

Pastor Kenneth Mars

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

Cantate (Fifth Sunday of Easter)

May 1, 2021

Text: Psalm 98

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

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

Godly traditions and practices are wonderful gifts. They give order and structure to our worship and to much of life in general. And more often than not, such traditions reflect the beauty and strength of God's love and common grace. Consider, for example, our church's music and song. We almost always have an organist that plays throughout the service. And we sing hymns and large portions of our liturgy, our order of service. Sacred music and song are truly godly traditions that we ought to protect, support, and encourage.

This morning, I want to give some attention to the question of why we sing and make music in church. Let me state here at the beginning where I'm coming from. Sacred music and song are not nice options we can take or leave. The Bible describes and commands that music and song fill our worship. The traditional name given to this Sunday, the Fifth Sunday of Easter, is Cantate which is a Latin imperative that means "sing." Today is the singing Sunday. Cantate comes from the opening words of Psalm 98. Please grab your hymnal and turn to Psalm 98 in the front.

¹Oh sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things! His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.

²The LORD has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.

³He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.

⁴Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises!

⁵Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody!

⁶With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD!

⁷Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who dwell in it!

⁸Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together ⁹before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.

I want to make some comments about this psalm and how it informs our worship. The psalmist begins with a command for God's people to sing unto the Lord a new song (vs. 1). It needs to be restated again, especially in light of some of the struggles the Church has had to face in light of the pandemic, that singing in Christian worship is not an option. Prudential judgment must certainly be exercised in such rare situations. But the idea that Christians must silence their music indefinitely, until further notice, is simply a violation of God's Word that Christians cannot obey. To silence the Church's song is but one way to silence God's Word and Christ's precious gospel. But what is of greater concern, and I think more applicable to our ordinary lives rather than the extraordinary circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic, is that it's easy to let singing and music fall into neglect. There is a tendency in our day and age to leave the music to the professionals, to the music lovers. The rest of us are relegated to mere consumers of music but not active participants. Let those with training, skill, and love for music take care of the singing and music making in worship.

Dear saints of God, the Lord God doesn't give us that option. All of us are to sing unto the Lord the new song of salvation. For all of us are participants in the salvation which Christ has brought to the world. We sing because Christ Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, preached the Gospel to the world, and healed the sick and raised the dead. The Church composes hymns and music because Jesus died to atone for the sins of the world and rose again triumphantly to destroy the hideous, ugly works of Satan and death. We Christians sing together with the great chorus of believers past, present, and future who confess with the prophet Isaiah, "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the Lord God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation" (Is. 12:2). The new song of salvation is the on-going song about Jesus and His universal work of saving every man, woman, and children from every nation of the world. Stanzas 2–3:

²The LORD has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.

³He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.

We see already in these first few verses the “command” to sing but also the “rational or the why” we sing. We sing because of what Jesus has done for us. It’s as simple and as glorious as that! Jesus has made known the salvation He won for the world when He was lifted up on the cross for the sins of the world. In John’s gospel, we learn that Jesus said, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32). The cross of the Jesus is the salvation of the world. All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. The Church’s ministry is to proclaim this great work of salvation. Through preaching, the instruction of the young and old, through witnessing and mission work. And yes, through songs, hymns, and spiritual songs. The apostle Paul, in Colossians 3:16, directs the church, the assembly of believers gathered around God’s Word and Sacraments, to “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”

Our congregations have spent enormous resources for music and song in the purchase of hymnals, organs, pianos, (hand chimes), worship bulletins, etc. Through these things, the precious Gospel of the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting are proclaimed in the world until Christ comes again. The apostle Peter describes your priesthood with these glorious words, “But 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 2:9). You, dear saints and priest of the Lord, proclaim through your day to day lives of faithfulness, through your love for one another, and through your worship and song, the excellencies of Christ Jesus. For He called all of you out of the ugly darkness of sin, unbelief, and death into His glorious light! Singing the gospel is part and parcel of your royal priesthood.

The months of May and June are times in which we remember and give thanks for mothers and fathers. That is another good, beautiful tradition. One thing mothers and fathers can do to fulfill their godly vocations as parents is to have your children memorize Scripture and hymns. Children can learn them so quickly. It’s astounding. Another thing we can all do in fulfillment of our vocation as God’s priesthood is to sing in Church. The witness we give through our singing, or lack of singing(!), is quite powerful. Our singing encourages one another. And believe me, I hear people talk about the joy of attending services in which people sing. And the uneasiness of worship services where little singing is heard. Don’t worry about whether or not you sing on pitch. Or whether or not it sounds good. Your song is glorious and beautiful.

For God Himself created you to sing His praises. Don't let the devil or your sinful flesh, silence the glorious beauty of the gospel proclaimed through your voice.

Psalms 98 describes and commands songs be sung with the human voice. It's an obvious point but one we ought not overlook. But more often than not, the human voice is accompanied with instruments.

⁴Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises!

⁵Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody!

⁶With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD!

