

GOD'S PEOPLES' AFFLICTIONS AND GOD'S COVENANTAL PROMISES

Hear again the Word of the Lord to His Church on this seventh day of Christmas, as God speaks His enduring Promise of mercy in faithfulness:

*Ever eternal I will cause to establish your descendants;
and (I will) build from generation to generation your throne."*¹

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

Merry Christmas! God, in His mercy, has allowed us to pass the halfway point in the Church's celebration of the Nativity of our Lord. This year, He has given us the opportunity to ring out the old year with a joyous baptism, the first in a newly-dedicated, handcrafted baptismal font. Christian Michael's new birth through the water and the Word also is the ninth recorded in this congregation's official pastoral acts journal during this waning calendar year. What wonderful gifts we continue to receive from our merciful God and Father! Consider that as His ongoing fulfillment of these words translated from the inspired text:

*Let (the) heavens all praise Your wonders, O YHWH;
Your faithfulness (also) in (the) assembly of (the) Holy Ones.*²

The joy among the Holy Ones, the saints, in the heavens we are free to reflect among the saints on earth, those declared holy by Christ's death and resurrection through the Lord's washing of regeneration and renewal. It is important to remember that there is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents, and that is also cause for joy on the earth. This is a season for rejoicing, so all of that should be humanly reasonable for those in this place to comprehend. Even so, we who are named holy on earth live in a fallen world.

That means, at times, we also have found our joy in the Church on earth muted in the passing year. The pressures that the world, the devil, and our own sinful flesh bring to bear upon each and all of us can tempt us to take our focus off the reason for this season. Even if one were able to ignore the human tragedies that occurred daily

¹ Psalm 89:5 MT.

² Psalm 89:6 MT

throughout this past year, one would still have reminders of them in the feasts and festivals of the Church.

Most of you will recall that this time of the Church puts forth a changing pattern of colors. Those colors move from gold, to red, to white, to red, to white in order to remind us that, even in the earliest days of Christ's Church, there were moments of great joy and times of sheer horror.

Let us think how the Nativity season is marked among us. The day that celebrates the first of each calendar year's five great feasts is marked with gold that is used only on one other feast, which is? (The Resurrection, or Easter). That day that brings tidings of great joy and Good News for all people is immediately followed by the red day of the first martyr of the New Testament Church. We are called to remember the price Stephen, the crowned one, paid for proclaiming the Christ's Whose first Advent we just heralded. His day is then followed by the white of St. John, the Apostle and Evangelist. Therein we recall with joy the five books attributed to his inspired authorship. We reflect that the purity of the Word made flesh brought eternal brilliance to a man, who, of the original Twelve disciples, appears to be the only one who was not killed for the Faith. (Though, the realities that the enemies of the Good News he bore – (reports according to Church tradition) such as attempting to poison him through the Lord's cup, boiling him in oil, and exiling him to an island until his death – still afflicted that faithful sent one of Jesus). The fourth day of Christmas brought back the red of bloodshed on account of the message of the birth of King Jesus. The Holy Innocents' blood was poured out as rulers of this world attempted to secure their rule in the face of the birth of God in our flesh.

We who annually follow that long-established rhythm of the Nativity Season may be reminded for the real reason why the color reds, golds and whites predominate Holiday Season decorations outside the Church. That is, that all people know, deep within themselves, that any day, any season, any year is filled with joys and sorrows, sadness and happiness.

Even the ancient Old Covenant people were aware of this, and so, Psalms such as this morning's 89th speak of God's people's afflictions and God's covenantal promises. The intertestamental Church attributed it to a fellow named Ethan the Ezrahite. He appears to be a wise man with regard to whom, in relation to wisdom, Solomon is named the greater. That same Ethan may also have been the great-grandson of Judah, son of Jacob/Israel, and a somewhat removed cousin of David. The words of the Psalm appear to indicate that this Ethan lived during the times when the Promised Land was being joined under that same David, according to God's Promise. It was an era when political and worldly machinations conspired against the consolidation of the land under God's anointed king. That means that Psalm 89 was composed when the descendants of Israel faced many trials in the face of God's Promise.

