

Sermon for January 4th, 2026
SECOND SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

READINGS

Genesis 46:1-7

1 So Israel took his journey with all that he had and came to Beersheba, and offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. **2** And God spoke to Israel in visions of the night and said, “Jacob, Jacob.” And he said, “Here I am.” **3** Then he said, “I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. **4** I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again, and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes.”

5 Then Jacob set out from Beersheba. The sons of Israel carried Jacob their father, their little ones, and their wives, in the wagons that Pharaoh had sent to carry him. **6** They also took their livestock and their goods, which they had gained in the land of Canaan, and came into Egypt, Jacob and all his offspring with him, **7** his sons, and his sons' sons with him, his daughters, and his sons' daughters. All his offspring he brought with him into Egypt.

Psalm 77:11-20

11 I will remember the deeds of the LORD;
yes, I will remember your wonders of old.

12 I will ponder all your work,
and meditate on your mighty deeds.

13 Your way, O God, is holy.

What god is great like our God?

14 You are the God who works wonders;
you have made known your might among the peoples.

15 You with your arm redeemed your people,
the children of Jacob and Joseph. *Selah*

16 When the waters saw you, O God,
when the waters saw you, they were afraid;
indeed, the deep trembled.

17 The clouds poured out water;
the skies gave forth thunder;
your arrows flashed on every side.

18 The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind;
your lightnings lighted up the world;
the earth trembled and shook.

19 Your way was through the sea,
your path through the great waters;
yet your footprints were unseen.

20 You led your people like a flock
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

1 Peter 4:12-19

12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you, as though something strange were happening to you. **13** But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. **14** If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. **15** But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. **16** Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let

him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. **17** For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? **18** And

“If the righteous is scarcely saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”

19 Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

Matthew 2:13-23

13 Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” **14** And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt **15** and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

Our text for meditation this Second Sunday after Christmas is on our Epistle reading.

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

Introduction

One of the primary causes of the Reformation was the sale of indulgences. Typically in our Protestant circles this gets presented as the Roman Catholic church selling forgiveness, and Martin Luther bravely arguing against it because all of our sins were forgiven when Christ died on the Cross. While I suppose that is a good summary of the matter, it does not touch on the rise of indulgences and why the Roman church established them in the first place.

Why did Rome begin selling indulgences? We might say that it was greed: the papacy loves luxury and gold. We might say that Rome was trying to spiritually enslave people: telling the common Christian that he must go out of his way to purchase Heaven for himself is a powerful way to accomplish that, and Rome certainly loves *power*. But these are insufficient answers, because they discuss the *motivations* for establishing indulgences, not the *arguments* for it. While the papacy, the office of antichrist, most certainly desires power and money,¹ we do ourselves a disservice if we do not examine their case, and why our reading for today teaches us something *very* different from Rome's ideas.

On Roman Purgatory

Indulgences come from the Roman church's conception of something called “Purgatory.” The idea is this: there must be some otherworldly place that “purges” us of our venial sins before we enter Paradise. “What is a venial sin?” you might ask. For us Lutherans, a venial sin is iniquity that we commit without recognizing it; whoever lives a life of penitent faith has these sins forgiven every morning, for God knows our weaknesses and He is merciful toward us.² But for Rome, a venial sin is just a sin of a “less serious” variety;³ it might not be a bad enough sin to *damn* you (that would be a *mortal sin*), but it still has some consequences. Even if you have that venial sin forgiven, Rome claims that you have to do a sufficient amount of *penance* to work that sin off; otherwise, after you shed your mortal coil you must suffer longer and more painfully in Purgatory. That is why it is there, in Rome's mind; God does not want to see so much as a stain of sin before letting someone into Heaven – so

¹ Indulgences are still being sold, so this is a present reality.

² Psalm 19:12, Lamentations 3:22-23

³ https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P6C.HTM#:~:text=1862%20

whatever sort of imperfection on you must be *burned* off.

