

**FINDING TRUE COMFORT IN THE MIDST OF AFFLICTION**

Hear again the Word of the Lord to His Church:

*You redeemed with Your arm, Your people, (the) sons of Jacob and Joseph. <sup>selah</sup><sup>1</sup>*

**Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**

The texts for this most recent last day of the Christmas season's end in the 2020 or so years since the first Nativity all point their hearers to finding true comfort in the midst of affliction. From the Gospel's narrative of God's deliverance of Jesus, Mary and Joseph from the wrath of Herod; to St. Peter's inspired words regarding suffering while trusting God; to Moses' God-breathed account of Israel/Jacob's deliverance from famine through his journey into Egypt; these words which began our proclamation of God's grace in the Psalm of the Day have been declared fulfilled:

*You (are) the El Who (is) working wonders; You have caused to manifest in (the) peoples, Your might.<sup>2</sup>*

From the wonder of the Word of God working guidance to St. Joseph in dreams, God made it possible for Divine Might to appear among those who were not Jews, first, to the men, named centuries after the event as Baltshazzar, Caspar and Melchoir, then to those in Egypt. For those of us who are familiar with God's working His wonders among us, today's narratives about God's displaying His might in protecting His infant Son are no mystery. It is not hidden from you that the reason that Jesus, with Mary and Joseph, was spared from the wrath of a violent, jealous and ruthless

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 77:15.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 77:14.

earthly king named Herod, happened so that the eternal King of kings would someday die in the sins of all people on the orders of one who worked for the earthly King of kings. You might not like thinking about that which God's deliverance of Jesus meant as Christmas ends and the Feast of the Epiphany is begun. He would have to die for you, for your sins. Yet such reflection, dear Christian, is necessary from time-to-time so that you may not fall from a Christ-centered theology of the Cross into a cute-cuddly manger-centered theology. To help hold us in the right confession of Christ our recently approved mission statement proclaims: we are all about the Dead Guy on a Stick. Hear again that which we have agreed to confess from this place as we are prepared to give an answer to all who ask about the hope we have been given:

*We are a group of sinners who, through no merit of our own, have been called by God to receive His gifts through the proper preaching of Law and Gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments. At Catalina Lutheran Church, we preach, teach, and confess Christ-crucified for the forgiveness of our sins to reconcile us to the Father. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, we share these gifts with others in deep gratitude to God, Who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the Truth.*

Those words have been posted on the board in the Narthex (entry way) for several months. Do you know what the two central words are in that 94-word document? Wrapped into all of that is the core reality of "Christ-crucified." (A word-count places those two words after 46 words and before 46 words. Done by human design? Ask the committee who prepared it and the voters who approved it).

As the Christmas season ends at sundown, and the Epiphany season begins, it is good to reflect upon that which the Holy Spirit has moved us to confess. The central message of Scripture – that Christ was born to die in our sins and did so to be the perfect atonement for them – allows anyone who hears of, and believes in that Christ to ultimately be saved from all afflictions, whether they be worldly or spiritual. Jesus, the Lord Whom the Lord rescued through dreams and human agents, the Lord to Whom the Magi were led, is the Lord in Whom we believers find true comfort in the midst of affliction. It is the God of the Scriptures, born in a mortal body that God proclaimed was coming many centuries before His arrival with words such as these:

*You redeemed with Your arm, Your people, (the) sons of Jacob and Joseph. <sup>selah</sup>3.*

You may know that is true for you in your times of affliction, because the record of history, contained by eyewitness records, shows it to be so for Jesus. As you are in Christ, those words must remain true for you. God, who did not abandon Jesus, Mary and Joseph in the face of Herod's wrath, will spare His children in our hours of trial.

Those realities lie behind these words:

*When (the) waters saw You, O Elohim, when (the) waters saw You, they were in anguish, yes, the deeps trembled.<sup>4</sup>*

As a devout Jew, Joseph would have heard and recited those words of the 77<sup>th</sup> Psalm. As Herod was troubled by the report of the birth of the King of kings in his land, and all Jerusalem was with him, Joseph, as he fell asleep with that report, could

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm 77:15.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 77:16.

have reflected that God said that the waters, which represent the chaos of sin in creation – into the deeps – thought by the ancients to represent the depths of sin. Joseph could have received comfort from God’s promise. That man might have reflected that he was hearing of the fulfillment of God’s Word (he had already received direct revelation of God’s Word and will through dreams, and had beheld them completed). Yet, it appears that Joseph needed a bit more encouragement to fulfill his role as God’s means to accomplish His will revealed in these words:

*You redeemed with Your arm, Your people, (the) sons of Jacob and Joseph. selah<sup>5</sup>.*

(If Joseph needed more help in determining the Lord’s help, why does it surprise you that you desire such help also at times of affliction?) The word translated “redeemed” in the Psalm appears as such three other times in the Old Testament. Once in Exodus, (15:13); once in Psalm 74 (2); and once in Lamentations 3 (58), the word “redeemed” (קָדַם) appears. In each case, that word is used to show that it is God alone who buys back His people from evil intended against them, either by God on account of their sins, or by other humans on account of the evil in those afflicting the people of God.

