God's mighty deeds found in the first five books of the Bible, Genesis through Deuteronomy. Moses was privileged to see God face to face (Exodus 33:11) especially on Mount Sinai. But those face-to-face encounters with God changed Moses. According to today's Old Testament reading, Moses' face would shine after meeting with God. This divine afterglow frightened the people of Israel. In a sense, Moses was Transfigured or illuminated with the light of God. And even though God's people were afraid of Moses' shining face, Moses would not cover it while he spoke what God commanded him to say. Only after speaking God's Word, did Moses veil his face.

Imagine that kind of direct encounter with God. I think there is something in all of us that desires to have that kind of experience with God. Direct. Immediate. Powerful. And like Moses, such encounters will change you. For we worship the living God; He is holy, transcendent, good, powerful and loving.

Let us consider the events recorded in our gospel text. There we learn of another direct and powerful experience with the immediate presence of God. In Matthew chapter 17 we find Jesus taking Peter, James and John "up a high mountain by themselves" (vs. 1). Before the disciples' very eyes, Jesus is transfigured. His appearance is altered and His clothing became dazzling white. The divine glory of Jesus Christ, the eternally begotten Son of the Father, is being seen with the flesh and blood eyes of Peter, James and John. They are seeing God! Face to face like Moses!

Peter, James and John had been with Jesus for three years by the time they went up the Mount of Transfiguration. The disciples have heard Jesus' powerful teaching; seen miracles upon miracles. But they've never seen anything like this. Matthew says that Jesus "was transfigured...and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as

light” (vs. 2). It sounds like what we confess in the Nicene Creed about Jesus. “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God.”

And then as if Jesus being transfigured wasn’t glorious enough, Moses and Elijah appear in glory talking with Jesus. Elijah, keep in mind, lived 870 years before Jesus while Moses some 1,440 years before these events and yet, here they are talking with Jesus. Peter, James, and John are having an amazing, divine experience of the first order.

Peter sees these grand events. He looks steadfastly at the brilliantly illuminated Jesus and says, “Lord, it is good that we are here” (vs. 4). Certainly true. But somewhat of an understatement. But then again, what can you really say at such a time? This is an awesome, overwhelming experience.

Peter, however, does respond further. Jesus, “If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah” (vs. 4). It’s hard to know what Peter was thinking in that request. But notice the effect such an action would have. It places Jesus, Moses, and Elijah all on the same footing. Each has his own tent. In this scenario, you could visit one, then another, and then another. Each gets his turn. Do you see the problem with such an approach?

Matthew shrewdly tells what happens next. “He, (that is, Peter) was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well please; listen to him’” (vs. 5). God the Father interrupts Peter and explains why they are seeing Jesus, Moses, and Elijah.

It is good that the three disciples are there but not for the reasons Peter was thinking. Peter got caught up in the glory of the moment instead considering what all this meant. The coming of Moses and Elijah was a sign of the end. When Moses and Elijah show up, you know the End times are here. According to Deuteronomy 18, God’s people were to look for a new Moses, one like unto the Moses of the Exodus but even greater. According to Malachi 4:5, Elijah was to return before “the great and awesome day of the Lord.”

Here on the Mount of Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus clothed in heaven’s glory. This event is another powerful sign that “the great and awesome day of the Lord” had arrived in Jesus. Jesus is the new and greater Moses who leads His people from the bondage of sin, degradation, the devil and even death. And Elijah? Well, the disciples ask Jesus about him as they are leaving the mountain. Jesus said Elijah was to return in the Last Days. And that has happened in the coming of John the Baptist; he is the new Elijah. In Matthew 17:12 Jesus says, “I tell you that Elijah has already come, and

they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.” As the end-times Elijah, John the Baptist, was persecuted and martyred for preaching and teaching the truth, the same will happen to Jesus. He will suffer and die. The birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus are the greatest signs that we are living in the Last Days. We need not look to the future for the end times. We are in them now, dear saints of God. The time of vigilance, perseverance, and patience is now, not some time in the years to come.

