

Seventh Wednesday in Lent, April 1st

The Seven Sayings of Jesus on the Cross.

Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. Luke 23:46

Luke 23:44-46

44 It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, **45** while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. **46** Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last.

Matthew 27:51-54

51 And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. **52** The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, **53** and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. **54** When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!"

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The final words of Jesus before He died on the Cross¹ are accompanied by miraculous signs. St. Luke records the darkness and the Temple veil, while St. Matthew (who was in Jerusalem at the time) adds that he recalls an earthquake (amid other phenomena). But if someone did not want to put significance to all these signs and wonders, they could have done so with ease. These are the sorts of things that the nonbelieving jews in Jerusalem would have shrugged off, though they shouldn't have. Sure, it can get dark out in any number of circumstances. Sometimes cloth gets old and rips all on its own. Earthquakes just happen, historians record them all the time. Even when St. Matthew brings up old prophets rising from their graves and speaking to people, it would not be surprising if the skeptics of the day claimed ignorance - "well how do you *know* that was Jeremiah rising from the dead? Crazy people make crazy claims all the time." No one would be convinced unless they were open minded.

Of course, someone would be *gravely* mistaken to ignore all of these things happening at once, but the pharisees and sadducees and almost everyone else were just that – gravely mistaken. They were supposedly experts in the Mosaic Law, but they did not bother to remember what Moses wrote concerning the heavens and the earth:

25 "When you father children and children's children, and have grown old in the land, and you act corruptly by making a carved image in the form of anything, and by doing what is evil in the sight of the LORD your God, so as to provoke him to anger, **26** I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you will soon utterly perish from the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess. You will not live long in it, but will be utterly destroyed. **27** And the LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the LORD will drive you."²

And:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse.
Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live.³

1 St. John records Him saying "It is finished" before He "gave up His spirit" in John 19:30. He spoke "Father into Your hands I commend my spirit" in the moment He "gave up His spirit."

2 Deuteronomy 4:25-27

3 Deuteronomy 30:19

And:

28 Assemble to me all the elders of your tribes and your officers, that I may speak these words in their ears and call heaven and earth to witness against them. 29 For I know that after my death you will surely act corruptly and turn aside from the way that I have commanded you. And in the days to come evil will befall you, because you will do what is evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger through the work of your hands.”⁴

What happens during the Crucifixion is no coincidence. Moses called upon the heavens and the earth to witness the Covenant between God and the Israelites. Close to 1,500 years later, having seen rebellion after rebellion from these people, finally both heavens and earth get a front-row seat to the worst betrayal yet. The children of Israel and Judah had slain the prophets, ran after other gods, murdered and oppressed their countrymen, disobeyed every commandment in the Law, and even after the Babylonian Exile they worshiped in a halfhearted way. But now, after God sent His only Son, this same people decide not to listen... but to slay Him.

St. Matthew records that the rocks were split during the earthquake. Consider my friends that when Jesus entered into Jerusalem during the Triumphal Entry, as people were rejoicing and crying out “Hosanna,” the pharisees asked Jesus to silence the crowd: His reply was “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.”⁵ Not only are the heavens shrouding Jerusalem with contemptuous blackness for the foul deed being carried out; not only is the earth buckling under the weight of Judah's wickedest sin; but even the stones witness and rend themselves as though they are trying to speak. They break open while Judah silently refuses to praise the Messiah being murdered right in front of them.⁶

All of this is to say that the murder of Jesus Christ is the final nail in the coffin of the Old Covenant. Just as Moses broke the tablets of the Law when he saw the ancient Israelites cavorting with the golden calf, the earth breaks and the rocks of Judea split as the Godman dies. The curtain in the Temple is torn asunder, demonstrating that God's special presence departed the Most Holy Place where the Ark of the Covenant once stood; from now on out, the *only* way they could ever be deemed acceptable to our Lord again is by repentance and faith in the Christ that they had crucified. They could never hope to trust in a Covenant that had been so utterly broken that the sky itself was closed off.

Yet at the same time, two things can be true. First, it is true that our Lord Jesus died on account of His own kin perpetrating of the worst crime in history; they crucified God, who had taken human form to witness to them.⁷ The very One who gave them that Old Covenant that they loved so much, they killed. Yet at the same time it is true that Jesus went to the Cross willingly. Remember my friends, His last words before breathing His last – “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” The ones who had Him killed did not *force* His spirit out of His body. Oh no. Jesus only dies when He says it is time for that death to happen. He could have decided, out of His miraculous power, to stay up there indefinitely. But *He* gives up *His* spirit when *He* decides to permit the wounds to kill Him.

Two things can be true at the same time without contradictions here. The witness of the heavens and the earth and the stones which broke is that the children of Judah broke the Old Covenant finally and irreversibly. Yet at the same time, God was establishing a *New Covenant* based on simple faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, they killed Him; but at the same time He voluntarily submitted to death *in order to save you my friend*.

4 Deuteronomy 31:28-29

5 Luke 19:40

6 St. Matthew uses the term *Lithos*, which are the larger rocks and cliffs. St. Luke records Christ using the term *Petros* in Lk.19:40, which denotes smaller rocks. Yet the connection between these two events is undeniable, and in our perspective the greater crime and silence denote greater rocks attempting the sound.

7 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16

Jesus determined when it was time to let the crucifixion kill Him. And when He had suffered, when the witness was presented, when the final act of sacrifice was to be accomplished, He gave up the ghost and then our sins were forgiven. This is the greater part, the veritable miracle that happened here. What the pharisees intended for evil, God intended for good, taking their wickedness and turning it around on their own heads. Ironically, with the murder of an innocent Man these men who loved the Old Covenant so so much ended up making room for its replacement. Now we are free from the burdens that no man is able to carry, and Christ sealed the deal with “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!”

Now the Peace of our Lord, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Sermon for April 2nd, 2026
MAUNDY THURSDAY

READINGS

Psalm 116:12-19

- 12** What shall I render to the LORD
for all his benefits to me?
13 I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the LORD,
14 I will pay my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people.
15 Precious in the sight of the LORD
is the death of his saints.
16 O LORD, I am your servant;
I am your servant, the son of your maidservant.
You have loosed my bonds.
17 I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving
and call on the name of the LORD.
18 I will pay my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people,
19 in the courts of the house of the LORD,
in your midst, O Jerusalem.
Praise the LORD!

John 13:1-15

1 Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. **2** During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, **3** Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, **4** rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. **5** Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. **6** He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" **7** Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." **8** Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." **9** Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" **10** Jesus said to him, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you." **11** For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "Not all of you are clean."
12 When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? **13** You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. **14** If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. **15** For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. **16** Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. **17** If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

Our text for meditation this Maundy Thursday is on our Gospel reading.

