

EPIPHANY III – JANUARY 23, 2022 – ROMANS 1:8-17

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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

⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. ⁹ For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you ¹⁰ always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. ¹¹ For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you-- ¹² that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. ¹³ I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. ¹⁴ I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. ¹⁵ So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. ¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith." Thus far our text.

What gets in the way of coming to hear the Word of God on a given Sunday? I know I'm "preaching to the choir" a little bit here, as you're the ones that come to church through thick and thin, making preaching and the Word of God a priority, but we all need to be reminded of how important this hearing and learning truly is. We as sinful men come up with a whole host of reasons why we get out of the habit of attending church on Sunday morning, and once we're out of the habit, it's difficult to get back into the habit of doing what's right and proper. Perhaps it's illness and sickness and pain and

difficult mobility. Perhaps it's because we've striven hard for six days, and Sunday is our only day off to rest and relax. Maybe it's because church is SO early on Sunday, and we're just not "morning people". Maybe there's something going on with our kids and grandkids on Sunday, and we think that it's okay to "just miss one week" of receiving the Lord's gifts. No matter what the case, it's easy for the cares of this life and the difficulties that are ours this side of heaven to intrude, dissuade, and drive us away from the Divine Service of God in this His house.

If you're going to be out of town, why not seek out your resources and find an LCMS church where you're going to be. (Apart from receiving the gifts of God, who knows – you might just make some new friends along the way!) The internet has made quick work of finding a church that's in fellowship with us, and there are precious few places in this country that don't have a church within a reasonable drive. Or, talk to me – I'd be glad to do some of the research for you! The important thing is that you come and receive the forgiveness of our sins echoed in your very ears, the Word of God properly read and believed and taught, and the Sacrament rightly administered to eager mouths. If we make it a priority to set aside what we're doing on Sunday morning to be "refueled", the benefits are much more than just earthly – God's blessings are also involved. He promises that His Word will never return to Him void, but will accomplish what He purposes and His Word is powerful and creative.

In our text, Paul reiterates the theme of his entire letter to the Christians in Rome – that "he is not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. " EVERYONE means EVERYONE – Jews, Greeks, Barbarians, all of the various tribes and peoples that is mentioned in the Pentecost account in Acts chapter 2. God wills that all men be saved – we know this is the universal will of God. He wants us to partake and believe, and then spread this hope that is beyond our understanding to all those within our sphere of influence. We give the reason for the joy that lies within us – that we are able to respond differently to the troubles of this life, because we are God's children, and He cares for us. Everything that we have, everything that we are, everything that we will

receive as a gift at the end of this earthly life, comes from the gracious and loving hand of our heavenly Father. Nothing else matters, really, when compared to this eternity with Him. Let's delve into this subject of the primacy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and what the implications of this importance are for our daily lives today, and our lives to come in heaven.

"The righteous shall live by faith" – that says it all, doesn't it? We believe in something that we cannot yet see, because we have confidence in the promise-giver, God Himself, to deliver that which He has said He will do. God never changes His mind, never reneges on His promises, never decides to start over with another group of people, and write us out of the Book of Life. After all, we're told in Revelation that our names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life with the blood of Jesus Christ, which is indelible and permanent. His love for us never changes, never wanes, never fades – just like the steadfast father in the parable of the Prodigal Son, when we stray from God and His Word, He never stops trying to bring us back to Himself. Even though we'd deserve to be forlorn and forgotten, that's not what our Triune God is all about – He is faithful when we are not; He is trustworthy when we are anything but

Why does He have this love for us? Because He created us in His image; we are the crown of His creation, the apple of His eye – He loves us with a love that we cannot understand. Last week, we talked about the church, and everyone in it, being the bride of Christ, and Jesus being the bridegroom. Marriage is a foreshadowing, a pointing-ahead, to the love that Christ has for us His bride, within His church on earth. The loving spousal relationship is but a shadow of that love, but it still has some of the same characteristics. You've seen the couples that are married for 50, 60 or 70 years – we all want to be like them, don't we. We don't see the struggles, we only see the outcome. Believe me, if they've made it that many years, they've seen good and bad, sickness and health, poverty and wealth, etc. We strive for a marriage relationship like that, don't we? Well, when it comes to the love of God in Christ Jesus for His church, we can experience it and revel in the doting attention that He gives to us. Why is this so

important? We can have faith, trust, hope in God, because He will never forsake us, but His love never fails. We can run away from Him, but He will never abandon us.

What does faith do? Luther tells us that this faith is a “very busy, active thing” – faith grows throughout our lives, matures as it is fed with good things such as the Word of God and the Sacraments, does good works in keeping with and at the urging of the Holy Spirit that is implanted in our hearts. Faith leads us to yearn for the things of God in His house – it’s not that we “have to” go to church every week, as if God were keeping score. Rather, we “get to” go to the Divine Service, and receive that which we need so much – the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, salvation. Yes, we can read the Scripture on our own, and watch it on the computer, but it’s a poor substitute for being present in the place that’s set aside as holy to the Lord, receiving directly the gifts of God in our ears and hands and mouth. Once we’re out of the habit of going to church, it’s easy to stay out of the habit. We human beings are habitual creatures – we form routines, and once they’re formed, they’re easily retained, and difficultly broken. Think of your morning routine for getting ready – it kind of throws off your routine if you don’t have breakfast before getting in the car, or put on the left shoe before the right shoe, or any of a host of shocks to the morning ablutions. If we fill the time on Sunday with something else (which in our busy lives is very easy to do), then we have to find some other time to pursue that activity if we want to make attending the Divine Service and Bible Study primary in our lives again.