All of this was lost on Peter, James, and John. And who can blame them? I don't think I would have fared any better. It was good that they saw visible proof that the end-time kingdom of God had invaded human history. In the not too distance future, these three men would be call as apostles to preach the good news of Christ's end-time gospel; a gospel message of peace, reconciliation and forgiveness this congregation has been entrusted to proclaim to our families, friends, neighborhoods and communities.

That's why God the Father interrupts Peter; to tell him what he should be thinking. “This is my beloved Son...listen to him.” Listen to Jesus, the Father says. The end times are here. Set aside this thirst for tents of glory and listen to my beloved Son. And when the disciples are finally able to open their eyes again, who is that they see and hear – “no one but Jesus only” (vs. 8) speaking words of peace and forgiveness. Moses and Elijah can't be placed on equal footing with Jesus. Only He is the beloved Son of the Father. All that Moses wrote and all the Elijah experienced pointed to the coming of Jesus. That's why we listen to Jesus!

I began this sermon with a brief reflection on Moses' direct encounter with God. And now we have Peter, James, and John's direct experience on the Mount of Transfiguration. While all of us have that longing to see God and experience Him in directly and powerfully, the Bible teaches us to seek God in a very different way. Let's consider Peter's post-resurrection reflection on the Mount of Transfiguration from II Peter 1:17-21, “For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,’ we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain...” Peter's is referring to Jesus' transfiguration.

Peter continues... “And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced

by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

Peter says there’s “something more sure” than even a Mount of Transfiguration type of experience. According to Peter, the better, the more sure way to experience God is through His “prophetic word.” Turn to the Scriptures!! The Bible. Remember what God the Father said on the Mount of Transfiguration, “Listen to Jesus!” The prophetic Scriptures preach Jesus from start to finish. Through the Scriptures you hear Jesus. If we want to know and experience God more deeply and to walk more closely with Christ, then turn to the Scriptures. Receive the Sacrament often as He bids us do in His own testament. Fill your life with prayer and meditation on God’s Word so that the word of Jesus fills your entire life. Not just Sundays. But all the time. Talk to each other about Christ through His Word, friends, families, neighbors, strangers. At home, over coffee, after watching movies, or listening to music, or walking in the beauty of God’s creation, or waiting at the bedside of a sick loved one, during times of mourning and suffering, during times of rejoicing.

This is why the Church, since the days of the apostles, has offered worship services on a consistent, week by week basis. During the Reformation, when Martin Luther and our Lutheran forefathers where doing their work of ordering the church under the priority of Christ’s gospel, they followed this same pattern. Weekly worship services that followed the tradition of the Western Church were still used for every service. The liturgy, the vestments, an orderly pattern of Bible readings and a sermon based upon those readings, the Lord’s Supper, and communal prayers were offered every Sunday service and on other festivals. In the Word and Sacraments “something more sure” was given to God’s people consistently, weekly, year after year, lifetime after lifetime. And know this...encountering God through His Word will change you in some very deep and powerful ways. At times, it can be overwhelming.

Temptations and trials will come. Adversity and set-backs will shake us to the foundation. These are the Last Days, after all. But you have “something more sure” than anything this fallen world can throw at you – the Word of God. Through the Holy Scriptures, may you listen to Jesus so that we He comes to take us home, we’ll then be able to see Him face to face in all His divine glory and majesty.

✠ 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

February 13, 2022

Text: Matthew 20:1–16

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

Massah and Meribah were not national moments of pride and boasting for the people of Israel. Massah means testing and Meribah means quarreling. The events of Exodus 17 were called Massah and Meribah because that was the place where God's people tested God and quarreled against Moses, the man of God. That place became synonymous with sin, unbelief, and failure. It was a place of shame. I'm not exaggerating. Listen to the words of the psalmist in Psalm 95:7b–11:

⁷... Today, if you hear his voice, ⁸do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, ⁹when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.

¹⁰For forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways."

¹¹Therefore I swore in my wrath, "They shall not enter my rest."