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In their last night together, before He was crucified, Jesus washes the feet of the Apostles. Now, in those days there were no clean paved roads and most people traveled on foot. These same roads were dirty and dusty, and those who could afford a horse or a camel would travel on them: this meant that manure would get on every pathway. People wore sandals to protect their feet from sharp rocks or broken glass, but they had no expectation of keeping their feet clean as they walked from one place to another.

When someone returned home after their workday, they would wash their feet before going inside if they could – either that or they would have a servant wash their feet for them. Living in the first century A.D., under no circumstances did you want to have dirty feet when you got home. If you walked inside with dirt and manure on your feet, then you were inviting crawling insects, flies, and rats to come in as well: they would follow the nasty smell, make their way into your home, and then find your food. Everyone would get sick very quickly.

Our Lord and the Apostles must have been in a hurry to set up the Passover meal, because their feet were unwashed. This ought not surprise us, since the Passover feast is a busy time, and while everyone is making their preparations (getting a roasted lamb and bitter herbs, making sure everyone was *ritually* clean, etc.)¹² few people are bothering with small details like foot washing. Jesus, seeing this, decides to rectify the situation and cleans the Apostles up before they can begin the meal.

St. Peter is taken aback by this act, and we can easily see where he was coming from. To clean someone's feet was something that servants and slaves did, and to the Apostles it would have been unthinkable for Jesus to do what a lowly servant does. They rightly understood that He is the Messiah, the King of Kings that every Israelite had been waiting for since the prophets spoke of Him. After Palm Sunday people were treating Jesus like a King – why on earth would He then stoop down, undress, and clean the Apostles' feet?

Christ makes it clear that this is necessary, so much so that if St. Peter had not received it then he would have been cast out from the Twelve. You see, Jesus is being a role model for them in the most unmistakable way, by *doing* something for them, and they must experience this in order to learn a crucial lesson. It is one thing to say words to teach someone: it is far more powerful to do what you want them to do, to *show* them what you mean. And if the Apostles are going to lead the Church, then they must do as He did.

In the sixteenth verse, Jesus says “Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.” In other words, He is saying to the Apostles, “I am not too dainty or too aristocratic to serve, so neither should you. I am willing to serve those beneath Me as though they were above Me, for that is what it means to be above them in the eyes of God. *Go and do likewise.*” Though Jesus is quite literally the King of the entire universe, He is willing to wipe horse poop off of the feet of sinners, and He demands the same of anyone who would be Christian.

The essence of Christian charity, or how we show our love for one another, consists in our willingness to lower ourselves to help others. No one is too disgusting, no one is too embarrassing, and no one is too poor. In the vast majority of places in the world today people do not have to wash manure

1 Numbers 9

2 For readers: yes, there is some debate on whether the Last Supper was a Passover meal or whether it was one day before. Our position is that it was a Passover meal, but the references in John's Gospel to a Day of Preparation are for the Feast of Unleavened Bread: since the Feast of Unleavened Bread is considered to be *part* of the week-long Passover observance, the Jewish authorities later conflate the two when they ask Pilate to expedite the crucifixions so as to be able to eat it (John 19:14).

<https://www.gotquestions.org/Day-of-Preparation.html>

and dust off of their feet, but Jesus is making a larger point. To help a homeless man and give him food; for children to befriend the weird kid in school; to visit the elderly or disabled in their care homes; to help the prisoners – all of these, *all* of these are the same as washing someone's feet. They are acts of servants, and Jesus tells us that we must never think of ourselves as being too rich or too high-status to do it.

Unfortunately, the unbelieving world does not see it that way. The rich men, the politicians and the celebrities all think of themselves as being too much “above” the poor and downtrodden to lift even a single finger to serve others. But for us Christians, people that have been delivered from their sins and promised eternal life, we must be *different*. Christ is King of all reality, yet He still washed the Apostles' feet; so too must we, the princes and princesses of the Kingdom of God, be willing to stoop down and cheerfully help others – *without* complaint or demanding reward. Instead of sneering at someone who is an outcast, let us confess that no one is an untouchable in the eyes of our Lord: as God has loved us, so must we love others.

The Church thrives and grows because of this humility. First this applies to our fellow believers, as Jesus says “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.” The Apostles – and all Christians – were instructed here to take care of other believers **first**, and to treat them as equals. No matter how much authority a pastor or bishop might have, he is not allowed to play Pope and demand that people kiss his ring or bow down to him. No, for however much authority a man may have in the Church, he has that much more responsibility to be humble before his brothers and sisters in Christ. Just before the Crucifixion, this command was all the more important to obey: the Church was going to be persecuted by the Jews, the Romans, and by savages wherever they went. If Christians did not support one another and help one another, then they would be siding with those groups that persecuted believers. This remains true to this day: if you refuse to help other Christians who are in need when you have the means and the time to do so, then you should be ashamed of yourself. To neglect your brothers and sisters in need, when you *know* that you could make the difference, is to be a persecutor yourself.

Now, the Scriptures do tell us that we must exercise wisdom in the process of charity. Scripture tells us to help people that are *actually* in need, not to enable laziness or fraud.³ We are not called to spend every last penny we have on others, and we are still told to save money and enjoy normal time with our families. One man cannot help everyone in the world either, we must make proper choices about *who* we help. But all this Scriptural exhortation to be wise in our charity *assumes* that we have the will, motivation, and desire to obey Jesus and be charitable for other Christians. We are not to look for excuses not to help; instead we are told that we must be wise so that we can be the most helpful.

And let me say it strongly, this is not just about Christians taking care of other Christians. Oh no my friends. This extends to the stranger and to the poor in your area as well. God knows who will convert to the true faith, even when we do not. He wants us to have the same general good will for humanity that He does. He even sends angels to the world, disguised as humans, to see whether we will help the stranger in need.⁴ But first, for the sake of the Body of Christ here on earth, we must love one another, showing it by “washing each other's feet.”

Now the Peace of our Lord, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

3 1 Timothy 5

4 Hebrews 13:1-2

Sermon for April 3rd, 2026
GOOD FRIDAY

READINGS

Isaiah 53:5-12

- 5** But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.
- 6** All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.
- 7** He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth.
- 8** By oppression and judgment he was taken away;
and as for his generation, who considered
that he was cut off out of the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people?
- 9** And they made his grave with the wicked
and with a rich man in his death,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.
- 10** Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him;
he has put him to grief;
when his soul makes an offering for guilt,
he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;
the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.
- 11** Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
- 12** Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
because he poured out his soul to death
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and makes intercession for the transgressors.

