

Pastor Kenneth Mars

Immanuel Lutheran Church – Burns, WY

Lent II–Midweek (members of St. John’s Kimball, Zion Grover, Grace Pine Bluffs present)

March 3, 2021

Text: Lord’s Prayer; SC III, 2nd & 3rd Petitions

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

Before we continue our journey through the various petitions of the Lord’s Prayer, we need to remember the foundation upon which our prayer life must be established.

First, prayer is an exercise and activity of Christian faith. Prayer can be likened unto the breath of faith created in us by the Holy Spirit. Praying is the calling and vocation of the baptized. When we were baptized into God’s Trinitarian name, God the Father filled us with the Holy Spirit because in those waters of baptism we died with Christ and were resurrected in the newness of His eternal life. Christians and the Christian Church will pray until we reach our final home in the new heavens and the new earth.

Secondly, Christ commands us to pray. “When you pray,” our Lord taught His disciples. Not if you pray but when you pray. Thirdly, Jesus promised to hear and answer our prayers. Ask and you will receive. Knock and the door will be opened to you. Seek and you will find. No qualifications or equivocations are provided. Just a bold, amazing promise. God will answer our prayers. Fourthly, Jesus gave us the very words to pray, the Lord’s Prayer. It is the perfect prayer. These four characteristics are the foundation upon which our prayers are established: 1) it’s an activity and discipline of faith, 2) Christ commands us to pray, 3) He promises to hear and answer our prayers, and 4) He gave us the perfect prayer that we are to pray every day.

Last week, we briefly considered the Introduction to the Lord’s Prayer, “Our Father who art in heaven.” The Small Catechism teaches us that God is our true Father and we are His true children so that with all boldness and confidence we may ask Him as dear children as their dear father. One of my goals in this Lenten series is to encourage and embolden your life of prayer. Not in your own righteousness or strength. But in the knowledge and confidence that God is our loving Father, and we are His beloved sons and daughters. God the Father delights in heaving our prayers and answering them. Our prayers are prayed with boldness and confidence because God is our Father, His Son is our Savior, and the Holy Spirit is our helper and guide.

We also briefly considered the 1st Petition, “Hallowed be thy name.” The Catechism taught us that God’s name is holy in itself. We do not and cannot make God’s name holy, but we want it to be kept holy among us. God’s name is kept holy among us by the grace of the Holy Spirit when the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity and we Christians live holy lives according to it. In this 1st petition we are praying for all pastors and teachers of God’s Word (Sunday school teachers, parents as they teach God’s Word at home to each other and their children, professors of theology, musicians and composers of sacred music, artists, and so forth). We are also praying for every Christian. That they would hear pure Christian teaching with repentance and faith and a sincere desire to live according to it. Doctrine and life always, always, always go together. They cannot be separated.

Tonight, we will consider the 2nd and 3rd Petitions of the Lord’s Prayer. The 2nd Petition, or request, is “Thy Kingdom come.”

The Catechism question is “What does this mean?”

Answer: “The kingdom of God certainly comes by itself without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may come to us also.”

Once again, we see a similar idea as we heard in the 1st Petition and we’ll hear again in the 3rd Petition. God’s name is holy in itself, God’s kingdom comes by itself, and God’s will is done (i.e., 3rd Petition) all without our prayers. In other words, we don’t make God’s name holy or bring God’s kingdom or make His will happen because of our prayers or other good works. God’s name is holy in itself, God Himself establishes His kingdom, and God accomplishes His will whether we pray or not. But we Christians want these things to happen to us: His name kept holy, His kingdom come, and His will be done, so that we may live godly lives now and into eternity. Thus we pray boldly and confidently that these things will happen because God has promised to do these things. Thus, we pray joyously and courageously.

The follow-up question in the Catechism under the 2nd Petition is:

“How does God’s kingdom come?”

Answer: “God’s kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity.”

Notice the similarity between the answer given here in the 2nd Petition to that of the question in the 1st Petition, “How is God’s name kept holy.” Both emphasize the pure preaching and teaching of God’s Word heard and believed in faith coupled with the

Christian living according to it. God's kingdom is a kingdom of faith in the earth created by the Holy Spirit resulting in a God pleasing life. The holy and precious Gospel, strictly speaking, is the preaching and teaching of the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. God the Father sent His Son to redeem us from sin and death and deliver us from the devil's power. The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

But this Gospel also brings about a change of life, heart, mind, and habits. This is why the teaching of the 10 Commandments cannot and must never be ignored or forgotten. We do not earn forgiveness of sins or eternal life by keeping the Commandments. That is given to us in Christ through the Gospel. But we must know how we forgiven, redeemed, and sanctified children of God are to live in this world. The 10 Commandments are included in the Catechism's phrase about the Word of God being taught in its truth and purity. Godly Christian lives are defined by the parameters established in the 10 Commandments. We don't really have the time tonight to consider each of the Commandments individually. But I do want to encourage you to review the 10 Commandments with their Catechism explanations included in your hymnal pp. 321-322. Or you can review them in Small Catechism published separately (Hold up copy). If you don't have one, let me know and I'll get you one. The Bible summarizes the Commandments as love for God and love for your fellow man. The apostle Paul says love is the fulfilment of the Law in Romans 13:10. A godly life in which God's kingdom triumphs among us (LC III:54) is lived in Christian love. May God the Spirit grant us this richly.

Now we consider the 3rd Petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

The Catechism question is "What does this mean?"

Answer: "The good and gracious will of God is done even without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may be done among us also."

The follow-up question in the Catechism under the 2nd Petition is:

"How is God's will done?"

Answer: "God's will is done when He breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature, which do not want us to hallow God's name or let His kingdom come; and when He strengthens and keeps us firm in His Word and faith until we die. This is His good and gracious will."

Under this petition, we begin to venture into the arena of spiritual warfare. In faith, we desire that God's name be kept holy among us, that His kingdom come to us, and that His will be done among us. But the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh do not desire these things. In fact, they openly resist them. The Bible teaches us "there will be strange events (in our lives) if we are to abide in God's will. We shall have to suffer many thrusts and blows on that account from everything that seeks to oppose and prevent the fulfillment of the first two petitions" (LC III:62) of the Lord's Prayer. The devil "chafes and rages as a fierce enemy with all his power and might" (LC III:62) against us because we are children of God.

"He marshals all his subjects and, in addition, enlists the world and our own flesh as his allies. For our flesh is in itself lazy and inclined to evil (Romans 7:18), even though we have accepted and believe God's Word. The world, however, is perverse and wicked. So he provokes the world against us, fans and stirs the fire, so that he may hinder and drive us back, cause us to fall, and again bring us under his power (II Cor. 2:11; I Tim. 3:6-7). Such is his will, mind, and thought. He strives for this day and night and never rests a moment. He uses all arts, wiles, ways, and means that he can invent ... For where God's Word is preached, accepted, or believed and produces fruit, there the holy cross cannot be missing" (LC III:62-63, 65).

Prayer, especially the Lord's Prayer, and God's Word are our protection. Remember to whom we pray, God the Father. According to whose command and promise, Christ our Lord and Savior. By whose grace and power, the Holy Spirit. We pray with all boldness and confidence for if God stands with us and for us, who can stand against us? Nothing and no one. "We (Christians) have this comfort and confidence: the devil's will and purpose and all our enemies shall and must fail and come to nothing, no matter how proud, secure, and powerful they know themselves to be" (LC III:70). God does all these good and saving things in our lives. You and all members of Christ's Church stand as intercessors for one another and for the world. The gates of hell shall not prevail against us and Christ's Church. Thanks be to God for your prayers and godly lives that witness to the love of God in Christ Jesus.