This was the generation of God's people who saw His wonders in the land of Egypt. The nine plagues culminating in the Passover where God's people were saved through Lamb's blood covering their doors and windows; this was the generation who saw God's mighty right hand of power when He split the Red Sea so that God's people could pass through on dry land only to witness the Red Sea crash upon Israel's armies destroying them according to His justice. Egypt had enslaved God's people for over 400 years. Israel's day of deliverance had come. But Egypt refused and suffered horribly for disobeying God's warnings and commands. This generation of Israelites saw all these things.

But only weeks after experiencing God's deliverance, they tested God and quarreled with Moses. Why have you brought us here to the Sinai desert? "...to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" (Ex. 17:3)

Israel's need was real. Up to a million people, not counting animals and livestock, needed water in the thirsty desert of the Sinai Peninsula. Where were they to get it? Instead of prayer and seeking God's face, they quarreled against Moses and wanted to stone him to death. They tested God! How can He, the creator of heaven and earth, provide water for us here in this dry, thirsty place? "Is the Lord among us or not?" (vs. 7). Many, many years later, the psalmist would write, our fathers "put (God) to the test and put (God) to the proof, though they had seen (His) work" (Ps. 95:9).

The Lord commanded Moses to take the staff he used to strike the Nile River and by which its waters turned into blood, and strike a rock. From that struck rock, water will flow with such generosity that everyone, every man, woman, and child as well as all their cattle will be able to satisfy their thirst in the desert (Ex. 17:5–6). The Lord delivered His people in spite of their hardness of heart.

But the story doesn't end there nor did their quarreling and testing. For as the book of Exodus records and the psalmist describes, that generation, which saw God's mighty work, continued to rebel against the Lord. So much so in fact that they never entered the Promised Land. Only Joshua and Caleb and the youth who were 20 years old or younger at the time of the Exodus entered the Promised Land. And that only after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Massah and Meribah became the shorthand words that described an entire generation. Testing and quarreling.

This Old Testament background must be known and understood in order to understand what the Lord Jesus is teaching us in the parable from Matthew 20. For in vs. 11, we see that one group of laborers in the parable says this about the generosity of the master, "And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house." They grumbled just like the Israelites at Massah and Meribah. This is the warning we New Testament Christians must heed today. Grumbling, testing, quarreling, and hardness of heart are temptations that God's face today. And they produce nothing in our hearts and lives but misery and sorrow. And the devil would use them to destroy our most holy faith in Christ Jesus.

Let's consider the parable briefly. It teaches us about the nature of God's kingdom. Keep that in your mind. This parable is not about workplace justice. The parable is about the Kingdom of God and the exceedingly generous nature of salvation that is found in Christ Jesus. It's about our salvation, the forgiveness you have everyday and the hope you have unto eternal life.

To the details. A vineyard owner needs extra help bringing in the harvest. So he goes out at various times in the day to hire day laborers. The first group was hired early in the morning, about 6 am, with a promised wage of one denarius. That was the standard wage for a day's work. The master goes out at other times of the day and hires more workers at 9 am, noon, 3 pm, and even 5 pm. But this group is different than the first group. For these workers who will have worked fewer hours, the vineyard owner says (vs. 4), "You go in the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you." No promises are given except what is right as determined by the owner.

The day's work comes to an end, roughly at 6 pm. And the master commands his foreman to pay the workers beginning with the last and finishing with the first. To those who worked but one hour, a single denarius. Wow! A full day's wage for one hour's work. The next group, a denarius. Everyone gets a full day's wage. And then the last group; these are the ones who began at 6 am and have worked all day, a full 12 hours. To them the master gives a single denarius as they had agreed. No more, no less. That's when the grumbling and complaining begins. "They grumbled at the master of the house, saying, '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. 11–12). Remember, this is a parable about God's kingdom, not workplace ethics.

The longer Christians participate in the life of the Church, the greater likelihood of facing the temptation of this group of workers. We have been members of the church for decades and have borne the labor of those years in taking care of the congregation, giving offerings, singing hymns, supporting pastors as they come and go, serving on boards, helping out whenever and wherever. And we start developing a sense of entitlement. It starts slowly, maybe even imperceptibly. We deserve more from God. It's not fair that we, who have borne the burden for

so long should be treated equally as everyone. That our promise and reward of heaven is the same as the newly baptized infant. Or the new convert who has only recently become a believer. Or even to be considered on the same basis as a lifelong, hardened sinner who confessed faith in Jesus only days or maybe even minutes before his death. And he gets the same funeral service as I will get though I have borne the struggle of Christian faith for so many, many years.