Psalm 22:1-20

- 1** My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?
- 2** O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer,
and by night, but I find no rest.
- 3** Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
- 4** In you our fathers trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
- 5** To you they cried and were rescued;
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.
- 6** But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by mankind and despised by the people.
- 7** All who see me mock me;
they make mouths at me; they wag their heads;
- 8** “He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him;
let him rescue him, for he delights in him!”
- 9** Yet you are he who took me from the womb;
you made me trust you at my mother's breasts.
- 10** On you was I cast from my birth,
and from my mother's womb you have been my God.
- 11** Be not far from me,
for trouble is near,
and there is none to help.
- 12** Many bulls encompass me;
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;
- 13** they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravening and roaring lion.
- 14** I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;
- 15** my strength is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.
- 16** For dogs encompass me;
a company of evildoers encircles me;
they have pierced my hands and feet—
- 17** I can count all my bones—
they stare and gloat over me;
- 18** they divide my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots.
- 19** But you, O LORD, do not be far off!
O you my help, come quickly to my aid!
- 20** Deliver my soul from the sword,
my precious life from the power of the dog!

2 Corinthians 5:14-21

14 For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; **15** and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. **17** Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. **18** All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; **19** that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. **20** Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. **21** For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

John 19:16b-37

So they took Jesus, **17** and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. **18** There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them. **19** Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." **20** Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek. **21** So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but rather, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" **22** Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written."

23 When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom, **24** so they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be." This was to fulfill the Scripture which says,

"They divided my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots."

So the soldiers did these things, **25** but standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. **26** When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" **27** Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

28 After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), "I thirst." **29** A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. **30** When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

31 Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away. **32** So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. **33** But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. **34** But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. **35** He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe. **36** For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken." **37** And again another Scripture says, "They will look on him whom they have pierced."

Our text for meditation this Good Friday is on our Epistle reading.

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Introduction

Why do we call this day “Good Friday?”

It does not seem to be an accurate title. After all, the Son of God was crucified on this day. Not only crucified, but *tortured* beyond normal human recognition. The physical pain that He went through was excruciating, and the emotional and spiritual pain was likely even worse. He was betrayed by one of the Apostles, abandoned by the others, had to watch his own mother weep over Him while He was callously mocked by the men who arranged His murder. Worse yet, during this time He knew that our Heavenly Father had turned His Face away from Him as the blame for every sin was laid upon His shoulders. For six long hours (after a sleepless and violent night) He endured this extreme pain and exhaustion, and then finally expired.

Why do we call this day “Good Friday?”

On the one hand we might say that this Friday is *good* because it is the anniversary of when we were liberated. St. Paul makes it clear that our trespasses are no longer counted against us, our sins are forgiven, and God the terrifying Judge is now God our Heavenly Father by virtue of seeing His Son die in our place. The devil no longer lays claim to anyone who has saving faith in Jesus, the grave which we merited by our sins is no longer a power in our lives, because those sins were all nailed to the Cross. Yet is it right to call this “Good Friday?” Of course something good happened for us, but isn't it a bit of a ghoulish euphemism if we skip over all the pain in the title. Why not call it “Sacrifice Friday” or “Atonement Friday,” taking away any attempt to smooth over the pain our Savior went through? Shouldn't the Church be honest that this is the anniversary of the wickedest sin that ever happened?

Why do we call this day “Good Friday?”

We cannot forget of course that “Good” can also mean good in the sense of holiness or moral correctness. It is good to help a starving homeless child obtain a home and a steady diet. It is good to tell the truth and not lie. God is Good. And on this day, something very holy and morally correct happened as an infinite mercy was bestowed upon all who would believe. Yet if we say *that* is the reason for it, we are ignoring all the evil that went into making such a day happen. It was good that Jesus paid the penalty for our sins; it was evil that the pharisees arranged for His crucifixion and Pilate submitted to their will. It would be sorely confusing to ignore such a terrible crime.

Why do we call this day “Good Friday?”

We can say that it is because Jesus is Good, so we celebrate that Good Man for being as Good as He is. This is more true than saying water is wet. Of course Jesus is Good. He is fully God already, so He is infinitely good, and in His humanity we understand that He is the greatest man ever. No one will surpass His greatness. Yet this does not suffice as a reason for this day's title, because on account of His greatness we ought to celebrate Him every single day. Good Friday is a *specific* holiday where we celebrate a *specific* good thing, not just Jesus being good in general. Yes, Jesus is good: that is why we worship Him.

Here is why we call it Good Friday, my friends.

Yes, we celebrate Christ who is good and we celebrate the good has come to us from the Atonement and the goodness of mercy given to us. But more importantly, we celebrate that the greatest

deed ever performed for humanity happened, as our Lord took all of the evil we had ever committed, and made something good happen. What the pharisees and priests meant for evil, God meant for good, permitting them to do their foul deed so as to provide life, forgiveness and salvation to us all. Christ *showed* His goodness to us by taking away *our* evil deeds on the Cross, then granting us freedom from the sentence of death on account of His death. In our reading, St. Paul says this is the reason he could no longer think of Jesus as a mere man; *no one* among mere men could ever accomplish a universal pardon offered to all mankind in exchange for their life. Only Jesus could do such a good thing – in fact, the *best* thing that any man has ever done.

This is what makes it *Good* Friday, that the greatest good deed in history happened at the same time as – and in spite of – the worst sin in history. We *could* call it some other title that emphasized the murder of our Lord, but that would take away the glory due to Jesus. He deserves the honorable distinction of having enacted this great salvation: we want to praise and worship Him for not just being our atoning Sacrifice, but for the good of the deed He performed. It is not the Church engaging in euphemistic language to call it Good Friday, but rather it is a way of keeping our eyes on Jesus Christ, the author of our salvation.

Christ Jesus actively gave Himself for us on this day, so that with His good deed we may be made good as well. Every one of us may be a new, perfected version of ourselves freed from the weight of our sins and in loving communion with our Heavenly Father. Because He has done this, the Good Deed to surpass all other good deeds, let us give ourselves to Him. Let each one of us say “I belong to Christ” in our hearts, minds, and will, that we may no longer live in our old ways but live with the newness of life that Jesus have given us. For that is the greatest good given for us on the first *Good Friday*.

Now the Peace of our Lord, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Sermon for April 5th, 2026
EASTER SUNDAY

READINGS

Job 19:23-27

- 23 “Oh that my words were written!
Oh that they were inscribed in a book!
24 Oh that with an iron pen and lead
they were engraved in the rock forever!
25 For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and at the last he will stand upon the earth.
26 And after my skin has been thus destroyed,
yet in my flesh I shall see God,
27 whom I shall see for myself,
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.
My heart faints within me!

Psalm 118:19-29

- 19 Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the LORD.
20 This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.
21 I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.
22 The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.
23 This is the LORD's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.
24 This is the day that the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
25 Save us, we pray, O LORD!
O LORD, we pray, give us success!
26 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!
We bless you from the house of the LORD.
27 The LORD is God,
and he has made his light to shine upon us.
Bind the festal sacrifice with cords,
up to the horns of the altar!
28 **You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God; I will extol you.**
29 **Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever!**

1 Corinthians 5:6-8

6 Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? **7** Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. **8** Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Mark 16:9-20

9 Now when he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. **10** She went and told those who had been with him, as they mourned and wept. **11** But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.

