

GOD GOES TO GREAT EFFORT TO SAVE

Hear again a more literal translation of the Word of the Lord for this second Sunday of the Christmas season,

But, insofar as you all have continual communion in Christ's sufferings, all of you must continue to rejoice; that also in the revelation of His glory you may have rejoiced by being exuberantly happy!¹

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

Today you being are called by God to rejoice in exultation as the Christmas Season nears its end. You may not feel greatly happy this day. In 2015, the world, unrepentant sinners, and the devil won some victories in the battles against the Truth. Those eternally defeated enemies of the faithful have been raging almost two thousand years after God-in-our-flesh won the war. Last year was a good year for those who celebrate perversions of the Law written on people's hearts.

As Christians, we should know that we are going to face more tests of the Faith. This year may bring more of the same for those who would restrict the liberties on earth of we who have been freed in Christ to follow His Word. Even so, God knows our struggles. He calls us to rejoice in those which show our fellowship in Christ's sufferings. For, in the Baby born in the manger, Whose life was so threatened that He was carried into Egypt, we learn anew that God knows our struggles, and He goes to great effort to save.

It is a fact that this Sunday which recounts the Holy Family's flight into Egypt does not show up every year. The days of the week upon which the Feasts of the Nativity and Epiphany land each year determine whether or not we will celebrate a Second Sunday after Christmas. We have arrived at the third year, of a five-year cycle, which provides us with this day in the calendar. In fact, unless the Lord returns on the clouds, there will not be another Sunday with these readings until AD 2020!

¹ 1 Peter 4:13.

The reason I point out the non-annual aspect of this day is to answer the question, “Why do we hear of the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt before we hear of the visit of the Wise Men?” The Twelve Days jump around various days of the week throughout the years. From that, you likely know that today’s occasional readings speak of events that take place after that which we will celebrate here at Wednesday’s services. So, hopefully to steal no thunder nor consolation from the upcoming Epiphany sermon, we move boldly into today’s text. Due to our preaching rotations, this appears to be the first year in which the sermon here will be drawn from the Letter of St. Peter. Hear again our centering verse:

*But, insofar as you all have continual communion in Christ’s sufferings, all of you must continue to rejoice; that also in the revelation of His glory you may have rejoiced by being exuberantly happy!*²

Such rejoicing in exuberant gladness can be beheld, on this day of this season, in the fact that we are celebrating the tenth day of Christmas. It is a day long ago remembered as one for jumping for joy. If you are a true English Christmas tradition aficionado, this is the day to give your true love, “Ten Lords – a – Leaping.” According to PNC Financial Services group, which calculates the cost of the Twelve Days of Christmas each year, that gift would cost you \$5,508.70. That is, if you rented out the leaping fellows from the Pennsylvania Ballet.³ Their cost is up 3% from last year! Cost inflation is not a reason for rejoicing – except for those who collect taxes perhaps.

But there is still joy to be found in giving gifts, even if they are not as costly, or as silly to our day and age, as those listed in the Twelve Days song. Perhaps you gave your true love some other reasons for rejoicing with great joy this day of Christmas. Maybe, in order to prepare yourself for this day of God’s service to you, you gave the gift of the Word, having read together the narrative of the Lord’s flight into and out of Egypt.

² 1 Peter 4:13.

³ Internet. <https://www.pncchristmaspriceindex.com/cpi/#giftprices> accessed January 2, 2016.

If not, you are free to recall that a person who loves you prepared and played a Christmas themed prelude today. That was done to set your heart on the Nativity realities which are being declared today. Hearing the prelude might have brought you the joy that comes from receiving in melody and harmony that which was written to communicate God's gift of the Christ. In addition, your congregation's music planners have presented to you two Christmas hymns already to sing. They have left you one more for joyous singing during the distribution of the communion which comes to you out of Christ's suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension.

It is a sad thought that many, even among people in the Church, have moved already in their thinking and preparations for celebration from Christmas to Valentine's Day, or, dare I say, St. Patrick's Day. Even so, we here still hold to the Church's ancient culture and customs. Know this: the Church is called to present her culture to inform the world, not to conform herself to the world's expectations. People, because of their sinful natures, need the weeks of Advent to prepare for the coming of God in our flesh. We need the 12 days of rejoicing with great joy to move us to His appearance for all men.

We continue in these treasures of tradition so that those people who may be drawn here, along with you, may continue to reflect on the reality of the lengths God goes to save. We continue to declare – in readings, hymns, colors and decorations – the human need that God, in His love for His fallen creatures, moved Himself to do. He took on our flesh to face genuine human and spiritual enemies to free you from them.

Those truths, dear ones who remain in fellowship with the Christ, are cause for rejoicing in abundant gladness. The Word of God enfleshed is a historical reality to be declared into human ears, hearts and minds. That brings divine blessings to those who actually believe, confess and live in the truth that God came to raise us up in Jesus. He came to earth, assuming our humanity into His divinity, in order to save us from our sins. Faith in such divinely revealed thoughts does bring trials, testing and temptation to the faithful, as God through St. Peter still says:

*O beloved ones! Do not continue to be surprised by the burning (ordeal) among you, which comes upon you for testing, as though something strange were to have continually happened to all of you.*⁴

That call to the faithful is fitting with today's remembrance of the Flight into Egypt. Joseph, rising from his dream of warning, in obedience to the Word of God, carried the Infant Savior and the Virgin Mary away from the trial that was coming upon the babes of Bethlehem. He was not allowed days or weeks of preparation.