✠ 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

Oculi (Third Sunday in Lent)

March 7, 2021

Text: Luke 11:14–28

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

The Christian life is beset with struggles against sin, our own as well as the sins of others, the allurements of the world, and yes, the devil and his fallen angels never give us a moment's peace. The writer of the book of Hebrews knew the doubts that God's people face on a daily, moment by moment basis. He was writing to first and early second-generation Christians. There was never a golden age of Christianity when the Christian Church wasn't contending for the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Listen to his admonition to struggling, discouraged Christians in Hebrews 12:1–4:

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. ³Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. ⁴In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

The author encouraged them to endure the long race of faith and obedience. They had not yet shed blood for the name of Jesus. The battle was hard, but the victory was assured. The best course of action, then and now, is to stay focused upon the Lord Jesus Christ. Look to Jesus with unflinching determination. He endured the cross. Rose from the dead. And now sits at the Father's right hand in glory and majesty. Look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

Looking to God has always been the attitude of God's people. King David, in Psalm 25:15, part of today's Introit, wrote, "My eyes are ever toward the Lord, for he will pluck my feet out of the net." The eyes that David and the writers to the Hebrew Christians are referring to are the eyes of faith, not these wonderful creations of God by which we are able to see the physical world around us. Those eyes are the wrong organs of faith. The eyes of faith, which see the truth that permeates and transcends

the physical world, are created through hearing God's Word, believing it, and living according to it. The eyes of faith are created by hearing the Word of God with a true, sincere heart. Then you will be able to set your spiritual eyes toward the Lord Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of your most precious faith. Right here at the beginning of this sermon I want you to hear the essential take-home message. True Christian faith and godly living begins, continues, and ends with hearing and believing God's Word. The Lord Jesus Himself declared, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Luke 11:28).

But the devil is a master at creating doubt about God's Word, the Bible in general, and the saving Gospel in particular. In fact, Satan's chief weapon against true Christian faith is doubt about God's Word. It all began in the Garden of Eden. Did God actually say that you may not eat of any tree in the Garden? (Gen. 3:1). Doubt. Satan tried something similar with Jesus during His wilderness fasting and temptation. According to Matthew's gospel, the devil said to Jesus twice, "*If you are the Son of God ...*" God the Father had Jesus to be His beloved Son when Jesus was baptized by John" (Matt. 3:17). But now, Satan is whispering, "*If you are the Son of God!!*" Doubt about God's Word! During the third temptation, Satan tried to get Jesus to doubt God the Father's will of saving the world through sufferings, death, and resurrection. Satan promised to give the world to Jesus in exchange for a single act of idolatry. This way is so much easier and simpler. Isn't it? Unlike Adam and Eve, Jesus resisted the devil's flaming barbs of doubt and held firmly to God's Word.

Even though Jesus defeated Satan during the wilderness temptation, he wasn't finished. The devil doesn't give up. He won't stop tempting us either. This is why daily prayer and regular periods of fasting are so very important, even as our Lord taught in the Sermon on the Mount.

The deep implantation of God's Word in your hearts coupled with regular prayer and fasting are the God-given means of resisting the devil's temptations. On one occasion, several of our Lord's disciples failed to cast out a demon from a boy (Matt. 17:14–21). When Jesus learned of their failure, the Lord cast out the demon and told the disciples, "If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you. Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting" (vs. 20–21).

I commend you all for being faithful in regular Church attendance. Encourage one another to come together for prayer and worship as the book of Hebrews teaches us.

And I also encourage you in daily prayer and regular periods of fasting, each according to your unique circumstances and abilities. The devil doesn't give up. And we must remain vigilant! God's Word keeps our eyes of faith open and sharp. Jesus said in John 16:33, "Take heart, I have overcome the world." And in Galatians 6:9, the apostle Paul wrote, "And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up." And James admonished Christ's Church, "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). Thanks be to God for the victory given to us in Christ Jesus our Lord. Through God's Word, our eyes of faith remain focused and strong.

Lest we think we can let down our guard against the devil's temptations, we should consider deeply the gospel text from Luke 11. Our Lord defeated a demon that had enslaved a man with muteness. When the man, who couldn't speak before began speaking, some marveled. Some doubted and scoffed saying, "He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, while others, to test him, kept seeking from him a sign from heaven" (vs. 15–16). Satan was stirring up more doubt!

The doubt comes in at least two ways: First, if Jesus did cast out a demon, He did so only by demonic powers. He's merely using demonic powers to deceive everyone; pretending to be from God, He's really from the devil, casting out demon by Beelzebul, the prince of demons. Second, even if Jesus did cast out a demon, we want more signs. Doubt, doubt, more doubt about who Jesus is, the Son of God in human flesh, doubt about what He came to do, deliver humanity from sin, death, and the deceptions of the devil.

Listen to our Lord's ingenious response to the devil's doubts. Vs. 17–18, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls. And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul" (vs. 17–18). In a war, spiritual or physical, the last thing you do is attack your allies who are helping you. It would be silly for Jesus to cast out a demon if he's working with the demons. In truth, this is the "finger of God" says Jesus. This is a reference to Exodus 8:19. Pharaoh's magicians recognized they were being defeated during the plagues. So they declared "This is the finger of God." It was the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses who was overcoming the kingdom of Satan. Notice Jesus uses God's Word, the Old Testament, to defeat the devil's doubt. And by so doing, Jesus overcomes the devil. Jesus says in vs. 21–22, "When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe; but when

one stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his spoil” (vs. 22).

The Lord Jesus Christ is the Stronger One who plunders Satan’s kingdom. That is, Jesus attacks and conquers the devil and his evil hordes and rescues us poor, trapped sinners. Jesus plunders Satan’s kingdom and we Christian believers are set free!! We, the baptized, are the plunder Jesus has collected for Himself through His death and resurrection. Jesus would not leave us in misery and death. He Himself is our deliverer, the Stronger One, who keep us safely in the palms of His hands. Thanks be to God for His indescribable gifts!!

So here at the end we return back to where we began. The struggles of the Christian life will not go away because you came to Church today. They didn’t for the Hebrew Christians of the 1st century, they won’t for us in the 21st century. We must recognize and understand this. It’s what God’s Word teaches us. So why come to Church? To be strengthened and renewed in the grace and mercy and love of Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. He remains faithful to us especially when we struggle. He is the One who powerfully invites us to come to Him, “Come unto Me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). And your Church, your brothers and sisters in arms, also stands with you and for you. Look around and see with the eyes of faith! We are the body of Christ. Though the battle remains long and weary, the victory remains ours. By coming together to hear His Word and receive His Sacrament in the manner in which He commands, our eyes of faith are opened and strengthened. Blessed, says Jesus, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it (vs. 28). The take-home point is our Christian life begins, continues, and ends through hearing God’s Word. Blessed are you dear saints. Keep your eyes ever fixed toward the Lord Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of your faith.