12 After these things he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. **13** And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them.

14 Afterward he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining at table, and he rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. **15** And he said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. **16** Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. **17** And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; **18** they will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.”

19 So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. **20** And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs.

Our text for meditation this Easter Sunday is on our Gospel reading.

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Risen Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

[Note for Deacons and lay leaders: traditionally, the Very Lutheran Project has included very short sermons and encouraged our house churches to have very short services for Easter Sunday. The logic behind this is that Easter, like Christmas, is supposed to be a *celebration* – and Christians celebrate best when enjoying the day with their families and fellow believers. We encourage the same brevity today with a shorter homily. However, if your home congregation desires to have a *longer* service, we encourage the addition of an extra hymn after the homily, and chanting the Psalm instead of praying the collect.]

“Three Strikes and you're out”

The expression goes, “three strikes and you're out.” Three chances. Typically this relates to the sport of baseball: the batter has three tries to hit the ball and run to one of the bases, and if he fails then he is out of the game for the time being. But “three strikes and you're out” applies to other things too, like criminal trials. A judge might give a ruffian a light sentence for the first two times he breaks the law, but if he commits a third crime then he will spend years behind bars. A woman might give her boyfriend three chances to stop disrespecting her before it is time to break up. Whatever its application,

“three strikes and you're out” always has the same idea to it: after three failures you lose, it's over, you're *done*.

The Apostles received three strikes on the third day when Christ rose from the grave. Three chances for them to believe that He had risen from the dead. The women came up to them, first with Mary Magdalene, but they did not believe her; strike one. The other Gospels tell us that St. Peter and St. John saw the empty tomb,¹ yet even seeing this... they did not believe, except St. John; for the other ten, strike two. Finally, two disciples saw the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus,² ran to Jerusalem and reported the Resurrection to them all, and once more they did not believe (except St. John, as I am sure he would remind us); still, strike three.

So my friends, the Apostles had three chances to believe that Jesus rose from the dead based on the word of eyewitnesses. At this point, our worldly sense of justice and fairness would shout “three strikes and you're out! That's it, you're done!” We might expect Jesus to feel the same way, and go out looking for new Apostles to spread His message. But we would be wrong, because our Lord Jesus approached this by saying “*Three strikes and you're in.*”

“Three strikes and you're in.”

Just as Jesus rose again from the dead at the end of three days and three nights,³ the Apostles encountered the risen Jesus after their three chances to believe the reports of others. The darkness of the grave was overcome by the power of Christ rising for our sakes after those three dreadful nights. The darkness of the Apostles' despair, doubt and pain was overcome by the very same power as Jesus went to them personally. After spending three years with them and showing them all the ways that He is the Savior, Jesus would not ever permit these men to continue in their unbelief. He came to them and showed them that His Resurrection was absolutely real.

His arrival stunned them but also saved their very souls. Thanks to Christ saying “Three strikes and you're in,” they were overjoyed and positively *filled* with the faith that they needed. Shortly after this, with the coming of Pentecost, these very same Apostles fulfilled the prophecy Jesus gave: they spoke in tongues, cast out demons, healed people, picked up snakes and miraculously survived their venom,⁴ and they preached the Gospel everywhere they went. Three strikes, and instead of being cast out they were brought into the Kingdom of God again with *power*.

And my friends, this is additional good news. Jesus did not die on a cross and rise again just to give up on the Apostles after three strikes; neither will He give up on you, no matter how many strikes you rack up! He says this, that “whoever believes and is Baptized will be saved,” meaning that no matter *how many times* we fail, He is faithful and just to bring us to being justified by faith in Him. My friends, this offer is always on the table for whosoever wishes to live eternally. Let us entrust ourselves to Him, listening to the words of the eyewitnesses to His Resurrection, for that very justification is the reason He rose from the grave in the first place.⁶

Now the Peace of our Lord, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Risen Lord. Amen.

1 John 20:1-10

2 Luke 24:13-35

3 We confess that He rose on the Third Day *and* at the end of three days and three nights. For any who might be confused about this reckoning of time, the simple answer is found here:

<https://answersingenesis.org/jesus/resurrection/three-days-and-nights/>

4 Acts 28:1-5, St. Paul is bitten by a viper and suffers no harm.

5 Please do not handle snakes though. Once this prophecy was complete, Christians were once more vulnerable to snake venom.

6 Romans 4:25

Sermon for April 12th, 2026
SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

READINGS

Ezekiel 37:11-14

11 Then he said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.’ **12** Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. **13** And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. **14** And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD.”

Psalm 33

[Collect verses in **bold**]

- 1** Shout for joy in the LORD, O you righteous!
Praise befits the upright.
- 2** Give thanks to the LORD with the lyre;
make melody to him with the harp of ten strings!
- 3** Sing to him a new song;
play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.
- 4** For the word of the LORD is upright,
and all his work is done in faithfulness.
- 5** He loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.
- 6** By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
and by the breath of his mouth all their host.
- 7** He gathers the waters of the sea as a heap;
he puts the deeps in storehouses.
- 8** Let all the earth fear the LORD;
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him!
- 9** For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.
- 10** The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;
he frustrates the plans of the peoples.
- 11** The counsel of the LORD stands forever,
the plans of his heart to all generations.
- 12** Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD,
the people whom he has chosen as his heritage!
- 13** The LORD looks down from heaven;
he sees all the children of man;
- 14** from where he sits enthroned he looks out
on all the inhabitants of the earth,
- 15** he who fashions the hearts of them all
and observes all their deeds.

**16 The king is not saved by his great army;
a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.**

**17 The war horse is a false hope for salvation,
and by its great might it cannot rescue.**

**18 Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him,
on those who hope in his steadfast love,**

**19 that he may deliver their soul from death
and keep them alive in famine.**

20 Our soul waits for the LORD;
he is our help and our shield.

21 For our heart is glad in him,
because we trust in his holy name.

22 Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us,
even as we hope in you.

1 John 5:1-5

1 Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. **2** By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. **3** For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. **4** For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. **5** Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

John 20:19-31

19 On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” **20** When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. **21** Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” **22** And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. **23** If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

24 Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. **25** So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”

26 Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” **27** Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” **28** Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” **29** Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; **31** but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Our text for meditation this Second Sunday in Easter is on our Epistle reading.

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Introduction

St. John begins this part of his Epistle with an easily understood message. We can format the first two verses for an even simpler understanding.

Question 1: Who is born again?

Answer 1: Those who believe in Jesus.

Question 2: What do people do who believe in Jesus?

Answer 2: They love God by loving other Christians.

Question 3: How do we love other Christians?

Answer 3: By obeying God's Commandments.

