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**Sunday 26 February 2023 to**

**Sunday 5 March 2023**

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Sunday 26 February 2023

**Holding fast to God’s words**

by Dr Pauline Simonsen

***Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil***

***(Matthew 4:1).***

Read Matthew 4:1–11

At his unexpected baptism, Jesus was powerfully affirmed in his divine identity as the beloved Son of God. And straightaway, the Spirit who fills him leads him out into the wilderness for 40 days of solitude and fasting – and temptation by the devil.

This testing was crucial to Jesus’ human identity. Temptation was part of Jesus’ experience as a full human being. He was ‘tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin’ (Hebrews 4:14–16).

Temptation itself is not a sin; it is a typical experience for every human being living in a broken world. Jesus joins us in it. His temptations come when he is deeply vulnerable – also a very typical human experience! When we are tired, hungry, disappointed, or hurt – that’s when the enemy is sure to show up. Do you know your vulnerable times, when the tempter will try his luck? Ask the Holy Spirit for words of Bible truth that will confound Satan’s tempting. Ask the Spirit to help you learn them, so they are hidden in your heart, ready for the crucial moment!

Satan’s deepest temptation of Jesus was to doubt God’s word about Jesus’ identity. Jesus has just heard God’s proclamation about him: ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased’ (Matthew 3:17). God’s declaration is the very bedrock of Jesus’ being. From this reality will come all Jesus’ ministry. So it’s this reality that Satan tempts Jesus to doubt. ‘If you are the Son of God’, he sneers, twice. Luring Jesus to doubt God’s word; making him feel he needs to prove his divinity with flashy performances. After all, the strategy worked so successfully with Adam and Eve way back in the garden of Eden: ‘Did God really say … ?’

Satan does his most devastating work when he gets us to doubt what God has said about who we are. What did God say over you at your baptism? That you were redeemed by Jesus Christ on the cross; that Satan’s power over you is broken and you are washed by God, rebirthed to new life as a child of God. God has declared it and sealed you in the family name: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

That is who you are and no-one can take that name and identity away from you. You are hidden in Jesus Christ for eternity.

Just remind yourself – and Satan! – of this reality, next time you are vulnerable and tempted to believe his lies.

***Gracious God, defend us from the subtleties of Satan. Hide your word in us that we may grasp it in the time of trial. Lord Jesus, walk with us and give us your strength and victory. Amen.****Pauline leads a Bible college and offers spiritual direction in Palmerston North, New Zealand. She’s married to Roger – who is recently retired – and she enjoys having him home a bit more. When she gets some free time, Pauline loves cooking and reading and likes nothing better than sitting with a cat on her lap and watching the birds in her garden.*

Monday 27 February 2023

**Cinderella no more**

by Dr Pauline Simonsen

### As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you (Isaiah 62:5b).

Read Isaiah 61:10 – 62:5

Rejected, deserted, desolate …

It’s a story often depicted in novels and movies: the Cinderella story of the poor and rejected woman found by the prince, dressed in magnificent clothes and transformed, given a new name and life. It’s the ultimate ‘makeover’.

For Old Testament Israel, this story brings meaning far beyond Hollywood sentimentality. Today’s reading from Isaiah carries profound hope for an Israel devastated after exile in Babylon, where they felt abandoned and rejected by God, forlorn, desolate. Once the loved consort of Yahweh, Israel's splendour had vanished.

But now God delights in restoring his beloved Israel, re-clothing her in righteousness and glory like a gorgeous bride. God will take his beautiful bride to himself again, and Israel will be a glory among the nations, ‘a crown of splendour in the Lord’s hand’.

The person talking here is the Anointed One of Isaiah 61, whom God would send to do his work of salvation. We now know this person to be Jesus Christ, who in the Capernaum synagogue announces that he is God’s Anointed One, the fulfilment of Isaiah 61 (Luke 4:18–21). Messiah Jesus came to restore Israel to their God – if they would let him. ‘He came to his own, but his own –people did not receive him. Yet to those who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God’ (John 1:11,12).