✠ 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
Grace Lutheran Church – Pine Bluffs, WY
Lent III–Midweek (members of St. John’s Kimball, Zion Grover, Immanuel Burns present)
March 10, 2021
Text: Lord’s Prayer; SC III, 4th Petition

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

This year’s sermon series is about prayer. The foundation of a good prayer life is knowing that prayer is an activity of true Christian faith, that God in Christ has commanded us to pray, that He has promised to hear and answer our prayer, and finally, He has given us the perfect prayer to pray, the Lord’s Prayer. With this solid foundation, we Christians can boldly and confidently pray to our heavenly Father as dear children ask their dear father. God the Father loves us. The Father honors us redeemed sinners with the privilege of calling upon His name and coming into His presence whenever and as often as we will. No appointments are needed, no preauthorization required, or any form of restriction. Such privileges of access are not even granted by our earthly rulers, presidents, governors, judges, legislators, administrators, and so forth. But God the Father gives us this honor and commands us to use it. My goal throughout these sermons is to encourage you in your life of prayer.

The past couple of weeks we have considered the first 3 petitions of the Lord’s Prayer. They center on God’s holy name, His kingdom, and His will. Through the revelation of God’s Word, we know that God name is holy in itself, that God will establish His kingdom when and where it pleases Him, and that nothing can stop or hinder His will being accomplished in heaven and earth. As His redeemed children, we pray that these things will happen to us and among us.

Before we look at the 4th Petition of the Lord’s Prayer in particular, I want to introduce an important and timely theological category. And like all topics that are truly Biblical and theological, they are absolutely practical and vital for day-to-day life in this world and the world to come. What I am referring to is the three estates in which we Christians live. They are the domestic estate, that is all things related to house and home; the churchly estate which has to do with faith and life in Christ through the Gospel; and the civil estate, that is all things associated with politics, society, the economy, and government. God rules over all three estates. This must be absolutely understood.

Each of the estates has its own hierarchies, authority, and power. Though they are related, they are distinct with each having its own goals and purposes. We mustn't confuse the three estates and bring that which is distinct for one estate into another. For example, the Gospel of free forgiveness of sins cannot be the guiding principle in civil government. According to Romans 13, civil authorities must exercise the power of the sword, judging criminals, enacting just laws, promoting virtue and the common good, all tempered with mercy. The government is not in the business of proclaiming the forgiveness of sins or administering the sacraments. The Christian Church, however, doesn't use coercion or the power of the sword in proclaiming God's kingdom. The only authority the Church has is God's Word, not constitutions, tax code, zoning policy, and so forth.

The home is the place where the civil and the churchly estate coalesce the most frequently and significantly. Christian husbands and wives seek to live together under God's love and forgiveness and raise their children in the fear and instruction of the Lord; a just state recognizes the authority of the family. It's in the state's best interest to protect the family for the sake of the larger society. Families also order their homes according to the dictates of the state, pay their bills, obey city, state, and federal law, and so forth. The foundation for both the Church and state is the family. That's why both estates have legitimate concerns about the families under their authority. So, each of you as Christians lives under God's authority in all three estates.

I chose to introduce the doctrine of the three estates during tonight's sermon because of the attention we will be giving to the 4th Petition, "Give us this day our daily bread." This petition explicitly focuses on the concerns of our earthly life. It certainly touches upon the spiritual estate in the Church, but the primary focus is on the earthly estates of family and civil life under government and law. Let's look at it more closely, "Give us this day our daily bread."

The Catechism question is "What does this mean?"

Answer: "God certainly gives daily bread to everyone without our prayers, even to all evil people, but we pray in this petition that God would lead us to realize this and to receive our daily bread with thanksgiving."

Once again we see that familiar pattern found in the first three petitions. These things, God's name being hallowed, God's will being done, God's kingdom coming, and now God giving daily bread to everyone, all these things happen whether or not we pray. They happen because of who God is. The Lord Jesus taught, in Matthew 5:45, early in

the Sermon on the Mount, that God the Father “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.” Did you notice that Jesus called the sun the Father’s sun? And He chooses, out of His own nature to love and give to all people, evil and good alike. He does this whether or not we pray. But as His children, we pray that God would constantly remind us that He gives us His earthly gifts freely and graciously so that we, in turn, may give Him true and sincere thanks.

Even in the area of earthly gifts, we confess that God the Father gives them all to us by His grace without any merit or worthiness on our part. For such goodness, love, and magnificence, we give our Father hearty thanks. This is an area we Christians always need to be mindful. Our Christian faith is a grateful, thankful faith. For our God is a rich, loving, and gracious God who gives more than we deserve. Our very existence, that we live in body and soul, is pure 100% gift. We are a thanksgiving people. Even though the world tries to sap away our gratitude and replace it with resentment, entitlement, and selfishness. But not so in the Christian Church. We receive our daily bread with thanksgiving for it is pure gift from our heavenly Father.

And that leads us to the follow-up question in the Catechism under the 4th Petition is:

“What is meant by daily bread?”

Answer: “Daily bread includes everything that has to do with the support and needs of the body, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, land, animals, money, goods, a devout husband or wife, devout children, devout workers, devout and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, self-control, good reputation, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.”

This is the longest explanation in the entire Small Catechism. I think Luther did this on purpose. God the Father is rich and generous in providing “everything that has to do with the support and needs of the body.” He doesn’t just give a slice of bread and a cup of water. No, He gives so much more. Not only food, but house and home, family, nation, the entire world! God is exceedingly rich in His gifts.

The Catechism’s explanation lists everything needed for human flourishing in the civil and domestic estates. When we pray the 4th Petition, we are praying for our family, present and future, for our government, present and future, as well as for the general welfare of the nation, the family, the weather, our health, even our reputations. Often times, people will ask me to pray for good weather for the benefit of our

farmers, ranchers, and the land in general. You are already doing that when you pray the Lord's Prayer! Or people will say we really need to pray for our government. We are doing that in the Lord's Prayer. For we realize that without a "permanent and peaceful government" we would not be able to keep or use any of the earthly abundance given to us by our Father (LC III:74).

A brief word of exhortation and instruction in this regard. Christians cannot support ideologies that seek to undermine and destroy our government or any form of legitimate government. I have in mind here groups like Black Lives Matters or Antifa or large numbers of professors at universities or even some politicians. There is no perfect form of government nor are there perfect civil servants. Our task as Christians living in the domestic and civil estates is to pray for and support these institutions so that they remain just and good. Ultimately, God the Father is the authority behind all legitimate government; it is a gift of the Father. When government gets something wrong, as it certainly will for it is filled with fallible, sinful people, work to change it. But always continue to pray for the various parts of the civic and domestic estates. Such prayers include: education, the economic sectors, private industry, military and civil servants, the arts and sciences. And certainly for the strength and vitality of the families in our land.

One further part of our life of prayer for the civic and domestic estates. For not only pray for all that is good and noble in this earthly life, but we also pray against every form of evil and destruction; this is the unique, particular vocation of the Christian Church. Martin Luther, in the Large Catechism, wrote these very sobering words:

But this petition (i.e., 4th Petition) is especially directed also against our chief enemy, the devil. For all his thought and desire is to deprive us of all that we have from God or to hinder it. He is not satisfied to obstruct and destroy spiritual government by leading souls astray with his lies and bringing them under his power. He also prevents and hinders the stability of all government and honorable, peaceable relations on earth. There he causes so much contention, murder, treason, and war. He also causes lightning and hail to destroy grain and cattle, to poison the air, and so on. In short, he is sorry if anyone has a morsel of bread from God and eats it in peace" (LC III:80-81).

My goal is that all of you would be encouraged and strengthened in your life of prayer. The world depends upon them for peace and prosperity. You may never receive a word of thanks from the world for this good and noble vocation. But God

the Father hears and answers your prayers. He is pleased and rejoices. His love and good pleasure are reward enough. Not to mention His gifts of all heaven and earth.