Very well then, we have our message. And we as Lutherans understand that the Commandments of God are summed up by the two greatest Commandments: to love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, then to love your neighbor as yourself. The Ten Commandments teach us how to fulfill these two, and so we have our catechisms to explain it even further. This is what Christians are supposed to do. For two thousand years now, Christian morality has been self-explanatory; worship only the true God, don't take His Name in vain, sanctify the holy day, honor your parents, don't kill anyone, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't bear false witness, don't covet your neighbor's stuff and don't covet his life. Follow all of these, and you will be an upright and moral Christian who loves God and his neighbor.

But Then...

But then St. John hits us with a statement that confuses and frustrates us. After giving us this simple rundown, he says "His commandments are not burdensome." My friends, in your experience does this feel true? Do you feel *unburdened* by the Commandments of our Lord? Christians are called to sanctification, cooperating with the Holy Spirit as He works in our hearts; this means that we are under a sort of pressure to sin less over time, feel true contrition when we mess up, and continuously learn to do better and better. It isn't just about sinning less, but having a comprehensive obedience that continues to grow. And as that obedience increases, so does our awareness of where we fall short.

To add to this, each one of the Ten Commandments is so exceedingly broad in application that one could never get to the bottom of them. Let's take an example, one near to everyone's modern experience: "you shall not commit adultery." Under this commandment, anyone who is does of any sexual activity with another human being who is not their lawfully-wedded spouse (who is necessarily of the opposite sex) is guilty. Fornicators, adulterers, homosexuals, all of them are guilty and hellbound so long as they do not repent. We might think "fine, so I will wait until marriage." Good! But you and I both know that it does not stop there. Oh no, you see Christ forbids us from coveting members of the opposite sex,¹ and that means we must excise any impure thoughts from our minds about the people we know before it turns into coveting them sexually, and this also means avoiding pornography so that we don't turn ourselves into degenerates, but then so much is pornographic in society today that we have to avoid half of what we see in our daily lives so as to not be ridden with guilt. Now repeat the process with every facet of the Decalogue. My friends, St. John says that God's Commandments are not burdensome; does that not sound *burdensome* to you, having to exercise such self control at all times?

1 Matthew 5:28

And then he says that the people who are born of God overcome the world – that is, the world as in organized nonbelieving humanity, not creation itself. Do you feel as though there is a great victory at your hands? Well, as things stand now the Church is on the back foot as secularism and a rising vague paganism have been taking over in formerly Christian lands. Persecution is on the rise – and we should know, being in the Catacomb Synod! But world over, Christians that mean it are being punished for trying to be faithful to the Word, up to and including being sent to jail or suffering violence.² Yet here St. John says that the one who believes in Jesus has...*overcome* all this? And not *will* overcome, but *has* overcome. So not only are we told that we ought to spend our lives trying to deal with all these Commandments, but now we are supposed to rejoice that we have overcome the world...which is currently grinding the Church's face into the dirt. How on earth do we make sense of all this?

The Unburdened and Victorious Christian

Some exegetes have pointed to the *relative* lightness of Christian living compared to the Old Covenant – that is, the Mosaic Law. We do not have to get circumcised, we don't have to eat kosher, we can wear mixed fabrics all day and there are no more animal sacrifices. Believers no longer have to present themselves at a physical Temple or Tabernacle and the cleanliness laws are null. Believers do not have to go to a priest for prayers and forgiveness, because the priesthood has been returned to a universal state. St. Peter refers to the Mosaic code as something that “neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear:”³ *surely* being freed from these requirements makes God's Commandments lighter, they reason. But that is not the only thing that makes it easier.

Truth be told, the Christian is *free* from the curse of the Law altogether: Christ redeemed us from it by shedding His Blood for our sins.⁴ The very commandments that told us we ought to die and then burn forever are no longer threatening us. You see my friends, the Law tells the unregenerate “this is what you have to do;” *we* tell the Law, “this is what I *want* to do.” The Law says to the nonbeliever, “you are damned because you love neither God nor your neighbor;” the Christian says to the Law, “I am forgiven of my sins, now teach me to love God and my neighbor.” To the Christian, the Decalogue is no longer a set of stipulations that we are guilty of breaking. Now, by the work of the Holy Spirit these Ten Commandments are woven into our very essence, motivating us to follow their every word so as to make our joy complete.

This is why St. John says that it is our faith which wins victory over the world. The world, which still resides under the curse of the Law, absolutely *hates* our freedom in Christ. They are burdened, cursed, and bound by the condemnation of their souls on account of their sins, but we are not. The persecutors deeply desire that all men should be as they are, and their leader the devil rages against even one soul being brought to salvation – but here the believer stands fast in freedom, singing the praises of our Savior. Our victory comes by our freedom which is won by our Savior and appropriated to us by faith.

That victory is not our own doing, and neither is our faith. The Apostle speaks of a believer as one who has been “born of God.” An infant is neither conceived nor born of its own volition, as it is by a father's will that the conception occurs and a mother's body determines the birth. Our faith, and the victory which comes from it, is all a gift from God which we only had the option to either reject or receive, not something which we appropriated by our own efforts. Christ won the ultimate victory for us on the Cross and in His Resurrection; we receive faith by the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments, and thus this victory is assured; we could not do this by our own power, so Christ has done it for us. There is no greater freedom then, and there is no greater victory,

2 Some of the recent examples can be found here:

<https://www.gottesdienst.org/gottesblog/2026/4/1/anti-christian-nationalism-success-worldwide->

3 Acts 15:10

4 Galatians 3:13

than to continue steadfast in our continued belief in Jesus.

Conclusion

To summarize, St. John teaches us that because Jesus has brought us to the faith, we are now free in Him to live as Christians. We do not obey the Commandments *in order* to be saved, but because we *are* saved we desire to live according to them – which as we are sanctified leads us to greater freedom in the first place.

I will exhort you though my friends, *never give this freedom up*. Whoever would try to bring you out of the Christian faith is an agent of the world trying to force you back into bondage under the curse of the Law. Whoever else would tell you that being Christian is fine but we have to be justified by our works, that person is a crass judaizer trying to enslave you as well. Never forget the tyranny of Rome and the Orthodox, who decided to place heavier burdens than the Mosaic code on the shoulders of Christians through their penances, indulgences, fasting, monasticism, prescribed daily masses; again all of these are judaizing heretical practices that deny Christian freedom. My friend, St. James adds to St. John's words with the Law of Liberty⁵ - someone who lives as a forgiven and forgiving man, someone who *loves those born of God*. And that is who you are now. You are born again by faith in Christ, brought to love for the saints by the power of the Holy Spirit, free from all the burdens of endless requirements and stipulations by the victory of Jesus over death and the devil. And because of this, you are free, victorious, and unburdened indeed.

Now the Peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.

5 James 1:12

Sermon for April 19th, 2026
THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

READINGS

Ezekiel 34:1-16

1 The word of the LORD came to me: **2** “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? **3** You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. **4** The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. **5** So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; **6** they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

7 “Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: **8** As I live, declares the Lord GOD, surely because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep, **9** therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: **10** Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.