To summarize it, the Roman conception of Purgatory is that it exists as a kind of temporary, diet version of hell that believers have to go through before they can be permitted residence in Heaven. The more penance one does, the papacy says, the less time they will spend there. So they introduce the sale of indulgences as a means of *helping* people – yes, they believe this helps people – reduce or abolish their time in the dreadful place of Purgatory. Of course, there is no verse in the Bible that tells us such a place exists, but human reason has a way of “discovering” things, though it is really just making things up to fill in the gaps in our understanding. To the Roman theologian, Purgatory simply *must* exist, or else the stain of our sin stays forever and we are doomed! Thus, whether their true motives were greed and power or not, the papacy framed indulgences as a kind offer of extra penances for Catholics everywhere.

Lutheran Purgatory

Of course, we Lutherans reject the practice of indulgences, because *all* of our sins were paid for at the Cross. There is no need to worry about whether your venial sins have been washed away, because whosoever has been Baptized has had their sins absolutely *drowned* in the Blood of our Lord Jesus through the water comprehended in the Word. If you believe in Christ, then you are justified; at Judgment Day, God will look at you and see nothing but the righteousness of our Lord Jesus. Does Jesus have the stain of venial sin on His Person? Heaven forbid we tolerate such a blasphemous notion! My friends, He was and is *sinless*; if you are counted as righteous by faith in Jesus, then there is no *need* for Judgment to include every little offense that you may have committed here on earth. Rejoice, for if you are a Baptized believer, then if and when you shed your mortal coil then you will *immediately* be with our Lord in Paradise. After all, St. Paul writes that to live is Christ and to die is gain,⁴ and the Apostle who confessed to his own issues with sin⁵ expected that if he was executed then he would be with our Lord instantly.⁶ The same holds true for all of us.

But there *is* a Purgatory. Only, in the Scriptural understanding of it Purgatory is *this world* that we are living in right now. In our reading, St. Peter says that Judgment begins *at the household of God*, and by this he means the Church here on earth. Our experience of suffering, whether that be the normal slings and arrows of tragedy in this life or if it be the persecution of believers by anti-Christ forces, is how that Judgment plays out. Christians are insulted, martyred, imprisoned, tempted, bereft of social privileges, and hated more than anyone or anything else. The Apostle says that this is the purgation, the fiery trial which has afflicted believers since shortly after Pentecost.

Let us not get things confused though. The Scriptural understanding of Purgatory is not a matter of removing sins that remain upon our flesh. Yes, God does discipline us to help us behave better in life,⁷ but that is not a matter of judgment so much as it is relationship; when He does this, He is treating us as any good Father would. Meanwhile, this fiery trial that St. Peter writes about marks the beginning of Judgment, beginning with the Church here on earth, is for the sake of glory. It is distinct from the normal disciplines that help us behave better, for this kind of trial actively conforms us to the image of Christ.

Jesus suffered for the truth. Jesus was insulted for being the true Christ. They crucified our Lord for bearing witness to who He is and for condemning the false teachings among both Jew and Gentile alike. When we suffer and it is not a consequence of sin, God is permitting that calamity for the sake of telling us this: if you share in the sufferings of Christ, then you shall also share in His Glory. We can bear it and rejoice, knowing that it is for something *good*. Christ's suffering brought about our

⁴ Philippians 1:21

⁵ Romans 7:14-25

⁶ Philippians 1:22-25

⁷ Hebrews 12

salvation; our trials help lead others to faith in Him. The truth about Purgatory in this world is that it is not about purging *us* per se, but rather it is more about purging evil from the earth and bringing us to a greater future.

Conclusion

So we as Lutherans reject both the Papist sale of indulgences and the imaginary Purgatory that led to them. We do so because we know that all of our sins have been forgiven on account of Christ, and because we hold to the *real* Purgatory. And what shall we say of the place? It is this world, which is the only place wherein Christians suffer. I must repeat it my friends, this world is the *only* place in which Christians suffer. And since it is for a good cause, that of growing the Church and increasing righteousness here on earth, we follow St. Peter's exhortation. We are to entrust our souls to our faithful Creator, who promises us eternal blessedness, and we must continue in doing good so that our cause may triumph over all others. Let us then continue in our path, glorifying God with the peace that says there shall be no "dread hell" in store for us.

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