

## **FRUIT-BEARING IN LONGSUFFERING**

Hear again the Word of the Lord to His Church on this sixtieth day before the Feast of the Resurrection of our Lord:

*Then [God] said to me, "My grace continues to be sufficient for you, for the power in weakness continues to be brought to completion." To a greater degree gladly then I will continue to boast in the weaknesses of me, that the power of the Christ might dwell upon me.<sup>1</sup>*

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

This is the day in the Church Year, one which comes around every year, in which we are free to remember that Christians are called to fruit-bearing in longsuffering. One of today's communion hymns selected with care by our congregational music planners has a verse that truly summarizes that theme. Its words were first assembled anonymously, in the German language, some 340 years ago. Its intent was to call the faithful to renounce the world. Just about 40 years ago, in Lutheran hymnals, the original eight verses were pared in half. One of those lines which you will not sing today reads:

*The world is sorely grieved...Whenever it is slighted  
Or when its hollow fame...And honor have been blighted.  
Christ, Thy reproach I bear...Long as it pleaseth Thee;  
I'm honored by my Lord – What is the world to me!<sup>2</sup>*

Through words like those, members of Lutheran congregations of old would have sung of bearing Christ's reproach. That means they were confessing by song that they each and all were willing to suffer this fallen world's scolding, rebuking and censure of them for holding onto the Christ of the Scriptures. It was another way to publicly state that which our day's confirmands promise in answering these questions:

*Do you intend to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even to death? (I do, by the grace of God).*

*Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it? (I do, by the grace of God).*

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<sup>1</sup> II Corinthians 12:9

<sup>2</sup> *The Lutheran Hymnal*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941, 430 (5).

We have heard some powerful affirmation of those promises here over the years. Even so, Christians around the world, whether or not they hear the Rite of Confirmation today, each year on this day they may be reminded of the seriousness of the right confession of the Faith. The Word declares to them, to you, the grace which keeps us in Christ's pleasure and honor. That is so, even as we remain longsuffering in bearing the fruits of His Faith.

The divinely inspired human writers of today's text were intimately familiar with godly fruit-bearing under persecution. Scripture, Church history and/or tradition provide records of the trials those men endured for proclaiming the Christ Who was to come and the Christ Who has come (and will come again). Perhaps that which I am about to proclaim will help you think more clearly about those who recorded the God-breathed Word. They were genuine humans, who, now and until the Last Day, reside in Christ. We can declare that of them because they lived and died for the Faith. They did so while holding onto the good confession — *by the grace of God*.

First we consider Isaiah. His words of God's promise of the fruitfulness of His Word were read into your ears today. It is recorded in the Jewish Mishnah that he was slain in the 7th century BC by King Manasseh of Judah because of his unwavering prophecies. Much later in time, a 2nd century Christian layman wrote that the Jews who rejected Isaiah's proclamation of God's Word sawed Isaiah in two with a wooden saw.<sup>3</sup>

As to our two New Testament evangelists whose words we heard today, there are also reports of their being martyred. That means that they were killed for their confession of the Faith. St. Luke, according to a 4th-century AD Archbishop of the Constantinople, did not die peacefully in his sleep at age 84. Another writer, giving his record some 11 centuries later, indicates Luke died by hanging — from an olive tree<sup>4</sup>. St. Paul, whose section of the Letter to the Corinthians will be the focus for the rest of this sermon, is

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<sup>3</sup> *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, v.2, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982, 885-886.

<sup>4</sup> Farrar, Frederic William. *The Gospel According to St. Luke, with Maps, Notes, and Introduction*, Cambridge: The University Press, 1880.

reported to have been killed by beheading on the Ostian Way, at a place called the Aquae Salviae.<sup>5</sup>

That Apostle says his critics declared of him, “the presence of [his physical] body [is] weak and [his] word [of speech is] counted as nothing (II Cor. 10:10).” A supposed eyewitness of Paul, writing apart from Holy Scripture, claims to have seen him on a road. That man wrote that Paul was “a man little of stature, thin-haired upon the head, crooked in the legs, of good state of body, with eyebrows joining, and nose somewhat hooked, full of grace...”<sup>6</sup> With that physical description in mind, hear again the strong words of the man whose manner of speaking his contemporaries considered contemptible:

*Then [God] said to me, “My grace continues to be sufficient for you, for the power in weakness continues to be brought to completion.” To a greater degree gladly then I will continue to boast in my weaknesses, that the power of the Christ might dwell upon me.*<sup>7</sup>

It seems that the great Apostle to the nations had also to learn to confess that which our new communing congregational members declare. Through the hardships in which he boasted, God brought him to the realization of the truth that God’s grace remains sufficient for those who follow Christ. Why, the congregation to whom today’s words was first addressed had been so troubled internally that it appears to have taken at least four letters from Paul to turn them from their erring ways.

In fact, the long reading you heard today comes immediately after Paul speaks about those who were continuing to trouble the Corinthian Church. He calls them, *false-apostles, workers of deceit, ones who are transforming themselves into apostles of Christ!* (II Cor. 11:13). He goes on to declare that they should not wonder that such people are found in the Church, *for he, the Satan, transforms himself into (an) angel of light!* (II Cor. 10:14).

This sermon began with a reminder that Christians are called to fruit-bearing in longsuffering. You are to be reminded that this is not done just in the face of the

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<sup>5</sup> *Butler’s Lives of the Saints*, v. 2, Herbert J. Thurston and Donald Attwater, eds, Allen, TX: Thomas More Publishing, 1996, 671.

<sup>6</sup> The Acts of Paul, “The Apocryphal New Testament,” M.R. James-Translation and Notes, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924

<sup>7</sup> *II Corinthians* 12:9

pressures of this fallen world – those outside the Church. We just learned that fruit-bearing is also called for when tribulations come on account of those who are in the Church! We confessed as much today in the Service of the Preparation – Confession and Absolution, as the Church in this place began to speak her words of public acknowledgement of her sins with, *“most merciful God, we confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean.”* (LSB p. 151). We went on to speak of “we” and “us” with words that declare our shortcomings with regard to all of us keeping God’s Word. We implored God for His mercy, we asked for His forgiveness, renewal and leading of us into His will and work.

Congregations sin, for they are filled with sinners. Congregations need God’s forgiveness, grace and mercy as well as individual congregational members. That is why we all, as one heard that God died for us and forgives us all our sins. Then, Jesus spoke through the Office He established, and said, “I therefore forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” (*ibid*). You are free to think of that Holy Absolution as for all of you as one repentant Body forgiven in Christ. (That is one reason why the pastoral decision was made to use that rite for Confession and Absolution on this and future Sundays when we receive God’s gifts through “Divine Service 4”).

Here, we confess regularly to God that we are truly weak in flesh and spirit before the assaults of the world, the Satan, and our own sinful flesh. God’s Word moves us to such repeated “owning” of our sins and sinfulness. That Word (in today’s Introit) spoke today to remind us that, even at times when we feel, experience and know that we are bowed down and laid low to earth on account of oppression and affliction, to realize that as God was faithful to our fathers in the Faith, and so He will be faithful to us. From that declaration, we heard from three of our fathers – St. Isaiah, St. Luke and St. Paul. That last still says to all who follow the Word:

*“My grace continues to be sufficient for you, for the power in weakness continues to be brought to completion.”* (II Cor. 12:9a).

Those words are a translated quote spoken to Paul by God Himself. As they stand in the Scripture, they were first declared by God after Jesus the Christ had died in Paul's sins, had risen from the dead to declare him right with the Father, had ascended into the heavens to place his flesh at the position of all power and glory, rule and dominion over all of creation. Jesus declared His grace to St. Paul sometime after Jesus called him to account for his sins against persecuting the Body of Christ.