So too, have such times of testing on account of the Faith come suddenly upon assemblies of people which bear our Savior's name. You are surely aware of the trials faced these past days by our Christian brothers and sisters in the Sudan. You may not yet have heard of yesterday's government coercion of a landlord and rental corporation in Guangdong, China to terminate a Christian house church's rental contract, leaving them with no place to receive God's gifts. It is possible that you have not learned that the 38th ranked nation in terms of persecutions lies just a few miles south of here. Yes, Mexico rates higher in efforts against Christians than Oman, Indonesia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait!⁵ And, here, in this nation founded and grounded in large part upon natural and revealed Law, congregations like ours have found it necessary to develop and pass building/land and church-use policies. We do so as laws are enacted by the Supreme Court and by Executive Order, laws which, because of their fallen worldly support of that which violates God's revealed Law and Natural Law, generations of Americans would never have considered, let alone enact and support.

Yet, in the face of that and more, God calls out to us Christians to *not continue to be surprised by the burning (ordeal) among you*. The Word makes it clear that such things *come upon [the Church] for testing*. In fact, that last word is a translation of the same Greek Word you and we pray so frequently. We ask God, through Jesus' gift of prayer to His Church, to *lead us not into temptation....*

⁴ *1 Peter* 4:12.

⁵ Internet. <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/> Accessed , January 2, 2016. See also: <http://www.persecution.org/2015/12/18/seven-evangelicals-jailed-after-refusing-to-convert-to-catholicism-in-mexico/>

Many of you know the Catechism's explanation to that text. What you may not have heard are these centuries-old Reformation era words: *God lays a cross on all believers in order that they may taste and prove the power of God – the power which they have taken hold of through faith.*⁶ That turns us back to our theme text for this day:

*But, insofar as you all have continual communion in Christ's sufferings, all of you must continue to rejoice; that also in the revelation of His glory you may have rejoiced by being exuberantly happy!*⁷

In that oft-repeated text today, you have a reminder of that which all Christians have in Christ. That is, we have a continual communion, or fellowship, in His sufferings. That is so much more than a sharing. It is deep, intimate, personal and connected. When you were baptized into Him, and received the Name of the Triune God as your family name, you became a living participant in the passion of the Christ. He took you who were conceived and born as a child of sin, and a slave to evil, and He gave you the benefits of the price He paid to save you from that, and from yourself!

We are being called to look from His beautiful birth in a manger, to His first human trials for the Faith. We are reminded that just as Joseph followed God's revealed Word and rescued the Infant Jesus and His Mother from the sword, so too has Jesus, in dying at the right time (not as a Babe but as a full grown Man), Jesus carries us to rescue us from those who would eternally kill us. God went great distances to save – to save Jesus to die another day. That truth frees us – liberates you – to rejoice in exuberant happiness whenever we have been counted worthy to bear any Cross of the Faith, as our text for the day declares:

*If all of you continue to be reviled in (the) Name of Christ, O (you are) blessed ones, because the Spirit of the glory and of the God continues to rest upon you.*⁸

You are blessed as the world, the devil, and the sinful flesh reviles you as you bear the Name of Christ. That is because you are not carrying the crosses of the Faith alone.

⁶ Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works*, v. 30, "The Catholic Epistles," Jaroslav Pelikan, ed. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967, 126-7.

⁷ *1 Peter* 4:13.

⁸ *1 Peter* 4:14.

Jesus, Who was born to die to lift the Cross for you, did so. If you need reminders of that, walk a while along the nine stations on these walls. Read the Word and devotions among them. Be reminded how much the Name of Christ means for you, and for all of us. The Word for this infrequent day of the year continues with:

For let no one among all of you continue to suffer as (a) murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or mischief maker; but if as (a) Christian, do not let him continue to be put to shame, but he must continue to glorify the God in that Name.⁹

There is a call to not violate the second Table of the Law. It is a call to remain ones declared as keepers of the Law in Christ. If you are suffering for such crimes, turn from them. Know that you have no need to bear your sin-burdens alone. Christ has carried them into death for you.

If you are suffering for your confession of Christ-crucified, that means you are bearing a genuine cross in this world, lift up your head. God has already borne all the taunts, jeers, and hate of the world for becoming its Savior. You are free to glorify in insults for the simple (or complex) confession of the Faith given to you in the Name of Jesus. We are free to bear the world's taunts, testing and temptations, because Christ is with us...

Know that the call to bear under the testing of the devil, the world and your own sinful flesh is borne up through the quotes in the lines quoted by St. Peter come from the Proverbs. They declare God's great effort in saving those whom He declares right with Himself. The text for today ends with this encouragement:

Wherefore, also, (let) the ones suffering continually according to the will of God, by faith to (the) Creator continue to entrust for safekeeping their souls in active good-doing.¹⁰

God is calling you, in this time of persecution, of testing, of temptation, to not withdraw because of suffering on account of Him. You are free to entrust yourselves to

⁹ 1 Peter 4:15-16.

¹⁰ 1 Peter 4:19.

the Creator, for He is faithful. God gave you life and an immortal soul without any help on your part. He is assuredly able to preserve them! You are able to display those realities in the good works that God will do through you. Merry Christmas!

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

The Second Sunday after Christmas (*Lutheran Service Book* one-year series)

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

January 3, 2016

Pastor Michael H. Morehouse

Soli Deo Gloria