But what does the master in the parable say to this group of grumblers, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?” (vs. 13–15). All notions of merit or of being more worthy than someone else in the Church must be cast away lest it destroy our most holy faith. Jesus died and rose again from the dead to save people from sin, death, the devil, and God’s righteous wrath against all ungodliness. In the Church, our hope is placed upon the unmerited mercy and grace of Christ Jesus. Our confidence is based solely upon these words from the master, “You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you” (vs. 4). Grace, mercy, and the goodness of Jesus is the sure foundation of our Christian faith.

We might be tempted to think this is making too much of the OT reading from Exodus 17, Psalm 95, and the parable of Matthew 17. But the writer to the Hebrew Christians didn’t think so. He begins in Hebrews 13:1 with “Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus...” You Christians, you believers in Jesus who have a share in heaven’s calling. Think about Jesus. And then the admonition

⁷Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, “Today, if you hear his voice, ⁸do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, ⁹where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. ¹⁰Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.’ ¹¹As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’”

(The Holy Spirit speaks through Psalm 95!)

¹²Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

The possibility to become hardened by sin is real. So what are we to do? Exhort one another, that is, encourage one another. Pray for each other. Lift one another up with words of encouragement. Weep with those who weep. Rejoice with those who rejoice. By the grace of the Spirit, be of one mind with one another. The battle is long. And dear saints of God, we need each other. Each of us needs to know and experience God’s love and forgiveness through real, tangible words and actions.

Salvation has come to us all. We have a common hope in Christ. The rewards of heaven will be sorted out by Christ on the Last Day. In the meantime, trust in the “whatever is right, I will give you” of the Lord Jesus. And build up one another. For we have come to share together in Christ Jesus. And His reward is unfathomably great and generous. Our Promised Land is coming. And our share in it will be rich beyond imagination. Praise be to Christ for His generosity and 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.

Pastor Kenneth Mars

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

Sexagesima¹

February 20, 2022

Text: Luke 8:4–15

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

In one of the collects of the church, we pray that God's "Word may not be bound but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people" (*Collect for the Church*, LSB 305). Today's Gospel reading from Luke 8 teaches us how God's Word has free course among His people; it also teaches us why God's Word is bound. The Lord Jesus Himself uses a parable of seed sown in 4 types of soil to teach us about the importance of hearing God's Word with an honest and good heart.

Now it is clear from our Lord's own teaching in the parable that the seed is the Word of God. Coupled with the Old Testament reading from Isaiah 55:10–13, we learn that God's Word is powerful and carries its own authority. Just as the rain and the snow fall from the clouds causing the earth to bring forth vegetation, so the Word from God's mouth is an efficacious Word; it accomplishes the very purposes of God Himself. Listen to God's Word from Isaiah 55, "So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (vs. 11). We know how the natural world works. As rain comes to the ground making it fruitful. So shall God's Word go forth into the world to accomplish everything the Lord seeks to accomplish. There is great comfort in this, for both a preacher of the Word and for hearers of the Word. The Lord will accomplish His work through His Word. That's true in this service of God's Word or whenever we read God's Word at home. God the Holy Spirit uses His Word effectually and powerfully. Another reason why we say, "Thanks be to God" after every Scripture reading in our worship services.

¹ This message was borrowed in large part from Prof. John Pless. Thank you dear brother and teacher in Christ.

From this parable we learn that God's Word alone has the power to convert people from unbelief to faith and bring them from death to life. It is only through the preaching of God's Word that the church grows. Evangelistic programs can never become the means of evangelism. The Holy Spirit uses the Scriptures to create faith in human hearts; through God's Word He creates and sustains believers in Christ Jesus. All our efforts are focused on the right use of God's Word in people's lives.