11 “For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. **12** As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. **13** And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. **14** I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. **15** I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. **16** I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

Psalm 23

1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.

3 He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

5 You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.

1 Peter 2:18-25

18 Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. 19 For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. 20 For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. 21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. 22 He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 23 When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. 24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. 25 For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

John 10:7-16

7 So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. 8 All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. 11 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

Our meditation for this Third Sunday in Easter is on our Old Testament and Gospel readings.

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

One Shepherd

The reading from Ezekiel is easy enough to understand. God speaks to the prophet, condemning the religious leaders of Judah in his day. He refers to them as “shepherds,” while the laypeople of Judah are the “sheep.” The priests and Levites and Ezekiel's contemporary prophets were *supposed* to lead the people, teaching them about God's Law and the promise of the Messiah. The priests were *supposed* to ensure the spiritual well-being of the people with right sacrifices and help with the cleanliness of the population. They were *supposed* to worship only the true God and condemn pagan practices. They hardly did any of these things. In fact, earlier in his book Ezekiel details the crass idolatry, sun-worship,

and conspiratorial corruption that were happening in the Jerusalem Temple itself.¹ God also speaks of how there were false prophets in those days running around and telling people lies and using black magic to manipulate their way into wealth.² Suffice it to say that all of Judah's spiritual leadership was incredibly corrupt, and that is not even scratching the surface regarding the wicked kings who were reigning at the time.

So it was no different from when Christ walked the earth or today's religious and political environment.

So how in our reading does our Lord respond to these dour conditions? He tells these evil shepherds that He will take their power away and be a Shepherd to the people Himself. If these men shall destroy the people of God with their endless oppressions and apostasies, then it is clear that mere sinful men *cannot* be trusted to lead His people by their own authority. When this prophecy is fulfilled, He declares, there will be no sacerdotal order. Christ affirms it by saying “So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” There will be no Pope, there will be no metropolitan, there will be no archbishop. There will be ministers, certainly, but they will *not* be the go-between authorities mediating between God and men; they will be there to assist the people with a leadership by example rather than dominion.³

In our Gospel reading for today, Christ says “I am the Good Shepherd.” This is to say, Jesus fulfills the prophecy that Ezekiel relates to us. Jesus, the Second Person of the Godhead, gathers together all who receive the Gospel into the invisible Church. Jesus, the true and good Shepherd, fulfills the Old Covenant and renders it entirely obsolete so that there will be no more priestly oppression. Jesus sought the lost sheep of the house of Israel and all others around the world, dying for everyone's sins so that by all means some may be saved. Jesus binds up the wounds of men by promising us eternal life through faith in Him, Jesus is the One who sent the Holy Spirit to strengthen us and seal us for salvation, and Jesus is the great Judge of men who will upbraid all the powers of the world. There is no other shepherd. Anyone who claims to lead the entire Church in Christ's place then is antichrist.

Against False Shepherds

My friends, do not be fooled. This isn't just about the papacy. Let no man with a clerical collar on his neck trick you into letting him boss you around – not even me. Let no man take away your freedom in Christ, or make you think that you have to submit all of your opinions and activities to him for approval. He might tell you that he has “apostolic succession,” and by that he means that a silly conga line of men for two thousand years laid their hands on each other's shoulders until he ended up getting hands laid on him. He might tell you that he went to a very important Seminary and he knows so much more than you and he did all this work to be ordained but this doesn't count for the pastors who say the opposite of what he says even though they went to the same seminary and *blah blah blah blah blah*. He might even tell you that unless you change all of your political and musical/entertainment and historical opinions to match his then you are *damned*, hellbound for the “travesty” of disagreeing with him about things that don't have much to do with Scripture. He might even insult you, call you “depraved,” or tell other people to bully you. He might even write up a “declaration” with his buddies to condemn you. But you must not submit no matter what manipulative tripe he spews out of his mouth, for he is not your shepherd – Christ is.

One can only imagine the horrific faces such men (and the women pretending to be pastors) will make on Judgment Day, especially in light of their hypocrisies. Rome tells people to pay indulgences and warns against greed; Pope Benedict IX sold his office to the highest bidder – *twice* – abandoning his ministry to seek worldly power but demanding that people submit to his every whim.⁴ The current

1 Ezekiel 8

2 Ezekiel 13

3 1 Peter 5:1-3

4 <https://www.historyskills.com/classroom/ancient-history/worst-popes/>

and previous popes have moralized to the Catholic laity that they cannot support borders or armed forces while enjoying the protection of the Swiss Guard. Orthodoxy fares no better: the “Protopresbyter” Robert Kondratick of the Orthodox Church of America (OCA) was dismissed after running a 20 year blackmail and extortion operation in his own church body, where it turned out that plenty of priests were engaged in infidelity, embezzlement and drug addiction.⁵ Imagine that, dozens of clergy telling you that you cannot sleep with your wife more than once a month all engaged in sexual sin! And when it comes to Lutherans...let's just say there are some discouraging lists out there,⁶ to say nothing of the improprieties in other Protestant branches. It is absolutely everywhere, and I could go on but other people have cataloged them all over books and the internet.⁷ The ones I have brought up are just a drop in the ocean of pastoral sins over the past two thousand years.

Why bring all these scandals up? Aren't we all sinners, even those in spiritual authority? We absolutely are. But it is patently absurd to give up your freedom to institutions that are riddled with corruption, abuse, hypocrisy and scandal. These ministers play the part of the wicked shepherds of Judah's past, telling people what they can or can't eat, when they can eat, how to drive their cars,⁸ what jobs they can have, who they can or can't vote for, what politics they can espouse, who they associate with, and a whole *host* of other matters which they want to force on us all but are not found in Scripture. The entire time they are enforcing the traditions of men, they flaunt these traditions privately. Men with real sins condemning others for doing things and thinking things that aren't sin.

They are just like the Pharisees, about whom Christ says “they tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.”⁹ Now is the time to rejoice in Christ my friends, because back then the people still had to listen to the Pharisees – He says “the scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do whatever they tell you,”¹⁰ but *now* Christ Himself is the sole Shepherd over our souls. If any pope, pastor, theologian or whoever tells you to do or believe this or that by his own authority, you can laugh in that man's face and walk away.