Paul was willing to jump through the fire in order to get to his people, in order to continue to feed them with the pure spiritual food of the Gospel. He was concerned that they were being misled into false teaching, shame and vice in his absence, and wanted to rectify this problem right away. However, he was prevented from getting to them, not because he didn’t want to come, but because of imprisonments, shipwrecks, persecutions and the like. I think that this was a much more credible reason for Paul being delayed than that “something came up”, and he just didn’t get there! This really concerned Paul, because in his absence, false prophets rose up and started teaching the people all sorts

of things. It's said that "when the cat is away, the mice will play" – when there is an absence of a head, fracturing results in the church. It's easy to be misled into false doctrine – after all, our sinful minds don't think the way that Christ has taught us in His Word – our reason and senses easily stop being servants to the text, and start being masters. It's easy to end up saying to a text of Scripture, that is difficult because it goes against the ways of this world, that it "doesn't make sense" to us. When we allow our reason and senses, our intellect, to overturn the clear sense of a portion of Scripture, we get in trouble very quickly.

We see this during long vacancies between pastorates – despite the best intentions of a vacancy pastor, the fact is that he is not there all the time, and many things slip through the cracks. Pure doctrine, right administration of the Sacraments, correct teaching on various issues that crop up in the church – these have impacts on a whole lot of things, more than just what happens on Sunday morning. It can even get to the point that we stop just avoiding subjects that are "ticklish" or uncomfortable, opposed to the thinking of "polite society", and actually succumb to the thinking and belief of the world around us. You can think of a whole host of stances that the LCMS takes that are counter-cultural. Each of them start to be watered down, when there isn't the constant reassurance that we are right in our thinking, and that the Holy Spirit gives us the courage to make the right confession

During his absence, Paul wanted to continue to teach the truth to the people, and have them reach out to their friends and neighbors, their business associates, even their own family members, with the centrality of Christ's passion, death and resurrection for the future of mankind. Everyone is included in the promise – not just the Jews, not just the chosen people, not just the "high and mighty" in society, but everyone – God wills that all men be saved. What is the Gospel? Here we're using the word Gospel in the wide sense, to refer to the entire counsel of God in Scripture, not just the Good News of salvation, as opposed to the Law that convicts us of our many sins. That's why sermons are properly constructed to both proclaim the Law in all its sternness to stubborn sinners, entrenched in their rebellion against

God, but also the Gospel in all its sweetness to those who have been brought low by the Law, and are in need of hearing about what Christ has done to bring us to eternal life with Him, forgive our sins, and give us everlasting life. False teaching easily omits the Law in favor of having the people hear what they want to hear, that they are included in the promise of Christ no matter what they have done, and doesn't dwell at all on the fact that we are by nature poor, miserable sinners. This *antinomian* (or law-lacking) teaching might seem to be sweet, but it's actually like saccharine – it tastes good going down, but it rots your teeth in the end! False teaching, conversely, can lead people into the falsity of thinking that there must be something that they can DO to earn their way into heaven, including turning the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of conversion into something that the sinner initiates, cooperates in, or has any doing in having its desired result. It's so easy to be misled – it's so easy to fall victim to false teaching – that's why pastors are so careful with the wording of what they say, and why they are given such a strong base in seminary of the true faith. Teaching the folks – that's what pastors do – in many and varied situations, to be sure, but teaching all the same. Hearing and learning – that's what the folks in the pews do – they listen to the one that the Lord of the Church has sent to be their pastor in their midst, and trust that what he is presenting is meet, right and salutary.

Right teaching, right doctrine, right practice – these are all crucial to the mission of the church in its goal to not be ashamed of the Gospel, but to preach the Word in season and out of season, rebuke, correct and instruct in the things of God. These are the power of God for those who believe – both the Jew and the Gentile. The Holy Spirit works in our hearts to create saving faith in our Baptism, and then nourishes it in the hearing of the Word, and the reception of the Holy Sacraments, on at least a weekly basis. Coming to church is more than just an obligation, like brushing your teeth; rather, it's a privilege, like getting excellent chocolate or excellent pizza and garlic bread, not on an occasional basis, but all the time. And, when we get to heavenly glory with Jesus, it will be like a Christmas dinner every day, a lavish banquet prepared for us in heaven, when God welcomes us home after our short sojourn here on

earth. Thanks be to God for sending heralds like Paul and every other faithful pastor, to lead us to the true spiritual food, and to avoid that which would do us harm. We're in a battle here, folks – the devil thinks he's won, when the Lord of Life triumphed over death and the grave when He overcame the cross, scorning its shame, and retook His position of authority at the right hand of God. We're given the tools to fight this battle, with the offensive weapon of the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, by regularly refueling our tank with the good teachings of God. Thanks be to God for giving us these reminders and urgings and routines by which we regularly partake of the good things of God in Word and Sacrament. He has truly done everything for our salvation. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.