✠ 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

Laetare (Fourth Sunday in Lent)

March 14, 2021

Text: John 6:1–15

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

The OT appointed for today is Exodus 16. The people of Israel are in a desperate situation. They are tired, hungry, and ready to despair. Exodus 16:3, “Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” It would have been better to die as Egyptian slaves in the plagues than be out here in the wilderness suffering hunger as God’s free people. The Lord heard their cries for food. He provided them with manna which the Bible calls in other places “the grain of heaven” and “the bread of the angels” (Psalm 78). The Lord, in His great mercy, provided them with food even though they grumbled against Him in unbelief and resentment.

Here is where we must make some distinctions, however. The Lord God expects us, yea, even commands us to call upon Him in our day of trouble (Ps. 50:15) and to cast all our cares on Him (I Peter 5:7). So what is the difference between laying our cares and concerns before the Lord and grumbling? For it was a legitimate need the children of Israel had in the wilderness. It’s quite possible they had millions of mouths to feed with little or no means to fill those hungry mouths.

Grumbling is the kind of sin which arises from thinking we deserve better. These evils things shouldn’t be happening to us!! The Lord’s provisions and care are insufficient for our needs. Sinful grumbling is focused upon the self, from anger, selfishness, impatience, and unbelief. Saints of God, we must repent of all such attitudes and expectations. They are poison, killing soul, mind, and body.

But we are commanded by God to call upon Him with our needs. The difference is one of focus. Faith looks away from ourselves and focuses upon the mercies of God. Casting our cares and anxieties upon God in our day of trouble necessarily means articulating to God the need but with confidence and faith in His love and grace. We pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” and “Give us this day our daily bread.” God the Father promises that His good and gracious will

shall be accomplished and that includes providing for all our spiritual and bodily needs according to His wisdom and grace. Should we be interceding to God on behalf of the three estates? Christ's Church, the homes and families of our country, and the civic realm which includes government, business sectors and economy, education, agriculture, and broader culture? Absolutely. And she we not also be praying against the societal confusion that has enthralled our culture, from the effects of the pandemic, from the evils of human trafficking, pornography, drug abuse, the dissolution of families, poverty, spiritual darkness and unbelief? Yes. Absolutely. But not from a grumbling spirit of "we deserve better" but one of confidence and faith in God. He is our heavenly Father. His will is always best.

This is one lesson we learn from Exodus 16. But there is another, and it's the most important. When reading the OT, a good rule of thumb is to ask the question, "What does this passage teach me about Jesus, His Church, the Gospel, Christian faith, and so forth." Exodus 16:12 says, "At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the Lord your God." The food that God provides His OT people in the wilderness was meant not only to satisfy their physical hunger but to show them that God is their God, their Savior. The manna in the wilderness was foreshadowing of a greater bread to come. This bread would show them Jesus. This is how the Lord Jesus Himself instructs us to read the OT in general but this passage in particular. Listen to John 6:32–35:

³²Jesus then said to them (i.e., the crowd that had been fed miraculously with bread and fish), "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." ³⁴They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." ³⁵Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.

Jesus is the bread of life. The manna in the wilderness, which God's people ate everyday for 40 years, was a prophetic preview of Jesus and the Bread of Life which He gives for the world, namely, Himself. And this is how we should read and think about Christ feeding the 5,000 with bread and fish, today's NT reading from John 6. Jesus provides for His people with Himself by the grace and power of His Word.

Let's consider the gospel text from John 6. A very large crowd was following Jesus because of the signs and wonders He had been doing. The Lord asked Philip, one of

His disciples, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” (vs. 5). Philip had a very practical outlook on things and said they had about two hundred denarii, roughly 7 months’ worth of wages. Hardly enough to feed the crowd which we are told later in vs. 10 was about 5,000 men, not counting women and children. The crowd 10-15,000 people. It seems nobody really planned on such a gathering. Andrew, the first of our Lord’s disciples, is the one who found the five loaves and two fish and brought them to Jesus with the disclaimer, “...but what are they for so many?” (vs. 9).

The Lord Jesus, by the power of His Word, multiplies the fish and bread and thus provides food for the crowd. It’s an amazing miracle to be sure. But Jesus had much more in mind than simply providing a single meal for a single day. The Lord Jesus not only can provide bread, He is the bread, the bread of heaven given whereby those who eat it will never die. The multiplication of bread and fish is but a sign pointing to the life and salvation that is found only in the Lord Jesus Christ. Remember, just a few moments ago, I prefaced John 6 with teaching from Exodus 16 and from John 6:32 – 35. Jesus is the Bread of Heaven.

We need desperately God’s Word, specifically, the Lord Jesus, the Bread of Life. We need His forgiveness, life, and salvation. And He promises to give His love and life with absolute abundance. Christ Jesus does not ration His love. For His death and resurrection on the cross was for the forgiveness of all of humanity’s sins. In these difficult days, run to Jesus. Feast on Him as the bread of eternal life. Only He can calm wounded consciences, heal broken relationships, and give peace that surpasses understanding. The gospel text reminds us that the multitudes ate “as much as they wanted” (vs. 11) so that “they had eaten their fill” (vs. 12). And when it was all said and done, the disciples gathered up all the leftover fragments filling 12 baskets full so that nothing would be lost (vs. 13). The Lord Jesus loves and forgiveness in super abundance. And that which is placed into His hands will never be wasted or lost.

We Lutherans are quite accustomed to the idea of Christians needing God’s Word. One of the solas of the Reformation is Sola Scriptura, Scripture alone. The Lord Jesus resisted the devil’s wilderness temptation by quoting the Deuteronomy 8:3, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). We must hold to this teaching fervently. God’s Word alone is the only infallible standard of faith and Christian practice. A great hymn worth memorizing is “God Word Is Our Great Heritage” (LSB 582). It has but one stanza and a memorable tune.

God's Word is our great heritage
 And shall be ours forever;
 To spread its light from age to age
 Shall be our chief endeavor.
 Through life it guides our way,
 In death it is our stay.
 Lord, grant, while worlds endure,
 We keep its teachings pure
 Throughout all generations.

God's Word guides us on our way through this world to the next. That's why we must keep its teachings pure in preaching, catechesis, and Bible study. For our sake and the salvation of future generations. And yet, there is another part of keeping God's Word that we must keep before us: the right use of the sacraments.

The feeding of the 5,000 in John 6 is not the Lord's Supper. But this feeding miracle is described in language that is very similar to the words used in the Lord's Supper. The verbs used in John 6 and in the words of Institution are virtually the same. Listen to vs. 11, "Jesus then took bread, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated." Now listen to the beginning of the Words of Institution, "Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night when He was betrayed, took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to the disciples and said: "Take, eat; this is My body..." As Biblical Christians, we must give attention to receiving the Lord's Supper regularly and frequently. Jesus commanded us to receive it often for we need the forgiveness of sins often, day by day as He teaches us in the Lord's Prayer. The Christian Church, in her wisdom and piety, has adopted the practice of offering Holy Communion every Sunday in addition to every Sunday sermons! Word and Sacrament go together. Many of our communion hymns use the imagery and language of Jesus being the Bread of Heaven or the Bread of Life. One of our distribution hymns today is "Lord Jesus Christ, Life-Giving Bread" (LSB 625) is well worth learning, maybe even memorizing. Listen to stanza 1 with Exodus 16, John 6, and the Words of Institution in mind:

Lord Jesus Christ, life-giving bread,
 May I in grace possess You.
 Let me with holy food be fed,
 In hunger I address You.
 Prepare me well for You, O Lord,

And, humbly by my prayer implored,
Give me Your grace and mercy.