True Pastoral Leadership

Someone may reply to me that the Bible tells us to submit to the pastors, the bishops, and elders. After all, the author of Hebrews tells us “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”¹¹ This is correct! But it would be absurd if by that verse he meant that you have to change the oil on your pastor's car when he tells you to, or sell all your possessions so that he can live in luxury. When they tell us to respect and support spiritual authorities, the Scriptures mean that we follow those clergy insofar as they speak and properly apply the Word of God. A minister is in the right to rebuke someone in his congregation if they stole something, for the Word declares “you shall not steal.” He is right to pass along the Biblical command to be charitable, or to exhort you to faith in Christ, etc. But a minister cannot command a woman to marry him, he cannot command people to sin, and he cannot tell people to change their opinions when

5 <https://web.archive.org/web/20090225043830/http://www.oca.org/PDF/SIC/2008-1108-1-sicreport-final.pdf>

6 <https://web.archive.org/web/20260217044259/https://www.lcmschildren.org/lcms-sexual-abuses-history>
<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/over-2000-people-abused-german-protestant-church-study-2024-01-25/>

7 <https://www.ranker.com/list/pastors-that-fell-from-grace/genevieve-carlton>
[for just a few more examples]

8 “Those incur grave guilt who, by drunkenness or a love of speed, endanger their own and others' safety on the road, at sea, or in the air.” Catholic Catechism, 2290. While this is fine in terms of the principle of helping our neighbors stay safe, a strict reading would ban all racing sports.

9 Matthew 23:4

10 Matthew 23:2

11 Hebrews 13:17

there is no sin in them. Nor can he command matters of private devotion like fasting or night vigils or praying the hours; you have freedom in Christ to engage with such things as *you* see fit to benefit your sanctification, with prompting and guidance from the Holy Spirit.

A true minister, a *legitimate* clergyman, teaches and applies the Word alone. If he is worth his salt, then if something about you offends his sensibilities he will go straight to the Word and determine whether his objection is founded in his opinion or if there is real sin in you. I am not speaking about open and crass sin of course, for such *would* be a cause for him to exhort you to repentance, and upon impenitence he must bring it to the congregation. Otherwise, he *must* submit himself to the Word.

Example; if a man likes to do boxing, his pastor may find that objectionable. The minister thinks that boxing is a perverse enjoyment of violence and conflict, and he believes this goes against the general call for Christians to be peaceful people.¹² If he were a wicked clergyman, he would simply threaten the man with being banned from the Eucharist or excommunication so long as he kept going to boxing class. But a *good* minister asks the man about it, and finds out whether he is boxing from a sinful love of violence or if he merely enjoys the sport and culture. If there is some sin there, then he attempts to work *with* the man to temper that instinct toward sin and seeks to help him make his hobby *unsinful* if possible. That is what a good pastor does, and tragically such discussions are few and far between.

Conclusion

The Church has tons of people who wish to take their faith seriously. They are sheep who yearn for the true Shepherd, Jesus Christ, who personally offers to guide them through all life by Word and Sacrament. The pastors and other Church authorities are *supposed* to assist such Christians, working as “undershepherds” who serve the laity and advance the cause of the Gospel. But the devil knows this, and so to mess things up he fills the offices of the Church with false shepherds who will route that serious faith to unproductive ends. My friend, how can you tell the difference between the loyal servant and the wicked shepherd? We already know that we must avoid anyone teaching false doctrine, but there *are* bad pastors and authorities who only speak correct doctrine. For the good servants, this discernment takes time and listening to their words. But for the bad ones, it is painfully easy to discern even if they are not teaching errors: once you see them making unbiblical demands, you'll know to who you can avoid.

This may sound burdensome, but the thing is my friends, the point of what I am saying is the opposite. You and I have one (1) Shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ. One day He shall return and free us all from even having to *listen* to those who would pretend to be shepherds in His place. But for now, He calls us to be independent Christians who hear the voice of our Shepherd above and beyond what any “hired hand” says. From Calvary onward, you are free from anyone who would make you their spiritual slaves, whether that is the devil or one of his minions behind the pulpits. Let us therefore rejoice in this freedom, carefully maintaining it according to the Law of Liberty.¹³

Now the Peace of our Lord, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

12 Romans 12:18

13 James 1:25

Sermon for April 26th, 2026
FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

READINGS

Lamentations 3:21-33

- 21** But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
22 The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
23 they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
24 “The LORD is my portion,” says my soul,
“therefore I will hope in him.”
25 The LORD is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul who seeks him.
26 It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the LORD.
27 It is good for a man that he bear
the yoke in his youth.
28 Let him sit alone in silence
when it is laid on him;
29 let him put his mouth in the dust—
there may yet be hope;
30 let him give his cheek to the one who strikes,
and let him be filled with insults.
31 For the Lord will not
cast off forever,
32 but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;
33 for he does not afflict from his heart
or grieve the children of men.

Psalm 147:1-11

[Collect verses in **bold**]

- 1** Praise the LORD!
For it is good to sing praises to our God;
for it is pleasant, and a song of praise is fitting.
2 The LORD builds up Jerusalem;
he gathers the outcasts of Israel.
**3 He heals the brokenhearted
and binds up their wounds.**
**4 He determines the number of the stars;
he gives to all of them their names.**
**5 Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;
his understanding is beyond measure.**
6 The LORD lifts up the humble;

he casts the wicked to the ground.

7 Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving;
make melody to our God on the lyre!

8 He covers the heavens with clouds;
he prepares rain for the earth;
he makes grass grow on the hills.

9 He gives to the beasts their food,
and to the young ravens that cry.

10 His delight is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his pleasure in the legs of a man,

11 but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him,
in those who hope in his steadfast love.

1 Peter 2:11-20

11 Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. **12** Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. **13** Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, **14** or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. **15** For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. **16** Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. **17** Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor. **18** Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. **19** For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.

John 16:16-22

16 "A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me." **17** So some of his disciples said to one another, "What is this that he says to us, 'A little while, and you will not see me, and again a little while, and you will see me'; and, 'because I am going to the Father'?" **18** So they were saying, "What does he mean by 'a little while'? We do not know what he is talking about." **19** Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, "Is this what you are asking yourselves, what I meant by saying, 'A little while and you will not see me, and again a little while and you will see me'?" **20** Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. **21** When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. **22** So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. **23** In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. **24** Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.

Our text for meditation this Fourth Sunday in Easter is on our Old Testament reading.

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

On Lamentations

If you only ever read this passage from Lamentations, you would be under the impression that

the prophet who wrote it – Jeremiah – was writing to console his audience and nothing more. But if you read the entire work, all five chapters, you will quickly see that our reading is an expression of hope in the midst of a man's nervous breakdown. After the Babylonians destroyed Judah, taking their best and brightest into Exile, the people who remained in the land were subject to violence, hunger, oppression, slavery, sexual assault and utter madness. Some women held their starving babies, who died because the famine has rendered them unable to breastfeed;¹ other women, driven to insanity by hunger, devoured their own children.² The national mood was one of such deep depression that those who were not being worked or beaten to death by the Babylonian foremen simply sit in the dirt praying and weeping.³

In the midst of witnessing the carnage and humiliation of his people, the prophet had a hard time making up his mind about how he ought to understand this tragedy. On the one hand, he knew that the children of Judah deserved this punishment. The prophets had said that this Exile would happen on account of their sins for three centuries now – for crying out loud, even *Moses* wrote about it nine hundred years prior!⁴ So Jeremiah writes “Why should a living man complain, a man, about the punishment of his sins?”⁵ But the prophet spends the majority of the book doing just that, complaining about the punishment Judah was made to endure. In fact, he says it is a worse chastisement than the destruction of Sodom:⁶ let that sink in, Judah's Exile was a harsher punishment than the city of pagans who believed in militant rape as their most important moral value.