Other psalms will expand this list of instruments (i.e., Ps. 150). Thus, the Church has always, from the earliest days, used many, many instruments in singing about Jesus and His Gospel. The organ has become the backbone of the Church's music because it offers the greatest flexibility and variety of sounds. But the Church has always sought to incorporate the unique sounds and qualities of the great variety of instruments. Voice and instruments go together in the new song of Christ's salvation.

Finally, one last, but important, observation from Psalm 98. It's not just the music we human beings make that offers beautiful worship to God, but all creation!

⁷Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who dwell in it!

⁸Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together ⁹before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.

Throughout the psalms, we hear composers invoking all creation to join the song of praise and redemption. The seas, the hills, the stars and the heavens, the wind and rain. And yes, the animal kingdom. Psalm 150:6 says, "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord." Those are fitting words that bring the inspired hymn book of the Bible to a close. Everything that has the breath of life is to use it in declaring the Lord's praises. Each according to its unique nature and character.

And wonder of wonders, the reason why creation praises God is that the Lord is coming again! The entire universe is moving forward eagerly awaiting the final day of judgment. The apostle Paul made a similar comment in Romans 8:19–21:

¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.

²⁰For the creation was subjected to futility ... in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

Creation is awaiting with eager longing our redemption on the Last Day! It awaits the return of Jesus and our resurrection from the dead. When you hear the sound of the wind, the rustling of leaves, the distinctive sound of animals, the flow of water, the sound of children at play, on and on we could go, know that creation is filling the world with the sounds of eager longing for the Last Day. The Church's music and song joins this mighty chorus as we pray, "Come, Lord Jesus. Amen" (Rev. 22:20).

By the grace of the Holy Spirit, may your mind, heart, soul, and voice be filled with glorious praises of Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

✠ 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

Rogate (Sixth Sunday of Easter)

May 9, 2021

Text: John 16:23–30; Psalm 66:19–20

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

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

Last Sunday, we considered that the Church is a singing Church. She sings the new song of salvation revealed in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. We, as the Church of the living Christ present in this location, express our love and joy and victory in and for Christ through the beautiful combination of word and melody. This, the Bible commands. For it is fitting and proper to declare God's glory and praise and our love and devotion through word and song.

Today, we consider a related characteristic of the Christian Church and of every Christian. Prayer. The Church prays; she is a praying Church. The characteristics of singing and praying are related and weave together beautifully. Let me give but one example. During their missionary journey, the apostle Paul and Silas were preaching God's Word in Philippi and thrown into jail unjustly. Through Christ's name, they cast a demon out of a girl who was making money by telling fortunes. Her owners saw that they had lost their source of income and had Paul and Silas thrown in Jail. Acts 16:25 describes Paul and Silas' response to their persecution. They were in prison, "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them." Praying and singing to God. They wouldn't have had any light. And yet they sang praises to God. And offered prayers. They didn't have hymnals. So the hymns would have been memorized and sung. Undoubtedly, they would have sung the psalms. And the prayers would have been a combination of prayers memorized from the Old Testament, the Lord's Prayer, prayers used in church worship, and those formed in the moment.

Paul and Silas were two gathered together in the circumstances of persecution as the Church, praying and singing. These are the things that we do as the Church. Today, is Rogate Sunday, which comes from the Latin word commanding prayer. Pray ye! Pray, one and all! is the sense we should get from this. Jesus is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity. So we pray. Psalm 66:19–20, part of today's Introit, gives us

these words of encouragement, “¹⁹But truly God has listened; he has attended to the voice of my prayer. ²⁰Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me!” Thank be to God. We have the steadfast promise that God hears and answers our prayers as Christians because He loves us.

On the night of His betrayal, Jesus taught His disciples about prayer and the great privilege we have as His redeemed people. Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you” (vs. 23). It is no exaggeration to say that in and through Christ, that is, through His holy and precious name, we baptized believers have complete access to God the Father’s presence. And we have the promise that our prayers will be answered!

And yet we know from Christian experience that it truly seems as if God does not answer our prayers, at least not all of them. And certainly not in the way we hope and expect. But Jesus says, “...whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give it to you.” There are a few qualifies here, limiting factors if you will that we must consider. To begin with, prayer is guided and directed by Christ’s name. To pray in Jesus’ name is to pray as a baptized Christian who comes to His heavenly Father, through Jesus, His Son, by the grace and comfort of the Holy Spirit. All prayers are limited by those things which can legitimately be asked in the name of the incarnate Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me contrast this describing it in the negative. A sinner cannot use the name of Jesus properly without the Holy Spirit. No one can say “Jesus is Lord” without the Holy Spirit says, the apostle Paul in I Corinthians 12:3. Without being born again of baptismal waters and the Holy Spirit, no one can offer prayer to God. Christian prayer, that is, true prayer that is heard and answered by the Father can only be made by Christians, the only people in the world who have the Spirit of God living in them. Their prayers offered to God in the name of Jesus are heard and answered by the Father. The opposite remains true. Without Christ, heaven and God’s throne of grace remains closed to sinners. One comes to the Father only through saving faith in Jesus, His Son.