That’s me. That’s you. Suddenly Israel’s restoration and glory becomes ours through Jesus. Believers in Jesus become the central figure in this Cinderella story to end all Cinderella stories. We, in our lostness, our personal desolation, sitting in our ashes, have been taken up by the royal King who comes to claim us. He washes us in baptism and re-clothes us in righteousness and glory, gives us new names of hope and beauty, and takes us to himself as his bride to love and cherish forever.

The truly wonderful thing about these verses is the great joy that the Anointed One has in doing all this. It is the Son’s delight to do this redeeming, transforming work for his Father and for us all.

We are 'the redeemed of the Lord', his crowning glory, shining to the whole world because of the Son’s work on the cross for us. What a makeover!

**Amazing Grace: how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now I’m found; was blind, but now I see! Thank you, gracious Lord! Amen.**

Tuesday 28 February 2023

**The King is coming!**

by Dr Pauline Simonsen

### The Lord has proclaimed to the end of the earth: ‘Say to daughter Zion, ‘Look, your Saviour comes’ (Isaiah 62:11a).

Read Isaiah 62:6–12

This week in our devotions, we are dwelling in the last chapters of Isaiah, which look prophetically beyond Israel’s exile in Babylon to a time of restoration. But these chapters also look further – to a time when God’s Anointed One will bring salvation and transformation not only to Israel but people everywhere in the world.

From our vantage point in history, we see how Isaiah’s prophecies are fulfilled in Jesus Christ, God’s Messiah, who brought redemption to all who believe through his death and resurrection. But we can also see Isaiah’s prophetic trajectory reaching further into the future – to the completion of these prophecies when the Messiah returns in glory to judge all with perfect justice and bring in God’s kingdom of righteousness and shalom forever. These chapters of Isaiah look towards that consummation of all history.

Our reading today yearns for that coming of the Lord. It’s portrayed as the victorious King coming to his holy city, promising his people secure possession of their land. Oh, how exciting, how triumphant, how glorious it will be when our King comes and leads us into the heavenly city of Zion! (Read Revelation 21.) There’s a wonderful picture here of the victorious King processing along the highway towards his city, gathering his people from everywhere as his reward; they stream towards him and join the great throng travelling with the King to Zion, the city of God.

Go through, go through the gates;  
    prepare the way for the people;  
... lift up an ensign over the peoples.  
The Lord has proclaimed  
    to the end of the earth:  
Say to daughter Zion,  
    ‘Look, your Saviour comes;  
his reward is with him  
    and his recompense before him.’  
They shall be called, ‘The Holy People,  
    The Redeemed of the Lord’ (Isaiah 62:10–12a).

But all this is in the future. In the meantime, the Anointed One has posted watchers and sentinels, looking for his coming, praying for his coming, reminding the Lord of his promise to come. Will you join their prayer?

When the state of our world tempts us to lose hope or to despair, let’s instead hope in the Lord! Let’s pray, ‘Your kingdom come, Lord; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’. Let’s pray, ‘Maranatha – come, Lord Jesus!’ Let’s be sentinels of hope, confidently calling to our returning King!

**Lord God, remind us when we forget that your great story is not finished yet – you have a final chapter when you make all things new! Lift up our eyes of faith to see that our King Jesus is coming to lead us home. Come, Lord Jesus, into this weary world! O, how we long for you to come!**

Wednesday 1 March 2023

**Our blood-stained Conqueror**

by Dr Pauline Simonsen

**For the day of vengeance was in my mind, and the year for my redeeming work had come (Isaiah 63:4).**

Read Isaiah 63:1–6

Our Hollywood movie today is not *Cinderella* – it’s *The Equalizer*. It’s every *Die Hard* movie, with a blood-spattered hero who single-handedly wreaks vengeance and emerges from the smoking ruins of destruction having brought victory with his own strong right arm.