The Lord Jesus is our God and Savior. He provides for all our needs of body and soul. As people born again through the living and abiding Word of God, let our commitment and love for God's Word and Sacraments grow and deepen.

✠ 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

Lent IV–Midweek (members of Immanuel Burns, Zion Grover, Grace Pine Bluffs present)

March 17, 2021

Text: Lord's Prayer; SC III, 5th & 6th Petitions

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

We have covered much over these past few weeks. I trust that you see the great importance the Lord has placed upon your prayers. He has commanded us to pray, promised to answer them, and provided the perfect prayer, the Lord's Prayer. The world depends upon your prayers. The three estates which God the Holy Trinity established and ordained for ordered life in this world leading into the next are served in large measure by your prayers. Day by day, we Christians pray for homes and families (the domestic estate), for governments, magistrates, all forms of useful labor and learning, military, agriculture, and the business sectors (the civic estate), and finally, for the growth of Christ's holy Church, the preaching of the gospel, and the extension of God's kingdom among us (the churchly estate).

We pray for and intercede on behalf of the three estates out of love for God and man; this is the positive part of our prayers. At the same time, we pray against every form of evil that seeks to undermine the three estates; our motivation is the same, love for God and man. This is the negative part of our prayers. We Christians are enrolled in a spiritual battle between the powers of darkness and God's kingdom of light. Because of Christ's perfect death and resurrection, the outcome of this war is determined. But the battle rages on until the Last Day.

We Christians are victorious and triumphant in Christ. That must be known and believed. A few hours before Jesus died for the sins of the world, Jesus instructed His disciples that the ruler of this world, the devil, is judged (John 16:11) and He (i.e., Jesus) has overcome the world (John 16:33). And the apostle John, having heard those words directly from Jesus, wrote in his first epistle two things that we Christians ought never forget. The first is that the reason why Christ Jesus came into this world was to destroy the works of the devil (I John 3:8). Second, our faith in Christ has overcome the world (I John 5:4). Through faith in Christ Jesus, we are victorious. But the days are long, the battle difficult, and it's easy to grow weary. Our consciences become burdened because we have sinned against others. And they have sinned against us. Day by day, we need to refreshing strength and peace of Christ's Gospel.

Keeping in mind this on-going spiritual struggle, we turn to the 5th and 6th petitions of the Lord's Prayer. In them, we find strength for the journey through this world into the glorious inheritance of the New Creation. Before we look at these two petitions in more detail, I need to highlight a significant change in the pattern and structure of the Catechism's explanations. The four previous petitions had this unique, consistent pattern of praying for things that will happen even if we do not pray. So, God's name is holy in itself without our prayers, God's kingdom comes without our prayers, God's will is accomplished without our prayers, and God provides daily bread to all people even unbelievers without our prayers. But we Christians pray those four petitions in faith asking for them to be done in our lives because we want them to be done among us, to us, and for us so that our entire life may be lived in all three estates in joyful courage and godly thanksgiving. Our prayers don't make these godly things happen. But we seek and ask for them because they contain God's blessing and life.

The remaining petitions require and assume the new birth of the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus. While we Christians pray all of the petitions in faith, these last petitions are uniquely based upon the promises of the gospel and life in the Spirit. They uniquely represent the Christian life. So, we consider the 5th Petition of the Lord's Prayer, "And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

The Catechism question is "What does this mean?"

Answer: "We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look at our sins, or deny our prayer because of them. We are neither worthy of the things for which we pray, nor have we deserved them, but we ask that He would give them all to us by grace, for we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment. So we too will sincerely forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us."

The forgiveness of sins has been won for the entire world through the death and resurrection of Jesus. That is the heart and core of the Gospel. Our prayer for forgiveness does not create forgiveness. But Christians know, through the divine testimony of Holy Scripture, that in Christ Jesus there is full and completely forgiveness. So we seek it, day by day. Christians pray this prayer because they believe the Gospel and have received the "washing of regeneration and renewal of the Spirit" in Christian baptism, as described in Titus 3:5.

Thank be to God that our Father "has given us the Gospel, in which is pure forgiveness before we prayed or even thought about it. But the purpose of this prayer

is that we recognize and receive such forgiveness” (LC III:88). Herein lies the struggle of Christian faith and life in the Spirit. “The flesh in which we daily live is of such a nature that it neither trusts nor believes God. It is ever active in evil lusts and devices, so that we sin daily in word and deed by what we do and fail to do. By this the conscience is thrown into unrest, so that it is afraid of God’s wrath and displeasure. So it loses the comfort and confidence derived from the Gospel. Therefore, it is always necessary that we run here and receive consolation to comfort the conscience again” (LC III:89).

By praying this petition day after day, we are constantly reminded that we live under the love and grace in all areas of life. For this reason, we also seek to bestow forgiveness to one another. We daily sin much and deserve nothing but punishment. And yet, the Father forgives us freely because of Jesus. Having been so loved and forgiven, we seek to forgive sincerely and do good to those who have sinned against us. “As we forgive those who trespass against us” is a comforting reminder that the readiness to forgive is not only God’s will and attitude toward the world, but it becomes our will and attitude toward our neighbor. Our desire and willingness to forgive those who sin against us serves as “a sign (or testimony of the Holy Spirit) alongside the promise (of the Gospel)” (LC III:96).

The Lord Jesus taught us about this blessed reciprocity of being forgiven by God and then, in turn, seeking to forgive one another. “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:14–15). We do not earn forgiveness by forgiving others. Christ alone, by His death and resurrection, earned forgiveness for the world. We seek to give that which we have freely received. To withhold forgiveness unjustly is inconsistent with the Gospel of Jesus. The comfort of this 5th Petition is that not only are we free from the condemnation of our sins through Christ but we are also set free from exacting retribution and punish from those who sin against us. Only the gospel of the free forgiveness of sin can give such glorious liberty.

Even though we know the freedom of the Gospel, we still live in this fallen, corrupted world, face the temptations of our sinful nature, and must withstand the attacks of the devil. Let us, then, consider the 6th Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “And lead us not into temptation.”

The Catechism question is “What does this mean?”

Answer: “God tempts no one. We pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice. Although we are attacked by these things, we pray that we may finally overcome them and win the victory.”

According to Scripture, we daily struggle against the temptations of the flesh, of the world, and of the devil (LC III:101). As Christian believers, “we dwell in the flesh and carry the old Adam about our neck. He exerts himself and encourages us daily to unchastity, laziness, gluttony and drunkenness, greed and deception, to defraud our neighbor and to overcharge him” as described in Gal. 5:19-21, Col. 3:5-8, etc. (LC III:102).

“Next comes the world, which offends us in word and deed. It drives us to anger and impatience. In short, there is nothing but hatred and envy, hostility, violence and wrong, unfaithfulness, vengeance, cursing, railing, slander, pride and haughtiness, with useless finery, honor, fame, and power” (LC III:103). The NT authors, James and John both wrote that friendship with the world means enmity with God (James 4:4; I John 2:15).

Finally, “then comes the devil, pushing and provoking in all directions. But he especially agitates matters that concern the conscience and spiritual affairs. He leads us to despise and disregard God’s Word and works. He tears us away from faith, hope, and love, and he brings us into misbelief, false security, and stubbornness...” (LC III:104). It is not without reason that the apostle Paul admonished the Ephesian Christians to put on the full armor of God that we might be able to stand in the evil day against the devil’s schemes and deflect his fiery darts (Eph. 6:10–18). St. Paul concludes this powerful admonition with “praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints...” We resist the temptations of the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh and find victory through faith in Christ coupled with the two-edged sword of God’s Word and fervent prayer.