Praying in Jesus’ name includes faith in Jesus and in everything Jesus did to save us, to justify us in the Father’s eyes, and make us His own dear children. Praying in Jesus’ name is to pray in absolute faith and confidence in Jesus. Such faith believes what God’s Word says about what He’s done to bring us to the Father; Jesus is the only mediator between God and man: “For there is one God, and there is one mediator

between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” (I Timothy 2:5). Praying in Jesus’ name means praying with Christ who stands with us in the presence of His Father.

That brings me to the next point about prayer in Jesus’ name and God’s promise to answer. Our prayers must be established on the wealth and strength of God’s Holy Word. Prayer is listening as well as speaking. We listen to God speak us through the words of Holy Scripture. Having heard God’s Word, we then speak back to Him, making our prayers, petitions, requests, and thanksgivings based upon the Word heard. I trust you’ll understand what I mean by this example...the Lord Jesus has likened the kingdom of heaven unto little children. Children hear their parents and others speak. Children, in turn, speak back what they hear. We pray, as children, to our Father, speaking back to Him what He has said to us in His inspired Word. Praying in Jesus’ name always praying in every situation the 3rd petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Not my will, but Thy will be done.

A word of encouragement to you mothers and grandmothers on this Mother’s Day. You give so much in so many different ways. Thank you for all of it. But the greatest gifts you can give to your children is not money, clothes, activities, education, and all those good things. And they truly are good. But the great gift you can give is 1) to teach them to pray and 2) to actually pray with your children. Through prayer coupled with God’s Word, you give to them Jesus. And He is the one who died and rose again to give them life in this world and the world to come. Father, help your wives in this regard too. Mom and dads, grandmothers and grandfathers, pray for your children. And pray with your children. This is God’s good and gracious will.

And the prayers that we pray, if they are to be truly in Christ’s name, must be established upon God’s Word. Use the very words of Scripture to form your prayers. Not mention, just simply pray the words of Scriptures themselves!! Even in our prayer requests that are specific to our lives and circumstances, those situations that are uniquely our own, are to be made according to God’s revealed will. Consider, for example, something like purchasing another vehicle. Cars, trucks, and motorcycles are not mentioned in the Bible. And yet, we recognize that we need transportation to go to work so we can support our family as well as help and support our neighbor in his needs. So we pray for the Lord to grant us a vehicle that will help us fulfill these parts of His good and gracious will in your lives.

So pray God’s Word. Use the Psalms especially. And every day, pray the Lord’s Prayer. We have Jesus’ command to do so, don’t we? And when you pray, says Jesus,

say, “Our Father who art in heaven...” One of our catechism students took the initiative to time how long it takes to pray the Lord’s Prayer. It’s less than 30 seconds. So, we concluded during that class that if you have time to brush your teeth every day, twice a day in fact, then you have time to pray the Lord’s Prayer as a minimum. In actuality, the Lord’s Prayer is the perfect prayer. It forms the basis and foundation upon which all prayers are spoken. Next, comes the psalms. Then the other prayers written in the Bible. And then the whole Word of God.

It also must be stated that we cannot pray for things that are forbidden in God’s Word. We cannot pray for evil and unbiblical things in Jesus’ name. No amount of prayer and fasting can change God’s holy will into something evil. Nor do we Christians want such things, not really, not when we remember that sin in all its forms and manifestations leads to death and misery. To pray in Jesus’ name is to seek to avoid ever form of evil that the devil, the world, and yes, even our sinful nature desires. The 6th and 7th petitions of the Lord’s Prayer are “And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.”

Praying in Jesus’ name is praying as baptized children of God, children who are loved and redeemed unto eternal life. It means hearing God’s Word and forming your prayers based upon the wealth and riches of His Word. “Whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you” (vs. 23). And did you hear the promise, “that your joy may be full.” Now that’s a promise to hold onto. In our own lives, we have bitter disappointments. There is never any shortage of things for which we may pray at any and every given time. As so we pray, that the devil, the world, and our sinful natures would not take away our joy through false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice. Our Lord desires to give you true joy, joy that surpasses mere human understanding. His joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, given to us in our baptism.

Blessed are you dear saints of God. For you have the promise “Whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give it to you...Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.” So the Church sings and she prays!

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

✠ 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

Immanuel Lutheran Church – Burns, WY (members of St. John’s also present)

The Ascension of Our Lord

May 13, 2021

Text: Luke 24:44–53

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

The sons of Korah are the authors of Psalm 47, the primary content of tonight’s Introit. This psalm is a prophetic description of our Lord’s ascension to the Father’s right hand 40 days after His resurrection from the dead. “God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet” (vs. 5). Tonight’s service is the joyous commemoration that Jesus is the divine King of kings and Lord of lords who ascended to the Father’s right hand of glory 40 days after His resurrection. From the Father’s right, Jesus rules over the heavens and the earth as the incarnate Son of the Father. He possesses all power and authority. And He remains the Savior of the world, not only because of His death and resurrection but by means of His rule over the universe.

Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 28, records our Lord’s great commission. Jesus told His apostles that Christian disciples are to be made until the end of time with a two-fold approach: baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and, teaching everything that Jesus taught. Baptism and teaching the fullness of God’s Word are the only divinely authorized means of making Christians; they go hand in glove, two sides of the same coin, if you will. It’s that simple, that profound, and that mysterious. The Holy Spirit creates and sustains Christ’s Church not through spectacular miracles nor through powerful displays of persuasive oratory. But by means of the Bible purely taught in all its articles and the Sacraments rightly administered in obedience to Christ’s command. Jesus builds His victorious Church through the ministry of the Spirit working in Word and Sacraments. The Church will do this until Christ returns in glory on the Last Day.

What’s of great importance for us tonight is the foundational basis and authority of behind Christ’s Word and Sacrament ministry. In Matthew 28:18, Jesus told His disciples, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” Then vs. 19, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing and teaching.” The authority Jesus possesses is the authority and power of the Father Himself. Thus, the sons of Korah write many centuries before Christ’s ascension that God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of the trumpet.” Those same sons of Korah saw

prophetically that Jesus, the ascended God, will rule over the nations of the earth. “For the Lord, the Most High, is to be feared, a great king over all the earth (vs. 2)...God reigns over the nations; God sits on his holy throne” (vs. 8). Jesus’ ascension is the coronation of the King of kings and Lord of lords. He rules over the nations from the Father’s right hand in majesty and absolute power.

Our Lord’s ascension reminds us, and dare I say, and encourages us to remember Jesus rules as the incarnate God over history. There are a number of things about this truth that should encourage us. First, we Christian disciples really don’t do anything. Jesus does it all. From tonight’s gospel text, Luke 24:44–45, we heard Jesus say to His disciples, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures...” Jesus fulfilled the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms, including Psalm 47 mentioned earlier in this sermon. Jesus did and does the work. Not you and me. The 10 Commandments are a summary of Jesus’ life. The prophets all point to Jesus, the Messiah. The Psalms are His prayers and His hymns of praise.

Jesus kept and fulfilled. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, our hearts are opened to understand God’s Word so that as baptized believers we believe and live according to what we hear in God’s Word. Through Christ and in the power of the Spirit, we Christians now desire and seek earnestly to live according to God’s Word because our life is hidden with Christ. Galatians 2:20 describes the life we have with Christ. These words, I think, are some of the most beautiful and comforting in the Bible, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Jesus is doing the work in us. The life we live, we live by faith in Jesus who loves us and gave Himself for us. He did all the work; He lives in us. We gather tonight in His name knowing that even in this service, He is doing the work in us. And what a gracious and joyous work it is.

Jesus promised the disciples that He would send the Holy Spirit to them. Stay in Jerusalem “until you are clothed with power from on high” (vs. 49). With the authority of the Father, Jesus will send the Holy Spirit to clothe us with the Holy Spirit. Jesus does all the work of getting us properly clothed for a right standing before His heavenly Father. Consider the imagery Jesus is using here! Every day, we clothe ourselves for the day’s tasks. Pants, shirt, shoes, skirt, dress, blouse, etc. In order to walk in this world as a Christian, we must be clothed – completely covered – with the

Holy Spirit. Nothing else will suffice! Without the Holy Spirit covering us, we are left naked and exposed, afraid of and ashamed in the Father's holy presence. But King Jesus would not leave us without what is most needed. He clothes us from head to toe, body and soul with the Holy Spirit. In Christ and through Christ we stand in His resurrection life through the Holy Spirit who completely and absolutely covers us. From the Father's right hand, Jesus sends us His greatest gift: the Holy Spirit.

Ten days from tonight, we will celebrate the Day of Pentecost. The Lord Jesus sent the Holy Spirit with the sound of a might rushing wind to fill the hearts and minds of His Holy Church. And His beloved people have been clothed with the grace and power of the Holy Spirit ever since.

Tonight, we are comforted and reminded:

1. That Jesus exercises all authority and power of the universe for the good of His beloved Church,
2. that Jesus fulfilled Holy Scripture for us and for our salvation,
3. that He opens our hearts and minds to understand the Scriptures, the same Scriptures that He fulfills,
4. that He clothes us with the Holy Spirit so that we can hear and believe God's Word unto eternal life,
5. that by the grace and virtue of Holy Spirit we seek to live according to God's Word, and
6. that the life we live, we live by faith in the Lord Jesus who loves us and gave Himself for us.

What tonight really reminds us is that all these happen because Jesus ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of God the Father almighty. From there, He does all these things for us. The right hand of God is the Bible's way of saying that Jesus now fills all heaven and earth. His divine authority and majesty are everywhere present and operative. He exercises His lordship over all creation. But most especially, He reigns in His Church through His Word and Sacraments. Christ Jesus is no absent monarch. He lives among us. He lives within us. Remember, we have been crucified with Christ. He lives within us now so that the life we live in the flesh, we live by faith in the Son of God who loves us and gives Himself for us.

Clap your hands, all peoples! Shout to God with loud songs of joy!
 For the LORD, the Most High, is to be feared, a great king over all the earth.
 God has gone up with a shout, the LORD with the sound of a trumpet.

God reigns over the nations; God sits on his holy throne.