This comparison with Holy Scripture might seem flippant, but read Isaiah 63:1–6 again, and picture it. A majestic, terrifying figure, his splendid clothing stained crimson, strides out of enemy territory (Edom was a long-standing enemy of Israel). A vivid Q&A interview happens, with the watchers asking, ‘who is this?’. The transfixing figure replies, ‘It is I, proclaiming victory, mighty to save’. No name is given or needed because we realise this is the Lord’s Anointed One, now Conqueror.

The watchers ask why the majestic One’s clothes are soaked crimson as if he’d been trampling grapes in a wine press, and the Conqueror takes up this familiar Old Testament image. Here the ‘grapes’ in the winepress are Israel’s enemies, upon whom the Anointed One has brought his wrath and judgement. Isaiah 63:6 is particularly graphic and terrifying, and suddenly any flippancy about the judgement of the Lord’s Anointed One shrivels in our mouths. We are face-to-face with the Holy One of Israel, who acts with sovereign power to redeem and avenge his beloved people. Israel. Us.

There is an apocalyptic sense of judgement here – this image is repeated in Revelation (Revelation 14:19,20 and Revelation 19:15), describing the wrath of God. Our 21st-century sensibilities recoil from these images of violence.

But if we look deeper into this ancient-world vision of vindicating vengeance, we see One whom we recognise. Look how the Conqueror emphasises that he alone did this work:

I looked, but there was no helper; I was abandoned, and there was no one to sustain me,  
so my own arm brought me victory, and my wrath sustained me (Isaiah 63:5).

I am reminded of Jesus in his suffering and crucifixion. ‘I looked for pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none’ (Psalm 69:20).

Jesus’ passion and death were carried alone by him; only he could do the work of salvation. He battled our worst enemies: the pervasive, crippling sin within and around us, this fallen, corrupt world, the liar and murderer Satan. He did battle with death itself.

And – thanks be to God! – our Conqueror emerged from the battle, bloodstained but victorious. He has done it. It is finished. The day of vengeance has brought us life.

***Lord Christ, we kneel in trembling awe before you, our conquering King. The lengths you have gone to in your fierce love to rescue us from our enemies! Saviour, cover us in your grace and hide us in your righteousness. We pray in your mighty name. Amen.***

Thursday 2 March 2023

**Your “God timeline”**

by Dr Pauline Simonsen

**I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord … because of all that the Lord has done for us (Isaiah 63:7).**

Read Isaiah 63:7–14

Have you ever taken time to look back over your life and trace the companionship and care of God with you over the years? It’s worth doing. It’s an exercise in faith to look back at the events of your life and see how God was present and how he acted for you in them. And also to look at the deeper undercurrents in your walk with God: the times of growth, when your faith deepened, or times of struggle or distance.

Each year, I ask my students to draw a ‘God’ timeline of their lives, including some of these times and seasons. The exercise inevitably reveals to each person again the wonderful faithfulness of our God and reminds them that their lives have purpose and direction under his Lordship.

Something like this is going on in our reading today. Isaiah looks back to ‘recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that he has done for us’. The prophet looks for the loving action of God for Israel when God saved them and showed them mercy. Isaiah’s reflections are beautiful: the God he describes is tender and compassionate, even as the same God acts with might and power on his people’s behalf.

There are times when the people rebel and grieve the Holy Spirit; there are times when they wrestle with God, and it feels like he is fighting against them (verse 10). Sound familiar? Israel’s journey is our journey, too, and we share the same weaknesses. But we also share the same God! And the Holy One of Israel, who lifted his glorious arm and divided the waters of the Red Sea to lead his people to safety, is the same God who brings each one of us through the waters of baptism into a new life in Jesus. He breathes and seals his Spirit in us, carries us through the hard times and gives us rest.

What would it do for your mind and heart today to ‘recall the gracious deeds of the Lord for you’? How might that exercise of reflective faith encourage you through the day ahead? Maybe you could recount what the Lord has done for you to someone else today and share faith and hope with them. It might just be the best, most heartening thing they hear today.