One final distinction must be made. “To feel temptation is a far different thing from consenting or yielding to it. We must feel it...or it could not be called a temptation” (LC III:107, 108). Though we know and feel temptations powerfully, we “take hold of the Lord’s Prayer, and speak to God from the heart...” (LC III:110). We have God’s

promise from James 4:7, “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”

The honor given to each of you as God’s redeemed child is truly amazing. May the Lord continue to raise us up to be powerful intercessors for the glory of His name and the salvation of His redeemed people.

✠ 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

Judica (Fifth Sunday in Lent)

March 21, 2021

Text: Genesis 22:1–14

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

The history of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac is one of the most joyful and troubling portions of the Bible. The Lord God called Abram, so he was called at first, to leave behind everything he knew in his own country, his family and society, and his false gods. The Lord gave a wonderful promise to Abram as he was leaving Haran, “I will make of you a great nation...and in you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed: (Gen. 12:1–3). The Lord led him to the land of Canaan, down to Egypt, and then back to Canaan. Lot, Abraham’s nephew, and his family joined Abraham and Sarah. At least a couple of decades went by and Abraham and Sarah were still childless. How was the Lord to raise up a great nation from Abraham’s lineage if they didn’t have any children? There are a number of twists and turns to this story, but the Lord eventually visits Abraham and Sarah through an angel announcing that Sarah will give birth to son in nine months. Both Abraham and Sarah laugh when they heard the promise of that Sarah would give birth to a son. She was 90 years old and Abraham 100!

In the due course of time, it became obvious that Sarah was pregnant and eventually gave birth to a son whom they named Isaac. His name means “he laughs”, a fitting name to be sure. The Bible calls Isaac, the son of promise. Even as all true, Christian believers are likewise called “children of promise” (Galatians 4:23, 28). Isaac’s birth was a miracle in the truest sense of the world; 90-year-old women don’t get pregnant. Our new birth into Christ Jesus through the gospel is likewise a miracle of God’s grace and love. We humans being who are spiritually dead in trespasses and sins awaiting a physical death don’t suddenly become spiritually alive. Every Christian is a miracle. Christians aren’t made through being born in a predominantly Christian land to Christian parents, though those are wonderful gifts of our heavenly Father. No, Christians are supernaturally born by the ministry of the Holy Spirit working through Christ’s Gospel. We are all Isaacs. Children of promise. Children of joy. Does not Jesus say in Luke 15 that the angels rejoice in heaven over sinners who repent and believe in Jesus?!

All of this wonderful, joyful history. But now the troubling side of Abraham and Isaac's history. Today's OT reading records Abraham's trial of faith. The Lord God called out to Abraham, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you" (vs. 2). Can you feel the power behind those words, "your only son...whom you love"? Isaac was the son of promise and laughter. Now the son of anguish and trial. Not because of anything Isaac did. But because of God Himself? And this is the real difficulty. In one sense, God has become Abraham's enemy. He, that is God, is taking away the very son of promise, the Son whom God gave miraculously through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed.

It's arguable that the test of Abraham and the trial of the Syrophenician woman in the NT gospels (Matthew 15, Mark 7) are the most difficult in all of Scripture. The reason I say this is that in both cases, the adversary is God Himself. God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. The Lord Jesus was silent and dismissive of the Syrophenician woman's request to heal her daughter of demon oppression. And yet, and here is where we must set our eyes of faith, God proves Himself to be true and faithful under the very appearance of hostility and adversity. God remains true.

We Christians, especially living in the wealth and prosperity of 21st century America, need to be reminded that God's good and gracious will is often experienced with difficult and many, many bitter trials. Trials that God Himself brings upon us. Abraham didn't ask for this test. The Syrophenician woman sought God's grace in Christ not His severity. But the Biblical saints knew God's grace often came under the form of trial, judgment, and suffering. Listen to these Bible passages which illustrate that God works through both judgment and grace in our lives.

Deuteronomy 32:39

³⁹“See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.

Hosea 6:1

¹“Come, let us return to the LORD; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up.

Psalms 60:1–5

¹O God, you have rejected us, broken our defenses; you have been angry; oh, restore us. ²You have made the land to quake; you have torn it open; repair its

breaches, for it totters. ³You have made your people see hard things; you have given us wine to drink that made us stagger. ⁴You have set up a banner for those who fear you, that they may flee to it from the bow. ⁵That your beloved ones may be delivered, give salvation by your right hand and answer us!

I share the Biblical witness that we may know better how God works in and through trial and testing, breaking and healing, even death and resurrection to prove us and refine us. I am not suggesting that we seek out trials and testing. God Himself works this in our lives when and where He wills. We pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done." The Bible reminds us that God accomplishes His will for the salvation of His people and the glory of His name. At times, His will is joyous and easy. Other times, it is hard. St. Augustine described God's work in his life as a "severe mercy."

God does this work in our lives to bring us closer to Himself. The apostle Paul wrote how God used the adversities of his life to bring him into a greater and more joyous knowledge of Christ Jesus. At one point in his missionary work, Paul had been arrested unjustly for preaching about Jesus. He had broken no law. But he suffered nonetheless for his faith and faithfulness to Jesus. Listen to these words which he wrote to the Philippian Christians while in jail (Philippians 3:7–11):

⁷But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— ¹⁰that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Paul shared in Christ's sufferings so that He could also participate in Christ's resurrection. The Holy Spirit gave these saints the faith to trust and believe in God even when it meant bitter suffering. Throughout Lent, we sing as a prayer the hymn "On My Heart Imprint Your Image". We mustn't forget it's the image of the crucified and resurrected Jesus. Even when it looks like God has abandoned us, He is, in fact, upholding us with His love, drawing ever closer to Himself.

Abraham went to Mount Moriah to sacrifice his son, Isaac. But at the fateful moment, the Lord stayed Abraham's hand, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to

him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me” (Gen. 22:12). God provided a sacrifice that day, a ram caught in a thicket. Isaac would not die but live. And through Isaac and his posterity, the Lord Jesus Christ would be born, the Savior of the world.

And it’s here that we must recall the singular event that gives meaning to all suffering, to all of God’s works and ways in the world. It’s the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Isaac was the son of promise, the only son, the beloved son. Those descriptions ought to perk our Christian ears. What Isaac was in prophetic foreshadowing, the Lord Jesus fulfills in redemptive substance. For Jesus is the Son of promise; beginning at Genesis 3:15, God the Father promised that the divine seed of the woman would crush the devil’s head and undo all his evil. Jesus is the only Son of God the Father, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. In the perfection of the Divine Trinity, the Father and the Son knew and loved each other through the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the beloved, only begotten Son of promise. The Father’s love for His Son was and is infinitely more powerful and full than our love for our husbands and wives and children.

And yet, the Father gave His one and only begotten Son, whom He loved in perfection, over to suffering and death that the world might be redeemed. The Lord gave Abraham a ram in the thicket to save Isaac from death. There would be no substitutionary sacrifice to save Jesus from death. He Himself is the sacrifice, given by the Father in love to save Abraham, the Canaanite woman, you, me and all believers in Christ; His death was our death, His suffering our suffering, His resurrection from the dead our resurrection. Hebrews 9:14 reminds us that Jesus offered His own blood to His heavenly Father through the eternal Spirit in order to “purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.” God purifies our conscience through the death and resurrection of Jesus. It’s not always easy. But it is always good. God the Father brings us through the trials and joys of life in this world. The adversities we face in this world are preparing us for greater and deeper joy in this world and the world to come. For now in Christ, we are His beloved children; His children of joy and promise.