✠ 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

Exaudi (Seventh Sunday of Easter)

May 16, 2021

Text: Psalm 27

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

These past few weeks I have been preaching and teaching about the characteristics of the Church using those funny sounding Latin names for each Sunday. The point is not to learn archaic Latin terms, though I think that's loads of fun. Rather, the goal is to grow in our most holy faith. Those Latin terms generally come from the Introit appointed for the day, which are portions from the Psalms. Two weeks ago, it was Cantate Sunday. The Church, we learned, is a singing Church proclaiming to the world the new song of salvation found in Christ Jesus through music and melody. The command to sing comes from Psalm 98:1, "O sing unto the Lord a new song, for he has done great things." Last Sunday we learned that the Church is a praying Church. The command, from the Latin Rogate, means, "Pray ye, one and all." It's derived from Psalm 66:19 which says, "Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me!" The Church prays because God loves us through the person and work of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Christian Church sings and prays.

Now we come to Exaudi Sunday. It too is a Latin word issuing a command to hear. But this command is quite different from the previous two we've considered. Those commands were directed to us. We are the ones who are to sing and to pray to the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit under Christ's grace and love. Today, it's we Christians commanding God to hear us as we pray! That should cause us to pause. Who are we to tell God to do anything? Before we answer that question, let's look at the Introit which begins with Psalm 27:7, "Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud."

King David is the composer of this psalm. He begins with great confidence and courage. Vs. 1, "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" The Lord God of heaven and earth is the source and strength of heart and life. Though the evil forces of sin and Satan seek to enshroud us in darkness, we live in the divine of Christ shining through the Words of Holy Scripture. No darkness or human judgment can stand against us. For God, the Lord of heaven and earth, stands with us and for us. Why

should we ever be afraid, if God is for us? The apostle Paul, in the New Testament asks that very question in Romans 8:31, “If God be for us, who can be against us?”

So this first thing we must notice and remember is that God is for us. In spite of our sins and rebellion, God continues to love this world. He doesn't wink at our sin. God Himself made atonement for our sins and the sins of the world through the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The world is reconciled to God through Jesus. That is the glory of the Christian gospel. The new song of salvation we considered a couple of weeks ago.

But King David knew that evil remains active in this world. In the next two stanzas he wrote about evildoers seeking his destruction, enemies were constantly encircling him in order to destroy him, war was a constant threat. Psalm 27:2–3:

²When evildoers assail me to eat up my flesh, my adversaries and foes, it is they who stumble and fall. ³Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident.

Those enemies included not only men and foreign nations but the spiritual powers of the devil. David knew that he was being attacked because God was on his side! There is a strange tension we believers live in. On the one hand, God is on our side. Who can stand against us and why should we fear anything? On the other hand, our enemies are larger in number and all the more determined to destroy us precisely because we are believers in Jesus. This shouldn't surprise us. The Lord Jesus told us such things would happen. In the gospel text for today, Jesus told the 12 apostles:

“I have said these things to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me” (John 16:1–3).

Our Lord's teaching applied directly and immediately to the apostles. But it also applies to the Church. The apostle Peter admonished and encouraged the Church when he wrote (I Peter 4:12–14, today's epistle reading):

“Beloved (as an aside, if the Church is beloved, who is the One loving the Church? God!!), do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad

when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.”

The Christian Church ought not be surprised when the people of this world turn against her. It turned against Jesus. He’s the light and salvation of the world King David sung about in Psalm 27. Though Jesus was rejected and despised by men, we Christians worship and adore Him in absolute obedience and love. In Christ Jesus, we stand triumphant and courageous.

King David continued his psalm of prayer and praise. Stanzas 4–6:

⁴One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.

⁵For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will lift me high upon a rock.

⁶And now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

In the midst of the enemies and the oppression of God’s enemies still at work in this life, David remained confident. And he continued to seek the Lord where He might found. In the house of the Lord, David saw the beauty of the Lord through the Scriptures read aloud and taught, in the prayers offered to God on behalf of God’s people, and the sacrifices that promised them the forgiveness of sins and new life. In the Lord’s temple, David saw Jesus. Jesus is the beauty of the Lord. Jesus is the Lord’s light and salvation. And having seen the beauty of the Lord in His Temple, David sang and made melody to the Lord. Again, the Church sings and she prays.

And now we come to the verse that sparked this entire sermon! Psalm 27:7, “Hear (that’s a command!), O LORD, when I cry aloud; be gracious to me and answer me!” There’s David, the redeemed sinner, seeking God’s beauty in the Temple speaking to the Lord with authority and confidence. The question we have been asking is: “Why is David able to tell God to do anything?” For that matter, why are we Christians able to issue commands to God? Psalm 27:7 is our prayer too. Day by day, we tell God to hear us in the Lord’s Prayer. We command God to give us this day our daily bread and to forgive us our trespasses, the 4th & 5th Petitions. Those two petitions are unambiguous, clear commands that we Christians speak to God.

So, to answer the question, “Why we are able to tell God to do anything” we must say two things. The first I have already said. We tell God what to do because He is not only our creator, but our redeemer. He has committed Himself to us in love. And in love, we speak the commands that love issues to a beloved. Give that which only You as the beloved can give. Light. Salvation. Forgiveness. Hope. Joy. Peace. Resurrection life. Only God can provide those things. And so we tell God to give what only He can give, knowing that He loves and cherishes us and we, in turn, love and cherish Him.