A perennial question asked throughout history is why do some hear this Word and believe, while others also hear it but reject it in unbelief? Human reason might answer that some people are by nature fertile ground, well-suited to receive the Word of God, while others are more hard-hearted, rocky ground unsuited for the things of the Spirit. Such an interpretation overlooks the fact that all of us are by nature resistant to the Word of God, for we are all children of Adam and as such are equally sinful and corrupt, dead in trespasses and sin. The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian congregation, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (I Cor. 2:14). The problem of sin and unbelief runs deep within our human nature.

In answering the question why some believe and other don't, some have fixed the blame on God, arguing that the quality of the seed varies or that God does not allow His Word to take root in some. Such reasoning leads to the erroneous doctrine that God predestines some to condemnation and hell. This is contrary to God's Word which teaches that God desires all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (I Tim. 2:4). What we know for certain is the salvation won for the world by our Lord on the cross is bestowed through His Word. His Word alone has the power to impart salvation to those who hear it. Therefore Jesus says, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (vs. 8).

In today's parable our Lord describes four types of hearing God's Word. Three of the four end in failure. The parable does not seem to be very optimistic about the success of preaching. But the focus is not primarily on the three scenarios where there is no fruit but on the one scene which ends with a bountiful harvest. One aspect of this parable that we ought not miss is that the language and

imagery of a harvest points to the Last Day when God will gather His crop into His heavenly kingdom. In spite of all the impediments and obstacles to God's Word, there will be a harvest. Many will hear and hold fast to the Word in patient endurance to the end. More often than not, the success of the Word of the Lord is hidden from our eyes. But remember the promise from Isaiah, the word of God preached will achieve the purpose for which God sent it.

Therefore our Lord's parable is aimed at teaching us how to hear His Word; it also teaches us what we must be aware of as we hear God's Word. In the first type of hearing, the seed is trampled down on the well-worn path. It never get planted in the ground and is eaten by hungry birds. Jesus tells us that this illustrates how Satan comes and "takes away the word out of their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved" (vs. 12). You see, God's seed is not planted in neutral territory. The prince of this world seeks to rob you of the implanted Word which is able to save your souls. Where God's Word is being preached there is a spiritual battle going on. Satan wants to separate you from the Triune God forever. The only way he can achieve that goal is to separate you from the Word of God. We know his deceitful tricks. If he cannot keep you away from the place where God's Word is being preached, he will try to remove that Word from your heart. He will try to convince you that the life and salvation which God promises to you in His Word is not really for you. Satan will do everything in his power to keep the Word from penetrating into your heart.

Then Jesus describes a second kind of hearing. There are those who receive the seed of God's Word. It gets planted and begins to grow. But it withers and dies because of the heat of testing and temptation. Jesus says these "hear the word, (and) receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away" (vs. 13). Seed which is planted but not watered will soon die. So it is with faith that is not continually nourished and enlivened by the Word of God. There may be an initial burst of zeal and enthusiasm but without the moisture of the daily application of our Baptism, the ongoing hearing of God's Word, and regular reception of Christ's body and blood in the Holy Supper, faith begins to wilt and ultimately dies. The heat of the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh are relentless. We desperately need the on-going hearing of God's Word coupled with the nurture and care of the Holy Spirit.

Thirdly, there is the seed that falls among the briars. This seed sprouts and grows up. But the life is choked out of the new plant by thorns which entangle the plant. Jesus says that this scene represents those whose who hear God's Word but their faith is overcome by "the cares and riches and pleasures of life" (vs. 14). These are people captivated by their possessions. That's quite an irony: the things we own so often wind up owning us! This type of hearing represents people who are too occupied with other things, so often worthy things like careers, relationships, recreation, money and so forth. But they can't make time for God's Word in private or during the public Divine Service. Tragically, we busy moderns schedule out God's Word. And it becomes choked and dies.

But then there is the seed which falls on the good ground, grows up and yields a hundred-fold harvest according to vs. 8. Our Lord says this last situation represents "those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience" (vs. 15). This is what we are praying for when we pray that God's Word "may not be bound but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people."