✠ 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

Zion Lutheran Church – Kimball, NE

Lent V–Midweek (members of Immanuel Burns, St. John’s Kimball, Grace Pine Bluffs present)

March 24, 2021

Text: Lord’s Prayer; SC III, 6th Petition & Conclusion

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

We have finally come to the end of our sermonical journey through the various petitions of the Lord’s Prayer and the Small Catechism’s explanations. My prayer and hope has been that all of you would be encouraged and strengthened in your prayer life. There is no greater work given to us as God’s children than to enter into the Father’s holy presence to bring our petitions and intercession before Him. The apostle Peter encouraged the Christians of His day, Christians who were suffering for their faith in Jesus, when he wrote:

“...⁵you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ...⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” (I Peter 2:5, 9).

Through your baptism in Christ, you have been born again into the holy priesthood of the redeemed. Your spiritual sacrifices of prayer, praise, and thanksgiving are acceptable to the Father. By the anointing of the Holy Spirit, all of you are brought into the royal priesthood that proclaims the excellencies of Christ who called you out of the darkness of the devil’s domain into the glorious liberty of the Father’s kingdom. Your intercessions are the bulwark that stops the devil’s rampage against Christ’s Church, the homes and families of the world, and the entire civic sphere; the three estates I introduced a couple of weeks ago (the church, the home, the civic estates).

It is no small gift that we Christians give to the world in our prayers and intercessions whether they be prayed at home, in private, or in public during our worship services. The world takes no note of our prayers. But God the Father does. He works through our prayers to accomplish His good purposes.

The devil and his evil horde despise and fear your prayers. He works to hinder them, to stop them outright through temptations to sin, by defiling your conscience with

your sins and the sins of others, and through the sloth and indolence of our sinful flesh which do not want to hallow God's name or let His kingdom come.

All of this emphasizes the importance of the 6th Petition of the Lord's Prayer which we are highlighting tonight. We can rightly say that in the 6th Petition "the entire substance of all our prayer is directed against our chief enemy (the devil). For it is he who hinders among us everything that we pray for: God's name or honor, God's kingdom and will, our daily bread, a cheerful conscience, and so forth" (LC III:113).

The 6th Petition of the Lord's Prayer is, "But deliver us from evil."

The Catechism question is "What does this mean?"

Answer: "We pray in this petition, in summary, that our Father in heaven would rescue from every evil of body and soul, possessions and reputation, and finally, when our last hour comes, give us a blessed end, and graciously take from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven."

We pray this petition, the entire Lord's Prayer, and every prayer that arises from our hearts to the Father in heaven seeking His deliverance and rescue "from every evil of body and soul, possessions and reputation." The Father Himself is our only salvation. He is our deliverance from evil and the evil one, the devil. We cannot stand against evil in our strength; that would be folly. Instead, we look to the Lord who is our strength and shield, our very present help in the day of trouble. The devil seeks to destroy and corrupt everything good and worthy. We recognize that without the Father's protection, we would not be able to eat a single meal in peace. Our families and our country would be destroyed. Suffering and misery would be the common, everyday experience of every human being. Without the Father answering our prayers and delivering us from the evil of the evil one, there would be no Christian Church, no gospel, no proclamation of forgiveness preached or heard, no sacraments, no hope of the resurrection unto eternal life.

But we have the sure and certain confidence that our Father hears our prayer especially the Lord's Prayer for it is the prayer given to us by His beloved Son, the Lord Jesus. He is the foundation and certainty of our life and salvation from evil. Good Friday and Easter signal to all heaven and earth that the problem of sin and death is resolved. The apostle Paul wrote to the Roman Christians in Romans 8:1–2, "1There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death."

The Holy Spirit has released us from sin and death through Christ Jesus. When we pray the 6th petition, we are asking that our Father keep us safe and secure in the loving hands of Jesus as we journey through this valley of the shadow of death. And when physical death comes to us, that He would give us a blessed end, meaning a blessed death.

For Christians, a blessed death is not what we typically what people imagine. You know, going to bed at night and dying in peaceful sleep. There's nothing wrong with that. But an unbeliever can experience that kind of physical death, but his death is not blessed. No, a blessed death is one in which the person is a believer in Christ Jesus. When the believer dies, by whatever means physical death comes to him, he or she is taken immediately into the presence of Jesus. According to the psalmist in Psalm 116:15 and the apostle John in Revelation 14:13, precious and blessed is the death of every Christian believer. Everyday we are praying for the Lord's protection through every twist and turn of this earthly life as well as asking for a death that ushers us into Christ's loving presence. Because of Christ's death and resurrection, we confess boldly and courageously that we need not fear death. Christ Jesus came to this earth to save sinners and to destroy him who has the power of death, the evil one, the devil (Heb. 2:14). To pray "but deliver us from evil" is to believe that Christ is risen from the dead and will return on the Last Day to take us to Himself in heaven.

Now we come to the Conclusion to the Lord's Prayer, "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen."

The Catechism question is "What does this mean?"

Answer: "This means that I should be certain that these petitions are pleasing to our Father in heaven, and are heard by Him; for He Himself has commanded us to pray in this way and has promised to hear us. Amen, amen means 'yes, yes, it shall be so.'"

Throughout the Bible we see this pattern of closing prayers, psalms, and thanksgivings with words of doxology and praise. For example, after David collected offerings for the construction of the Temple, he offered these words of thanksgiving and worship in I Chronicles 29:10–13. Listen to the similar language found in the conclusion to the Lord's Prayer:

¹⁰Therefore David blessed the LORD in the presence of all the assembly. And David said: "Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of Israel our father, forever and

ever. ¹¹Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. ¹²Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. ¹³And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name.

It is with joyful, heartfelt devotion we bring the Lord's Prayer to a conclusion. The kingdom, the power, and the glory are truly possessions belonging to our God and King. Each of the petitions serves the advancement of His eternal kingdom. God the Father is all-powerful and mighty. He has more than enough strength and wisdom to answer them even more abundantly than we could possibly imagine. His glory and majesty saturate the heaven and earth. It is most fitting that we who are created in His image and renewed after the likeness of Christ lead all creation in declaring God's glory.

The last word of the Lord's Prayer is "amen", that great word of faith. Amen doesn't mean the prayer is over though it typically comes at the end of prayers. Rather, it says we believe the prayer has been heard and will be answered as the Father has promised.

And so we come full circle to where we began over a month ago. The confidence and certainty of our prayer rests upon these things: 1) God has commanded us to pray, 2) He has promised to hear and answer our prayers, and 3) Christ Himself has given us the perfect prayer that we are to pray day by day until He brings us to Himself in heaven. But I have been holding out on you. There is a fourth factor that emboldens and strengthens our prayer. For not only has God commanded us to pray, promised to hear us, and provided us with the perfect prayer, but the Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit, the 2nd and 3rd Person of the Trinity, intercedes with us and for as we pray to the Father. Listen to these most encouraging words from Romans 8:26–27, 34:

²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. ²⁷And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

³⁴Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

Dear saints of God, I rejoice and thanks for you all when I remember you in my prayers. For I know that God works through you as His royal priesthood. You are more precious than all the combined wealth of the world. The Lord bless you and strengthen you as you continue to serve one another in love through prayer to the glory of our heavenly Father.