The second answer to our question as to why we mere mortals can tell God to do anything is found in Psalm 27:8. It’s clear and simple, “You have said, ‘Seek my face.’ My heart says to you, ‘Your face, LORD, do I seek.’” We tell God what to do because God Himself has commanded us to do so. He tells us we are to seek His face. To seek His light and salvation. The commands we give to God are authorized and empowered by God Himself, by His divine command. So we tell God what to do because 1) He loves us and desires to give us what only He can give and 2) because He Himself has commanded us to speak to Him in such manner. Notice that both come from God Himself. Without them, we could never presume to speak to Him in such a manner. Conversely, if we fail to come to God in prayer demanding what He Himself has commanded and promised to give, then we sin against Him.

Dear saints of the living God, through your baptism into Christ Jesus, you have been gifted with the authority and privilege to enter into God’s presence. God is delighted when you come into His presence to seek the things that only He can give. With all boldness and confidence, we Christians speak to our heavenly Father as dear children speak to their dear father. Thus, the prayer that the Lord Jesus gave us and commands us to pray day by day begins with “Our Father who art in heaven...” You are the beloved of the Lord, His children, heirs of His kingdom, and the delight of His eyes.

Hear, O Lord, when we pray. For the beauty of Your face we seek in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. Fill us with Your Spirit. That we may, at all times and in all places, call you Abba, 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

The Day of Pentecost

May 23, 2021

Text: John 14:23–31; Psalm 139:7–17

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

Christ's Church is a Spirit-filled Church. They go together. You can't have the Holy Spirit and not be part of Christ's Church nor can you be a living member of Christ's Church and not have the Holy Spirit. This is why the Introit begins with that joyous, confident phrase, "The Spirit of the Lord fills the world. Alleluia. The righteous shall be glad." We Christians recognize that God the Holy Spirit is not only present everywhere at all times, but He lives graciously within our hearts and minds. He enlivens our souls and bequeaths to us His gifts of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22–23). For us Christians, the Holy Spirit truly fills the world. And we are glad.

King David composed Psalm 139 as he contemplated the work of the Holy Spirit throughout the world and particularly in the lives of God's people. Consider Psalm 139:7–17; we'll look at vs. 7–12 first:

⁷Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? ⁸If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! ⁹If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, ¹⁰even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. ¹¹If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," ¹²even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.

King David exults in the Spirit's omnipresence. He truly fills the world. There is no place we can hide. Not the highest heavens nor the furthest depths. We marvel at the images from the Hubble Telescope as it peers into the depths of space. Or the pictures constructed from electron microscopes and other instruments as scientist attempt to understand the subatomic world. In either situation, the Holy Spirit is there! Relativistic and quantum physics find their resolution and harmony in the Holy Spirit. The gracious presence of the Holy Spirit permeating all creation is truly good news, especially for us believers in Jesus. God the Holy Spirit stands with us always, at all

times, in all places, during all circumstances. The forces of evil can never whisk us away to some place where God cannot reach us. Our God is continually present through the Holy Spirit. And we are glad.

King David narrows his focus to a much more personal level in vs. 13–16:

¹³For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. ¹⁴I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. ¹⁵My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. ¹⁶Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.

The Holy Spirit is responsible for our very existence. He is the Lord and giver of life. Mankind has always known that the procreation and nurture of children in the womb are wondrous, mysterious things. Such knowledge has become all the more wonderful with the discovery of ultrasound technology. We can see the child growing, moving, forming. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, David described our growth in the womb as being knit together, fearfully and wonderfully made. His poetry remains all the more beautiful and powerful when coupled with cutting edge, 3-dimensional technology. We get to see the Holy Spirit's work. The Spirit saw our unformed substance; the Spirit weaved together every cell in the secret places of our mother's womb. It is not mere sentiment or fine sounding words when we say every human being is unique and priceless. Quite the contrary. The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, is the creator of every human being. Being pro-life is much, much more than holding a political or cultural viewpoint; it's more than being against abortion, infanticide, racism, sexism, or any other form of anti-humanity. It's a confession that God the Holy Spirit is the Lord and giver of life, human life that is fearfully and wonderfully made.

And then David summarizes his contemplations with (Ps. 139:17), “¹⁷How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!” Yes, dear saints of God. The Spirit of the Lord fills the world. Alleluia! And we, the righteous of the Lord, are glad.

We're back to where we began. The Church of Jesus is a Spirit-filled Church. Every baptized Christian believer is filled with the Spirit, a living temple of the Holy Spirit. The body of Christ, the one, holy Christian and apostolic Church, is enlivened with

the Spirit. The reason we have such a privileged place of honor is because of the Lord Jesus Christ. He did the saving work of reconciling the world.