This day, every year, we hear of the One Who once removed the scales from eyes blinded by the man's own sinfulness, as God again declares His grace for that same Paul. He indicates he was afflicted by temptation to exalt himself on account of the wonders God had shown him, and the miracles He was doing through him, as he declares,

*Therefore, that I not continue to exalt myself, He gave to me (a) thorn for the flesh, (a) messenger of Satan, that (it) might continue to strike me with the fist, that I not exalt myself. (II Cor. 12:7).*

God moved St. Paul to see that which was troubling him, to keep him humble, as a "thorn," or if rendered more intensely, a "stake" in the flesh. Think about his temptation be overly elated in himself. That short, bandy-legged, bald-pated, hooked-nose, uni-browed fellow, was deemed fit enough by God, so special, that God had snatched him up into Paradise. He had beheld and heard things man is not able – literally "allowed" – to put into humanly comprehensible words. Let's pause for a moment for reflection on what that means for believers today.

Several of the members of this congregation have spoken of having blessed dreams and/or visions over the years here. They have shared them amongst themselves, from time-to-time. But we have always added the caveat that such are not necessary for one's salvation. Further, such experiences, whether they occurred in the flesh or in the spirit, are not indicators that the person receiving them is more special than others. It seems that with such experiences still come mental anguish, temptations, or persons, or afflictions and hardships, or disease. Be careful of the divine revelations you wish to

receive this side of putting off the sinful flesh. We have Paul's own inspired words as a caution against desiring such blissful "beholdings," as he still declares:

*Therefore, that I not continue to exalt myself, He gave to me (a) thorn for the flesh, (a) messenger of Satan, that (it) might continue to strike me with the fist, that I not exalt myself. (II Cor. 12:7).*

To help keep Paul humble, God allowed a literal, "Angel of Satan," which means, "Messenger of the Accuser," to be driven into Paul's flesh. As I mentioned confirmation earlier, one of the things you Lutherans learn to ask about difficult scriptural passages is, "What does this mean?" So, by now, I know that some of you are again asking in yourselves just what Paul's thorn in the flesh was. The Scripture is not clear. Even so, hear now meanings which have been taught in the Church over the ages about the stake in Paul's side, that it consisted of:

1. Satanic suggestions, blasphemous thoughts, tortures of conscience, and the favorite theory of the middle ages celibate monks – sexual temptations;
2. A persistent human opponent of Paul;
3. All the afflictions and hardships that attended Paul's work in proclaiming the Gospel.
4. A diseased condition.<sup>8</sup>

Whatever the "thorn in the flesh" was, it was sufficient to keep Paul humble before God. After all, when he considered his affliction, he could look to the image of the crucified Christ to see where the stakes were driven in for him. The Apostle could recall the narrative of the crown of thorns driven into the Savior's head and behold the price Jesus paid to deliver him.

You, when you begin to be self-exalted in your reception of God's wonderful gifts, may look to the images before you in this place. In the first Station of the Cross, you may behold your Lord, standing before the judgment seat of Pilate. About his head is the crown of thorns, a symbol of His humility. You may behold the images of Jesus' lifeless

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<sup>8</sup> Lenski, R.C.H. *The interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, (1937) 1963, 1302.

body on this pulpit, over the Nave doors, in the Narthex, in the hallways, in the classrooms, in the pastors' studies, in the Church Office, and remember how Jesus humbled Himself for you. (This place itself teaches the center of the mission of this congregation – Christ-crucified for the forgiveness of our sins)! Even so, the Word continues to proclaim:

*[God] said to me, "My grace continues to be sufficient for you, for the power in weakness is finished."*<sup>9</sup>

God through St. Paul declares that the work of the power of the Word of God is finished. We realize that when we behold our weakness before Him and confess our sins. Such confession continues to be watered with the blood of Christ. It is soaked with the blood of the martyrs. It bears much fruit, for you know that His grace is sufficient for you. You have the power of Christ to bear fruit in longsuffering!

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

Sexagesima (*Lutheran Service Book* one-year series)  
Psalm 44:1, 23-26a; Isaiah 55:10-13; II Corinthians 11:19-12:9; Luke 8:4-15; Psalm 84  
January 31, 2016

*Pastor Michael A. Morehouse*

***Soli Deo Gloria***

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<sup>9</sup> II Corinthians 12:9a.

*Then [God] said to me, "My grace continues to be sufficient for you, for the power in weakness continues to be brought to completion." Gladly then to a greater degree, I will continue to boast in the weaknesses of me, that it might dwell upon me, the power of the Christ.<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>10</sup> *II Corinthians 12:9*