You should know that God is your Redeemer in Christ, for you hear these words at each Divine Service in this place: *He saved us from the wrath of God, sin, death, and hell by His blood...* Where do they fall in the Lord’s Service? Yes, they are proclaimed just before the Service of the Sacrament of the Altar. That is where the Feast of the World’s Redemption is celebrated. Here, our Redeemer is offered to repentant sinners for the

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<sup>5</sup> Psalm 77:15.

forgiveness of sins. Here He is consumed and the benefits of divine strengthening are received by those who so believe to life everlasting. And, here, to those who do not believe, teach, and confess such biblical truths, the Body and Blood of Jesus may be eaten to the individual's own condemnation and judgment before God! Our Psalm declares:

*I call to mind YH's deeds from of old; I will remember Your wonders from of old.<sup>6</sup>*

This morning, the Church in this place has been reminded of the words she has chosen to confess before the world. It took a bit over three decades of God's grace in this place – through her mission start, to her fracturing over worldly issues; through pastoral struggles of personal and theological natures, to the closing of a preschool; from arson to renovation and rejuvenation – God's Word has accomplished His work in and through this congregation. The history of this place of God's grace for sinners is one which we may look to as we pray to discern the work God would have us do. As God moves us into this New Year, we are free to look back on His mercies which have kept this congregation in His Word through many trials – spiritual and worldly. Our Psalm gives this confession for you to sing, chant, and speak:

*I will meditate on all Your work; and (on) Your mighty deeds I will muse.<sup>7</sup>*

Unlike those who have no faith, the believer, you who have been declared faithful in Christ, are free *not* to look at your own good works – either before man or before God – as proof of your ability to stand in time of trial. We have here lessons of

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<sup>6</sup> Psalm 77:11-12.

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 77:2.

God's faithfulness among us, for this congregation, that His Word might come forth purely to call sinners to repentance and to grant them His forgiveness. God's mighty works are among us, even as one body you have formed to discern His will in the work done here recognizes what is being done. Yesterday, that group identified three major works the Word is doing to reach out with the Good News of Jesus Christ to those outside these doors. (There are many good works being done here by other groups and they were all represented at that meeting. But the group members were asked to focus in on what God is doing through us to reach our immediate neighbors – a concern listed in many of the congregational survey forms you completed). In no particular order, the good works of this congregation in outreach to her surrounding neighbors have been listed: Vacation Bible School; Operation Barnabas; and events like the Reformation Festival in which our neighbors are being drawn to visit us, and from that to hear and believe the Gospel. It is these upon which we are being called to build. We have the resources now to reach out to those who are lost around us, who will fear, if they do not hear and believe these words when they are fulfilled on the Last Day:

*(The) Voice of Your thunder (is) in whirling wind; they cause to light up lightnings; (the) world trembled and the earth shook.<sup>8</sup>*

Now, reflect on when that Last Day began. Remember that, when Christ Jesus, Whom God had protected from Herod the Great's jealous wrath, when Jesus breathed out His last in our sins, those things began. The world was clothed in darkness as the Light of Life was extinguished. The earth trembled, and the tombs were opened.

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<sup>8</sup> Psalm 77:18.

Christ in His death, broke the bonds of death. That is the message of God's voice we are given to proclaim to those who are still lost in darkness and the shadow of death.

Now, consider that, just three decades ago, this congregation began to reach out with that Word. She was the recipient of thousands of dollars a year in mission funding from the English District. For about 16 years, she was a taker. Then, for the past 16 years, freed from receiving funding for the Lord's work among us, God has used us to fund missions locally and around the world.

Now, place that reality alongside the wisdom of God that moved Tucson's mother Church, Faith Lutheran, to plant missions on Magee and elsewhere, and the then named the Lutheran Church of the Ascension's being led to plant a mission on North Twin Lakes Drive. Think backward in time from there to Synodical Conference agreements which ended in the early 1960s. That paved the way for confessional congregations of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod to even develop in Arizona.

Then, turn your minds back to the persecutions of confessional Lutherans in Europe that moved the faithful to settle in Perry County, Missouri in the mid 1800s. From that reality, dig deeper into your historical understanding of God's acting in history a bit more than 300 years from the founding of the DELKvMOuAS. Then, remember a monk, wrestling with how to be good enough before God, discovers the revealed Word of God unencumbered from human tradition and the Church Fathers. He learns from the Word to believe that anyone, including him, may be saved by grace through Faith in Jesus Christ, not by human works that no man may boast. Then, reflect on the regular renewals

of that discovery which preceded Dr. Luther's work, all the way back to the grace of God that He showed for sinners when He took their, took your, sins upon Himself that you need not die in them.

Next, muse on the three to four decades that God/Man lived after the Father spared Him from Herod's wrath. Discover anew the centuries which had elapsed wherein the faithful, faced with afflictions in this world, had repeatedly, generation after generation, returned to the Word of the Lord and His faithfulness, all the way back to the Exodus and on to the Promise to Eve. Hear again the Word of the Lord which endures:

*O Elohim, in holiness (is) Your way. Who is (an) El as great as Elohim?*<sup>9</sup>

The answer is, none. He is the God of gods and Lord of Lords, and He is working in our midst. It is Him who lives in you, and Who through His Word bears you up in any and all afflictions. That is because you know these words, through Holy Baptism, have made that which is unseen come true for you:

*In (the) Sea (was) Your way, and Your paths in (the) great waters, and Your footprints were not seen.*<sup>10</sup>

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

**The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus**

Christmas II (*Lutheran Service Book* one-year series)

Psalm 77:11-20; Genesis 46:1-7; I Peter 4:12-19; Matthew 2:13-23

January 5, 2014

*Pastor Michael H. Merhouse*

***Soli Deo Gloria***

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<sup>9</sup> Psalm 77:13.

<sup>10</sup> Psalm 77:19.