By daily contrition and repentance, created within us by the Holy Spirit through the Word, God creates an honest and good heart. The attitude we seek to cultivate in our hearts and minds is to come to God's Word with humility. We are sinners and God is speaking to us through His Word. Where He reveals sin, we repent and receive His promised forgiveness purchased by the blood of Jesus. Where there is victory, we rejoice and give thanks to God. At the same time, we daily seek to cultivate boldness and confidence. This is God's Word spoken to and for me. He will not lie or deceive me. His Word endures forever. Upon His Word we place all our understand and hope for life in this world and the world to come. May God's Word always have free course among us!

✠ 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

Quinquagesima

February 27, 2022

Text: Luke 18:31–43

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

On Thursday of this past week, I sent out an email with a few comments about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. One of the things I highlighted was the Lord Jesus Christ has always been and forever will be the Lord and King over human history. He told us there would be wars and rumors of wars (Matt. 24:6). Through them all, He remains the King of kings and Lord of lords.

I also mentioned that our Lord instructs us, His people, to pray for governmental leaders, for those entrusted with authority, for all people, and for His beloved Church. One of the primary ways in which the Christian Church fulfills her noble vocation of being salt and light in the world is to intercede for the peoples of the world through prayers and petitions brought boldly before the throne of our heavenly Father. In that email, I included the Collect for Peace in the World and encouraged our members to use it as part of their prayer for peace in Ukraine and in many other places where there is war and bloodshed. I would like us to take a few moments and pray this Collect. Please take your hymnal and turn to page 314. Let us stand. We pray:

Heavenly Father, God of all concord, it is Your gracious will that Your children on earth live together in harmony and peace. Defeat the plans of all those who would stir up violence and strife, destroy the weapons of those who delight in war and bloodshed, and, according to Your will, end all conflicts in the world. Teach us to examine our hearts that we may recognize our own inclination toward envy, malice, hatred, and enmity. Help us, by Your Word and Spirit, to search our hearts and to root out the evil that would lead to strife and discord, so that in our lives we may be at peace with all people. Fill us with zeal for the work of Your Church and the proclamation

of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which alone can bring that peace which is beyond all understanding; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

You may be seated. This a most remarkable prayer. Please note how it doesn't allow us to think about other people as being the cause of all the trouble. It calls us to examine our own hearts. For in our own hearts we find the evils of envy, malice, hatred, and enmity that lead to strife and discord. By the grace and mercy of the Spirit, we pray that our hearts and the hearts of all people would be softened so that transcendent peace and harmony even among enemies may be restored. The Lord grant us the gift of a vibrant and steadfast faith in Christ Jesus so that we may receive His forgiveness and be reconciled with all people and thereby live in peace with all people. Amen.

The Bible, God's Word, is always timely and applicable. But it seems providential to me that we have these appointed Scripture readings for today. The bulk of our remaining time will be spent on the Gospel text from Luke 18 but I want to make a few, brief comments on the other appointed Bible readings. The Old Testament text from I Samuel 16 is a very timely reminder of who rules over kings, leaders, and nations. According to I Samuel 16:1, we learn it was the Lord who rejected Saul from being king over Israel because of his (Saul's) disobedience to God's commands. And it was the Lord who will establish his successor, King David the youngest son of Jesse from Bethlehem. The Lord sees perfectly and completely into men's hearts. He is not limited as we are. No matter what happens in human history, the Lord sees, He knows, and He sets up and He takes down. He is King of kings and Lord of lords.

The epistle text from I Corinthians 13 is also providential for this particular time. For it reminds us of the priority of love. Love is that divine gift whereby we seek the good of others, even our enemies. Love never ends. It endures as it remains patient and kind. Love refuses to be selfish, resentful, irritable, or proud. Love seeks the way of peace through prayer and acts of kindness and mercy. As Christians we live and walk by faith in Christ Jesus and we have hope in Christ that transcends the trials, wars, and tribulations of this world. But what binds them all together is love. So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love (vs. 13).

Now we come to the gospel text which focuses our attention on our Lord's forthcoming suffering, death, and resurrection. This is now the third time (Lk. 9:22; 13:33) Jesus has told His disciples that the Father's redemptive plan for the world means He (Jesus) must suffer, die, and rise again. Jesus must do these things if atonement for man's sins and rebellion against God and man is to be made. I cannot emphasize enough that Jesus must do these things. Our Lord Himself says that everything written about Him in the prophets will be accomplished (vs. 31).