The prophet never goes so far as to accuse God of misjudging His people or going too far. He knows better than to question our Lord, especially after so many centuries of warnings. The children of Judah *knew* that it was wrong to worship other gods, to oppress their neighbors, to ally themselves with pagan nations, and to murder their kin. They *knew* that their hypocrisies and blasphemies were piled up higher than the tallest mountains. Yet they refused to repent so as to prevent this punishment from happening; occasionally a good king like Hezekiah or Josiah would arrive and establish religious reforms, but as soon as those men went to their graves the people went right back to their usual sins. Thus God punishes them without mercy,⁷ and declares Himself their enemy.⁸

The Two Responses

So what is to be said about our reading and its message of mercy and hope? Well my friends, it is plain to see that Lamentations is a complex and emotional work, one which reflects a deeply troubled soul seeing great calamity happen up close. God tasks Jeremiah with writing this down, including the promise of mercy and love to all who would repent after this punishment. But in the midst of proclamations like “His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning,” the prophet has to grapple with the tension he sees between God's mercy and justice. Just imagine being in his shoes and having to deliver this message to a young boy whose father was killed by the Babylonians, whose mother was driven to madness and cannibalism. Just imagine what he must have felt telling this to the few faithful believers who were suffering despite spending their entire lives devoted to the one true God. And he has to declare all of this while being so miserable that he writes “I have forgotten what happiness is.”⁹

So the prophet gives full expression to the two responses any man might have in such a

1 Lamentations 2:11-12

2 Lam. 4:10

3 Lam. 2:10

4 Deuteronomy 28:64-68

5 Lam.3:38-39

6 Lam. 4:6

7 Lam. 2:2

8 Lam. 2:4

9 Lam. 3:17

powerless state of suffering. One response is great sorrow and mourning, the other is faith. There is no point in resenting God for permitting this deadly massacre and enslavement, for the people had been told that they would be punished twice over for the same sins before any restoration could take place.¹⁰ They had been informed for one hundred and fifty years that God would put Jerusalem into the hands of the Babylonians, but that the Babylonians would go beyond what God had permitted and they would be punished worse than Jerusalem was.¹¹ Jerusalem was promised a restoration; Babylon was promised extinction. Judah could not be mad at God for this: it was their fault for ignoring and persecuting the prophets. They made their bed, and now it was time to lay in it. So now, all that is left is mourning and faith.

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”¹² The prophet has no need to tell people why they should weep – they already are, and he joins with them after 10% of their population is deported and a greater percentage is killed. But the greater challenge is to exercise one's *faith*. The Exiles saw *none* of God's mercy in what happened to them, yet they are instructed to trust that God will have mercy on them. God acted like He hated them as He permitted their babies to die torturous deaths and their women to be ravaged by foreigners and their old men to be subject to painful labor... yet here they are instructed to believe that God loves them and has their best interests in mind.

The Alien Work of God

Jeremiah tells them that God “does not afflict from His heart.” Though their punishment was grave, punishment itself is never something that our Lord *wants* to do. Wrath and judgment are what our theologians identify as the “alien works” of God. Though all He wants is to show mercy and grace to men, men choose to love their sin more and cut themselves off from Him; the only way to even bring humanity to a place of being forgiven is to terrify, punish, and threaten. *Then*, when the stony ground of the heart is dug up, the sinner may listen. *Then* the sinner may be made a saint.

Think of it this way my friends. Imagine a farmer who owns a donkey. This is his favorite donkey, one that he raised from its birth. He loves it so, so much. But as it grows, it begins to be stubborn, unwilling to work, and occasionally kicks the farmhands as they try to brush it. The more this donkey resists any sort of training, the more drastic the farmer will have to be to correct its bad behavior. If he does nothing, he will have to have the animal put down – and he desperately does not want to do that, because this is his *favorite* creature in the whole world. So he will stop at nothing to fix this donkey's rebellion, even if it becomes so stubborn that the animal is traumatized by the experience. But no matter how hard that ordeal may be, once the donkey no longer loves its rebellion, then the farmer can shower it with love and affection. That's all he wanted to do in the first place.

In the case of Lamentations, it was plain that Judah was the donkey here. And not only that, they were the most rebellious and stubborn donkey in history. If God had not done anything, then all of them would have gone head-first into damnation through their wicked love of sin; but by the time Jeremiah wrote Lamentations, they were so far gone that the only way to save *any* of them was to afflict them in a deeply unsettling, traumatizing, *brutal* fashion. Before any of them could be shown the mercy that God so desperately wanted to show them, punishment was required. In the moment it was terrible suffering, so much so that Jeremiah writes this whole book in a state of confused, sorrowful delirium; but afterwards, it was this very event that kept the children of Judah from worshiping false gods for hundreds of years.

10 Isaiah 40:2

11 Isaiah 47:6,

12 Hebrews 11:1

Lamentations and the Christian

Now in the midst of Jeremiah's depressive state, he gives us a piece of wisdom which every Christian ought to heed. He says "it is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord." If times are tough, perhaps it is on account of some stubborn sin in our hearts that we find ourselves suffering; God may well be engaged in His alien work to bring us back into the fold and fix our rebellious hearts. Perhaps it is *not* our fault, and we are merely suffering as collateral damage while God is working repentance in others. Either way, we must wait for His salvation – and do so with the proper faith that no matter how bad it looks and no matter how painful it is, He loves us and will deliver us. We must cling to Him, even if the world and the devil try to convince us to abandon Him. They may say that He has left us forever, that He isn't there, or that His responses are too harsh to be worthy of our worship – but pay no heed to such voices, for our Lord truly, deeply loves us. After all, this is the same God who sent His Son to die in our place for our sins. He has proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that He cares.

Further, Jeremiah says this is best done in our youth. By this, I don't think that he *just* means that young men repenting are better off than old men repenting, though this is certainly true. Yes, a man who devotes himself to the Lord and repents of his sins early on in life will have a much better track record of service unto our Lord. But think of youth in terms of *time* my friends. Jeremiah tells us here that we ought to repent early and often, imploring our Lord for mercy instead of trying to strike it out on our own like young men do. In other words, he who does not delay his repentance has far more hope. Let us therefore run to God's mercy *now*, let us learn from Judah's mistake and go to Him before more drastic things must be done – let us go to the Lord in penitent faith! For when we do, by all the promises of the Gospel He shall always joyfully and gently receive us.

Now the Peace of our Lord, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.