✠ 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

Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion

March 28, 2021

Text: John 12:12–19

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

Today begins our week of weeks. Holy Week. The single most important week in the liturgical life of the Christian Church. All of salvation history finds its focus and touchstone with these days and events in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. The past was moving forward to Holy Week. Our present finds its meaning in Holy Week. The future has no significance without Holy Week. To be blunt, I am struggling for words to describe adequately the importance of these days in the life of Jesus and for His Church.

It's not that these calendar days, in themselves, are more holy than other days. That's true of Easter Sunday too. Next Sunday's celebration of the resurrection of Jesus is not somehow more holy than any other Sunday. We don't get more of Jesus on Easter or more of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday. Good Friday doesn't give us more forgiveness than any-o-given Monday from the rest of the year. Rather, the faith we have in Jesus, the on-going presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, the peace of forgiveness that we received day after day, the daily victories we have in Christ Jesus, and the love we receive from God the Father are all made available to us and to the entire world because of the events we are celebrating this week. The past, the present, and the future all coalesce, or meld together, in the glorious events of this week. Heaven and earth rejoices because of this week. Let us rejoice in it too.

And I can't help but add a comment comparing this Holy Week with last year's Holy Week. Last year, we had restricted church services without Holy Communion. Our dual parish was not able to gather publicly for Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Vigil service. They were offered only on-line. Immanuel didn't have an Easter Sunday service last year because of the combined concerns of the weather and the pandemic; that fact still haunts me to this day. Easter morning, St. John's had two non-communion worship services, no special music, no Easter breakfast or Egg Hunt for children. It just wasn't the same. Don't misunderstand what I'm saying, the Lord Jesus hadn't abandoned His Church. As I've already said, we didn't have less of Jesus.

If I may be so bold! From our human perspective, the Lord Jesus may have been more active! Holding us, supporting us, calming our fears and doubts. A year ago, our needs were somewhat different than they are today. On the other hand, they remain the same. We still need our Savior Jesus as much then as now. The devil hasn't stopped his onslaught against faith and goodness in the Church or the world. Our personal lives are filled with fears, doubts, uncertainties mixed with joys and hopes. I share this reverie in order to remind us that during this forthcoming week, the most precious and eternal gifts of God are celebrated with greater pageantry. Participate in as many services as you can remembering that in them and through them we are celebrating our past, present, and future. The truth of who we are as God's people and the glory that awaits us in the Father's eternal kingdom will be celebrated with great joy and fervency. The God alone be glory through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The life and ministry of the Lord Jesus had been building up for this climatic week. All of the miracles, the teaching in town after town in Israel, the promises of hope and forgiveness pointed forward to something greater to come. The people in Jerusalem and the surrounding regions knew they were on the cusp of something really big. A few days earlier, in the town of Bethany, about two miles east of Jerusalem, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. Nothing like it had been heard of before! The Old Testament Scriptures recorded a few resurrections from the dead but not someone who had been dead for 4 days. And yet, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, commanding him to come forth from death back to life with the voice and authority of God Himself. Before that great event happened, Jesus said remarkable, powerful words that have been informing everything I've been saying about the importance of this week.

Jesus said to Martha, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" (John 11:23–24). Martha believed in the bodily resurrection. But that was still in the future. Now, Martha was right in her theology. On the Last Day, all the dead will be raised back to life. Believers to eternal joy and glory, unbelievers to eternal shame and punishment. Martha believed in Jesus, but she didn't understand completely who He was and what He came to do. So "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die'" (John 11:25–26). Jesus and Martha are, almost quite literally, standing in the face of Lazarus' death. And Jesus proclaims that everyone who believes in Him as Lord and Savior will never die because He Himself is the resurrection and the life. These are staggering words. Jesus isn't simply saying that He

can raise the dead, Old Testament prophets had done that, but He is the resurrection. Jesus isn't merely alive; He is life itself. There is no life, no resurrection from the dead apart from Jesus. Because He is resurrection and life, the Lord Jesus can rightly declare to Martha and to everyone of us here and every Christian believe past, present, future, that even though we may die physically, we will not experience death itself. We are forever alive in Christ Jesus who is resurrection and life.

After making this bold claim, the Lord Jesus asked Martha if she believed this (vs. 26b). In response and by the grace of the Holy Spirit, Martha confessed her faith and trust in Jesus with words Christians have been using ever since. Vs. 27, "She said to him, 'Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.'"

Shortly after these great events, Jesus prepared to enter Jerusalem on the Sunday before the Passover. We call this Sunday, Palm Sunday. John's gospel teaches us that a large crowd heard that Jesus was going to Jerusalem (12:12). In John 12:17–18, we learn the large crowd is there following Jesus because they knew He had raised Lazarus from the dead! Palm Sunday must be understood in the light of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Because of that miracle and everything that had been happening in Jesus' ministry for the previous three years, the crowd gathered palm branches and went out to meet Jesus while shouting Psalm 118:25–26, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the king of Israel!" (vs. 13). Palm branches were symbols of victory, waved when Israel's kings returned triumphant from battle. Added to all of this, Jesus borrowed a young donkey and began riding it into Jerusalem in fulfillment of OT prophecy, "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!" (vs. 15).

Imagine the scene!! Jesus, the miracle worker and great teacher from Nazareth who raised Lazarus from the dead just a few days earlier, rides into the holy city of God according to Zechariah's OT prophesy while hundreds, maybe thousands of people, were shouting prophetic words from Psalm 118, a psalm of David, as they waved palm branches in joyous triumph. This entire scene is dripping with Messianic expectations. Jesus of Nazareth is the long-awaited Messiah, the Savior, the King of Israel.

Dear saints of God, everything that has been described is absolutely true. Jesus is the fulfillment of OT prophecy. He is the triumphant King of kings and Lord of lords come to Jerusalem to claim David's throne. We mustn't forget what Jesus told Martha

moments before He raised Lazarus from the dead, lest we get distracted in all the glory and triumphant of the shouting crowds. “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” He who is resurrection and life is riding on that donkey into Jerusalem. He knows when and where He will ascend upon David’s throne to rule and reign forever. This, the crowds did not know.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem to be crucified on a Roman cross for the sins of the world. Above His thorn-encircled brow, a placard will be nailed which says, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” The cross is the throne from which rules and reigns over God’s kingdom. Even after His resurrection from the dead on Easter Sunday, Jesus is known and worshipped as the crucified, yet living Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The pageantry of this service, with our youth waving palm branches and the extended Passion reading with three different readers, is but one liturgical means teaching us something extraordinary is happening among us.

From the very beginning of this sermon, I have been asserting that Jesus is the Messianic King and Savior promised in the OT, that He is the resurrection and life, that every Christian believer never truly dies. I have asserted these things because the Bible asserts them. But there is proof undergirding these assertions: Jesus’ death on Good Friday and Easter. He suffered our judgment on the cross. He drank the bitter cup of our sufferings on Golgotha’s tree. He tasted and endured our death. Having taken the judgment of the entire world upon Himself, He died to save us. And rose again to open His Father’s kingdom to all forgiven believers. This is how Jesus can tell Martha and all His people whoever believes in Me (i.e., Jesus) will never die. Palm Sunday is the beginning of this great celebration. Jesus is life and resurrection. Not only because He said so. But because He died and rose again for us.

Let us celebrate this week, on the one hand as Christians have always celebrated it: with prayer, praise, hymns, songs, sacrament, feasting, and joy. On the other, let us celebrate it anew as we never have before. In the newness and freshness of Christ’s divine resurrection life given to us by gracious presence of the Holy Spirit. This is our week of weeks. The joy and victory of Christ be with 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.