The reconciliation of man to God cannot happen in any other way. The only source of true, lasting peace and forgiveness between God and man can only be accomplished through Christ's death and resurrection. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the angels proclaimed Glory to God in the highest and peace to His people on earth (Lk. 2:14). When Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the crowds shouted, Hosanna! Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest! (Lk. 19:38). True peace and divine glory are only found in Christ Jesus and what He did to reconcile us unto the Father and to each other. The prophet Isaiah described Jesus as the Prince of Peace in Isaiah 9:6. The peace we are praying for in Ukraine, the Middle East, Africa, and the rest of the world, and the peace we long for in our own lives and among our relationships ultimately finds its source in Christ Jesus, the Prince of peace. He alone brings peace to earth and heaven by the events in described in vs. 32–33, "For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise." The King of kings and Lord of lords who rules authoritatively and powerfully over heaven and earth is also the Prince of Peace who gave His life in love to bring peace to heaven and earth.

As in the previous two occasions, the disciples really did not understand. Vs. 34, "But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said." The disciples never really began to understand until after our Lord's death and resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. This too is a poignant and timely reminder that we constantly need the Holy Spirit to open our mind and soul to these great truths. Without our minds be illuminated by the grace of the Spirit, we will

remain in darkness. In a very real sense, we are hopelessly closed minded, at least, to the truth of redemption accomplished by Christ's death and resurrection.

Luke describes this powerfully in Luke 24 when two of our Lord's disciples met the resurrection Jesus on the Emmaus road. Luke 24:16 describes the men as "their eyes were kept from recognizing (Jesus)." The resurrected Jesus stood right in front of them. They saw and heard Jesus but could not recognize Him. A few verses later their eyes are finally opened by Christ Himself. But their great illumination only happened after Jesus taught them everything concerning Himself from the Scriptures and through the breaking of the bread!

Yes. Word and Sacrament. The preaching of God's Word and the administration of the Sacraments are Christ's appointed means of revealing Himself to people. The Holy Spirit reveals the saving work of Jesus to people through the holy and precious Gospel. Through Christ's Gospel, the Word and Sacraments, saving faith is created. Men, women, and children are reconciled to God and one another. Our hearts, minds, and souls are enlightened with God's truth unto salvation. This has profound implications for the Church's ministry. For the purpose and goal of every worship service is that everyone in attendance will know Jesus by faith and filled with His hope and love. That every soul would be enlightened by the Holy Spirit through God's Word and Sacraments. For not only does the Church intercede for the world by prayer, but we also shine the light of Christ into the world through preaching and sacraments.

This is why Aria's baptism this morning is such a great occasion for joy. Luke 15 teaches us that God and His angels are rejoicing in her salvation! She is now a child of God, filled with the Holy Spirit, and enlightened with the faith, hope, and love that is found in Christ Jesus. Baptism is religious ceremony spiced up with mysterious signs, symbolism, and actions. The baptism we saw this morning was Christ Jesus reconciling heaven and earth to Aria. She rests in earthly and heavenly peace because she has been redeemed by the Prince of Peace, the Lord of lords, the King of kings.

As Christ Jesus must complete the work of redemption in Jerusalem by suffering, dying, and rising again, so must He also through the Spirit created saving faith in our hearts through His Word and Sacraments. This great work belongs to Jesus from beginning to end. He is our Savior. Upon Him we place our hope. In Him rests our faith and trust. And most of all, He is the object of our love. “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

As we look to begin our Lenten journey this Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, know that our final and ultimate destination is not so much Easter Sunday, April 17th, (though that morning will be filled with joy and celebration). Our final end is the glory of Christ’s kingdom where we will see God face to face and participate in His splendid majesty for all eternity. On that Day, our faith and hope will be fulfilled. But our love will remain and endure in divine perfection. Faith, hope, and love. But the greatest is love. May the love of Christ Jesus fill your hearts, minds, and lives abundantly unto joy and peace ...

✠ 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.