Even if the between-Covenants Church got Psalm 89's attribution wrong, its words have continued to ring true throughout the generations of the faithful. That means that these words are relevant for any times when the Church confronts pressures on account of being found faithful to God's Word:

*Ever eternal I will cause to establish your descendants;
and (I will) build from generation to generation your throne."*³

Today, God has allowed us again to witness His fulfillment of promises such as that. In this New Covenant Church, God sealed His promises in little Christan Michael this day. Just so, God has continued to build His Church of living stones such as that little one for millennia.

God did so first from the covenant of blood He sealed with Adam as He clothed him with animal skins. God continued building upon that covenant through those He cut in blood with Abraham and the patriarchs. In each generation, God added to those who would be His own, who would bear His Name, the Name of the Promise.

³ Psalm 89:5 MT.

Then, in time, God began to cut a new Covenant in blood, in the blood of Jesus. He who came to conquer sin, death and the devil shed His first blood on the eighth day of His life outside the womb (that will be the topic covered by tomorrow's Feast-readings). Jesus' covenantal blood was then given, just before His blood was shed into death as He bore the sins of the whole world in His flesh into the grave. He veiled His covenantal blood in, with, and under His covenantal meal a few years after His faithful disciples began sealing others in His Name (more will be heard about that this evening...).

*Ever eternal I will cause to establish your descendants;
and (I will) build from generation to generation your throne."*⁴

At the beginning of this morning's service, those words were recalled as God's faithfulness was again revealed among us (coincidentally, as they were four years ago this very Sunday of the Church Year during the rite of "Public Recognition of Holy Baptism"). This reminds us that, as each newly baptized person receives the Name of God in their persons, God's holding fast to His promises in every generation is displayed. As was proclaimed then, "some 55 generations⁵ [have lived, died to the world, and risen to new life in Christ] since the incarnation of our Lord and His later establishing Holy Baptism as His means of grace..."

Jesus, long ago, as we heard today, was presented in the Temple according to the Old Covenant Law. Today, Christian Michael was presented before God in the Living Temple, and he was added as a living stone to that building into which all the baptized are joined. In plain water, combined with the Word of God, each candidate receives a new Holy Family name: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Though we do not know what that child's life will entail, we know that God has called him His own, and that He will send His holy angels to watch over him. God's mighty protection of His children – infant, young or old – is recalled in these divine covenantal words:

*YHWH Elohe Sabaoth, who is as You are mighty, O YH,
with Your faithfulness (is) also round about You?*⁶

⁴ *Psalm* 89:5 MT.

⁵ Morehouse, 2013. Assumes: 40-year generations from 4 BC to AD 1900; 20-year generations from AD 1900 – 1980; and 10-year generations since.

⁶ *Psalm* 89:9 MT.

In that verse, composed of just nine Hebrew words, the power behind God's covenantal promises for Old and New Testament believers is declared. The beginning of the text begins with the Name God revealed to Moses at the burning bush: it is just four letters long. It is followed by the title we translate, "God, of the hosts." This is used to declare His power over all things in heaven, on earth, and under the earth. It is this almighty God Who restrains the evil one and his foes; Who holds back wind and wave; Who reserves for Himself the time of this sinful world's end.

The Almighty God is the One to Whom God's people for generations have looked when the troubles of this world, and the wiles of the powers of darkness press in upon us. We, along with all those who bear God's all-powerful Name in the Faith, behold Him as He continues to faithfully fulfill His promises, in His time, according to His ways. That having been said, have you been consistent in calling upon God's Name in your times of trial in this past year?

If you cannot answer those questions with, "always," then you need to repent of your times of unbelief. Each time you thought or felt that God had abandoned you in your tribulations you were falling into the temptation of not trusting God's gracious promises. He knew you would have such times, just as little Master Hawkins will.

That is why He sent His Son, the One Who bears the Name, Savior, the eternal Second Person of the Eternal Godhead, into our flesh. That is why He Himself set aside His eternal glory, power, dominion and might that He would be placed under His Holy Law. He took His Old Covenant upon Himself, as He received its sign.

Then, in time, as a full-grown man, Jesus gave His New Covenant from Himself, as He gave it as far more than any sign. That Covenant, this Covenant in His blood, seals the faithful into God's promises as it works forgiveness and strengthens confessing believers in their common confession at His Table.