Every human being is fearfully and wonderfully made, as we saw in Psalm 139. But original and actual sin corrupts every man, woman, and child. In that same psalm, David wrote about wicked men doing abominable deeds. He prayed that God would destroy their evil plans, to slay them, in fact (vs. 19). Throughout the Bible, Old and New Testaments, the wicked are brought to nothing when they turn away from evil in repentance and confess faith in God unto the forgiveness of sin. The work of the Holy Spirit doesn't stop when He forms a child in the womb. He also seeks to bring people to saving faith in Jesus.

In today's gospel reading (John 14), the Lord told His disciples, "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (vs. 26). It is the Father's will that His people be filled with the Spirit. For He sends the Spirit in the name of Jesus. The angel, who visited Joseph, commanded him to name Mary's Son, Jesus, "for He will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). The Father sends the Spirit into the world for the purpose of bringing to them the salvation won by Jesus.

The entire ministry of Jesus is defined by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Lord Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit to be the world's Savior. Thirty years later, Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit during His baptism in the Jordan River to be the One who bears the sins of the world. The Holy Spirit led Jesus into the Judean wilderness to endure the devil's temptations for us and for our salvation. The Holy Spirit rested upon Jesus so that when He healed the sick, raised the dead, and preached forgiveness and eternal life to all believers, they were touched by the Holy Spirit. The Lord Jesus was raised from the dead by the Father through the Spirit. All that Jesus did was guided by the Holy Spirit. The name of Jesus gives salvation. The Spirit brings to sinners the love and grace and righteousness of Jesus. To be a follower of Jesus is to be filled with the Holy Spirit. And we are glad.

But the work of the Spirit doesn't stop when sinners believe in Christ Jesus unto salvation. The Spirit continues to teach Christians about Jesus. "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (vs. 26). The Church is filled with the Spirit. And through the Spirit, the Church learns about the teachings of Jesus.

So here is another vital characteristic of the Church. She lives by the teachings of Jesus as they are recorded in God's Word. Look at vs. 23–24

²³“If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. ²⁴Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me.

We Christians show our love for Jesus by hearing His Word and living according to it. The Spirit-filled life of a Christian begins, continues, and ends with God's Word. Moments before Jesus ascended into heaven, He gave the Great Commission recorded in Matthew 28:19–20. We readily remember the command, in vs. 19, to make disciples of all nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. But what is too often overlooked is vs. 20, “...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” The Holy Spirit makes Christians in the world through baptism and Christ's teaching.

This is the absolute, essential nature of the Church's work of preaching Christ and administering His sacraments. The Spirit works through Word and Sacraments to make Christians, to create and sustain the Church. Without Christ's Word, there is no Church, no forgiveness of sins, no hope of the resurrection on the Last Day, no everlasting salvation. The Holy Spirit fills the world and brings to it the saving word of Jesus. Joy and peace come to the world as the Spirit brings sinners to Jesus.

Over these past few Sundays we have highlighted that the Church sings. She prays. The Church dwells in the presence of the Father and speaks boldly to Him in Christ's name. Now we see the Church is filled with the Holy Spirit and lives by the word of Christ. Our prayers and hymns of praise are guided and enriched by the Spirit. With all boldness and confidence we pray, “Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the faithful, and kindle in them the fire of your love.”

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

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

Pastor Kenneth Mars

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

The Holy Trinity

May 30, 2021

Text: John 3:1–17

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

I've been following a pattern of thought in my sermons over these past several Sundays. Using the themes of the day, I have been highlighting various characteristics of the Christian Church. My goal has been to increase and deepen our understanding of who we are as God's redeemed people. We are members of the one holy Christian and apostolic Church founded upon the doctrine of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus the cornerstone. Our membership in Christ's Church is a grand, miraculous privilege. The Church is the living body of Christ, His bride, and the focal point of all human history. The apostle Paul exalted in the glorious nature of the Church when he wrote:

⁸To me ... this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, ¹⁰so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (Ephesians 3:8–10).

It's through the Church, the manifold wisdom of God is revealed to the citizens of heaven and earth. The Bible teach that part of God's wisdom and even His divine characteristics can be learned through the study of the natural world including philosophy, history, the natural sciences, music, art, and so forth. But the Church of Jesus is the place of divine illumination. This, in part, is why the Church can never compromise her doctrine and worship to accommodate the passing fads of the world. God the Holy Trinity has established that His wisdom, His saving will, His love and mercy, His plans and purposes for this world and the next, can only be made known in and through the Church. Dear saints of God, let us be what God has redeemed us to be, the Christian Church. Without apology, excuse, or compromise. Filled with joy, confidence, and love for God and one another.