Even so, all of that remains veiled to our human senses. At this time, the sacramental vessels, with the bread and wine, remain hidden from our sight under the

color of this day. Later, when the coverings are removed, Christ Himself will remain hidden from our sight as He presents His New Covenant – His very Body and Blood – hidden under natural elements. Without that, for us who still live in mortal flesh, Jesus' *glory would only strike [every]one with terror...*⁷ Yet, on account of His mercy for us sinners, *the faithfulness which encompasses Him softens the sunlike brilliancy of His glory, and awakens trust in so majestic a Ruler.*⁸ In other words, He makes these words of today's Psalm bearable for us unto life everlasting:

*For who in skies can be compared to You?
Who (is) like unto YHWH in (the) sons of Elohim
an El being feared in (the) council of Holy Ones;
great and terrible above all around Him?*⁹

When you look about you in this place, when your gaze is cast East to the Cross, Lord's Table, Book of the Word, Sacramental Vessels, pulpit and lectern, vested table waiters and ministers of the Word, it can be easy to see these as simply symbols, or the way things ought to look in a Church service. Yet, under them the Lord of the Universe is, by His own design, through His own Word, proclaimed in ways we humans can tolerate and comprehend in our mortal flesh. These are earthly instruments given to convey heavenly realities.

Think about this, since the Word declares that God is feared – that is much more than awe – it is enacted in humbling oneself with trembling in the Presence of the One Who holds, in Himself, the power of blessed eternal life and eternal condemnation. The Psalm declares that to be the attitude of those whom God has gathered about Himself in His Holy heavenly council. If that is their experience, and they will never fall from His glory, what would your reality be if He were not merciful to you?

The answer to that question is: sheer terror. But, on account of God's grace for you, your response to His Presence now on earth will be your unending proclamation in heaven. Because of faithfulness to you, granted to you in Holy Baptism, sustained in you

⁷ Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, "Psalms," v. 5, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001. p. 586.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Psalm 89:7-8 MT*

through Holy Absolution, the Sacrament of the Altar and all God's means of imparting Jesus' blood-won forgiveness, you are freed to respond to His glory with words like these:

*Heseds of YWHW eternal I will sing;
from generation to generation I will cause to proclaim Your faithfulness with my
mouth.¹⁰*

To that opening call, which in the Hebrew begins, and thus emphasizes, with a word we translate, "steadfast love," "enduring mercy," or "loving-kindness," you responded with the faithful of old and the faithful to come:

*"Eternal Hesed was established;
in (the) heavens You cause to make firm Your faithfulness."¹¹*

That declares, as this Nativity Feast passes its half-way point, the divine reality that you are free to celebrate God's giving His gifts of eternal loving-kindness to you. The faithfulness He established in the heavens has again come down to earth to you. That can be a fine divine gift to remember as this old year passes. It liberates you continue to rejoice in the Christmas days before us! Merry Christmas!

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

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

Psalm 89:1-8; II Samuel 7:1-16; Galatians 4:1-7; Luke 2:33-40

December 31, 2017

Pastor Michael A. Morehouse

Soli Deo Gloria

¹⁰ Psalm 89:2. MT

¹¹ Psalm 89:3 MT

*Heseds of YWHW eternal I will sing;
from generation to generation I will cause to proclaim Your faithfulness
with my mouth.¹²*

*For I said, "Eternal Heseḏ was established;
heavens You cause to make firm Your faithfulness in them."¹³*

*"I have cut covenant for My chosen One;
I have sworn to David My servant:
ever eternal I will cause to establish your descendants;
and build from generation to generation your throne." Selah¹⁴*

*Then, all of you let praise, O heavens, Your wonders, O YHWH;
Your faithfulness in assembly of Holy Ones.
For who in skies can be compared to You;
who (is) like unto YHWH in sons of Elohim?
El being feared in council of Holy Ones;
great and terrible above all around Him.
YHWH Elohe Sabaoth, who is as You are mighty O YH,
with Your faithfulness round about You?¹⁵*

¹² *Psalm 89:2. MT*

¹³ *Psalm 89:3 MT*

¹⁴ *Psalm 89:4-5 MT.*

¹⁵ *Psalm 89:6-9 MT.*