We are the Church of Jesus. Over the past month, we have seen the following characteristics of His Church. This is by no means an exhaustive list but

representative of the exalted status of Christ's Church. And remember, the manifold wisdom of God is revealed to the authorities in heaven and earth through these unique features of the Church:

1. The Church is a singing Church, proclaiming the new song of salvation in song and melody unto the end of time. Psalm 98. This is a song that we cannot leave silent. It's the song of Jesus, His incarnation and perfect life, His crucifixion, His resurrection. The entire story and drama of divine redemption, love, and grace!! May the Church's song be ever beautiful and powerful.
2. We are a praying Church, calling upon God the Father in Christ's name as we live according to His will and purposes through the Spirit of grace. Psalm 66. And the Lord Jesus taught us that whatever we ask in His name, God the Father will give us (John 16:23). A most amazing privilege!
3. And then we saw that the Church dwells in the very presence of the Father through the Spirit. In God's presence, we speak to Him with a commanding voice! Yes, we tell God what to do. Such authority God Himself has given to us. Psalm 27. Hear us, O Lord. For you commanded us to seek your face. And to bring our petitions to you. Most notably, in the Lord's Prayer, we command God to forgive us our trespasses and to give us our daily bread. The Father Himself has commanded us to speak to Him in such a manner because we are redeemed by His Son Jesus and filled with His Spirit.
4. And that brings us to last Sunday, Pentecost Sunday. The Church is a Spirit-filled Church. For God the Father and God the Son sent the Spirit to enliven His Church and to fill the world with His presence. In the womb, God the Spirit fearfully and wonderfully created each and every human being (Psalm 139). But the Spirit continues to do His gracious work by calling sinners to repentance and faith in Christ. In the Church, Christians hear God's Word and show their love for Christ by living according to it. To be a Spirit-filled Church means that the Father and the Son make their home in the hearts and minds of every Christian (John 14:23).

Now we come to today, Holy Trinity Sunday. This will be the fifth and last characteristic we will consider in this thematic sermon series. The Church is Trinitarian, meaning that she and every one of her individual members finds her being and self-knowledge in the God who is One in essence yet three in Person. The mystery of the Trinity is the highest, most profound wonder of the Christian faith. The apostle Paul taught the Roman Christians that many things about God are revealed, even His invisible attributes of eternal power and divine nature (Rom. 1:20). All

human societies have known about God's existence. Some have even believed that God was one in spite of the predominance of pagan polytheism throughout human history. But what could never be known through creation is that God is Trinitarian. One God in essence but three in Person. Only the Holy Scriptures, revealed knowledge of God made known through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, teach us that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And any discussion or worship of God which does not confess and adore God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is idolatry.

The Trinitarian life of the Church begins with baptism and continues with teaching all that Jesus commands. Matthew 28:19–20 records Jesus' Great Commission. Christian disciples will be made from all nations until the end of time when water is applied in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Entrance into God's kingdom begins with God's Trinitarian name being given to sinners through Baptism. Then, according to Jesus, baptized Christians must be taught Christian doctrine. "Every word that I have commanded you" is how Jesus described the teaching His people are to receive in Matthew 28:20. Through the means of baptism and teaching, the Lord Jesus will be with His Church until the end of time.

Christian discipleship is really that simple and that profound. God's holy name and Word are given to us so that we are now part of His family. We belong, body and soul, mind and heart, to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. His Word and His Spirit guide and direct us in every area of life. For as Jesus taught in John 3:5, from today's gospel reading, we Christians are born-again through baptismal waters and the Holy Spirit.

We mustn't pass over our Lord's teaching regarding our new birth. Without the new birth of water and the Spirit, no one can enter God's kingdom. Jesus said that twice. John 3:3 and John 3:5. The reason we need a new birth is described in vs. 6, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." Our fleshly birth, you know, the one we celebrate every year with cake, ice cream, and singing, that birth will not get you into God's kingdom. Our human flesh, that is, our human nature, cannot receive the things of God for it is corrupted by sin. The apostle Paul declares bluntly in Romans 8 that setting our minds on the flesh is death and it is impossible to please God according to the flesh (vs. 1-8). We must be born again according to the Spirit. That's our new birth. And it is given to us in water baptism that is administered in God's Trinitarian name. The Church is Trinitarian for her members are born again by water and Spirit given in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

This is why we rejoice in our baptism. Not only once a year, like we celebrate our earthly birthday, but every day. By the way, it is a great thing to remember your baptismal birthday! The day of new birth in the water and Spirit; the day we received the forgiveness of sins, the in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit, the promise of the resurrection on the Last Day and an eternal inheritance in God's kingdom. But we celebrate our baptismal new birth every day. In the Lord's Prayer, we say, "Our Father who art in heaven..." We sinners are privileged to call upon the Father because His Son, Jesus gave us this prayer to pray day by day in the grace and power of the Spirit. The Lord's Prayer can only be prayed by Christians baptized in God's holy name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our Christian faith finds its beginning, its day-by-day continuance, and its promised fulfillment on the Last Day in God the Holy Trinity. The Church, from beginning to end, is Trinitarian.

The wisdom of God is revealed in the Church. Such wisdom is found by knowing who God is. He is one in essence but three in Person. God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That is the great confession we make before the world through our Christian lives and our public worship services. Knowing God's wisdom is also knowing who we are in relationship to Him. This God loves His creation. He seeks to save His people and give them a new birth in water and Spirit. Because of this divine love, most clearly and beautifully revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Church sings the new song of redemption, she prays and dwells in the Father's presence with boldness and confidence, she lives in and by the Spirit, and she confesses the truth of who God is and what He did and does to save her.

Enlivened with His grace and love, may we always be bold and courageous as God's Trinitarian Church!

✠ 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.