***It is good to give thanks to the Lord and sing praises to the Most High. God, it is good to proclaim your unfailing love in the morning and your faithfulness in the evening … You thrill me, Lord, with all you have done for me! I sing for joy because of what you have done. Thank you, Gracious One! Amen. (Psalm 92)***

Friday 3 March 2023

**Immanuel**

by Dr Pauline Simonsen

**You, O Lord, are our father; our Redeemer from of old is your name (Isaiah 63:16).**

Read Isaiah 63:15 – 64:9

Yesterday, we remembered and rejoiced at the goodness of God in our lives. But today, that is all behind a cloud because God is hidden from us. He seems far off in heaven, withholding his love and compassion from us. It feels like we – his dearly-loved people – are floundering and wandering aimlessly, losing our way. Where is our God?

Isaiah’s cry rises from these verses and travels over continents and centuries to every time and place since where God’s people feel shaken and abandoned. To Jewish people in pogroms and Holocaust. To persecuted Christians in countries that oppress the followers of Jesus. To tiny communities of faith struggling to survive another month. To churches wrestling with deep issues that threaten to divide and scatter.

Isaiah’s prayer speaks for us corporately – and personally – in our individual times of desolation and grief. Especially when we are burdened with our sin and utter wretchedness before God.

How hard it is to remember God’s goodness when God is silent in the face of our desolation! He seems to have forgotten that we are his beloved children! ‘O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down! … Look at us, we pray, and see that we are all your people!’

But wait. There is One here beside you, walking with you, his eyes fixed upon your face, and his ear turned to hear your cry. One who dwells within his broken church, among his tiny struggling communities, suffering beside his persecuted ones. His name is Immanuel, and he has come from heaven to be with his people. He is not far off; he is here.

And he is Lord. He is the Anointed One, the suffering Servant King, the Conqueror. He is the warrior shepherd. He is the Faithful God. He is the Son of the Father. He is the answer to Isaiah’s wondering, longings and visions. He is our God, and we are his people.

He is yours, and you are his.

When life overwhelms you with distress – whatever its source – and when the enemy tempts you to think that God has forgotten you, remember this: He is yours, and you are his.

‘For I am convinced that … [nothing] in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Romans 8:38,39).

***Draw near me, Lord Jesus, when I am lost in grief like Mary at your tomb. Call my name and lift my eyes to see you with me. Remind me of your everlasting love for me and your people. Thank you, my Saviour. Amen.***

Saturday 4 March 2023

**Pilgrimage**

by Dr Pauline Simonsen

**I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord (Psalm 121:1,2).**

Read Psalm 121

I can see it now, finally, as I look up: the City of God! It’s been such a long journey, travelling here for the Festival, but now our destination is in sight. We join together singing: ‘I lift up my eyes to hills’ – these beautiful hills of Jerusalem! Mount Zion! ‘From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.’

He keeps my life and so he will not let my foot slip on the stony road; he will shade me in the fierce noonday sun and guard me as we sleep by the road during the night. He does not slumber. He is the keeper of Israel!

And now here at last are the great gates of Jerusalem! As we go through again for another year, we sing: ‘The Lord will keep your going out and coming in, from this time on and forevermore’. Hallelujah! We are home!

I hear them singing this ‘song of ascents’, the Old Testament Jewish pilgrims going up to Jerusalem. I can imagine their joy as they draw closer, climbing up towards the city of David, the city of their hearts and hopes. The psalm speaks of the pilgrims’ travels and the physical dangers along the way. But the pilgrims trust the Keeper of Israel to guard them on the journey.

We are pilgrims, too, and our journey is towards the City of God, the heavenly Jerusalem. Like Christian from *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, we’re walking one day at a time towards our true home.  The sun gets fierce at times, the nights long and often fearful, and sometimes we stumble on the road. Evil threatens.

But then we lift our eyes again to the hills ahead, where the city of our hearts and hopes lies, and we ask, ‘Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth’. The God of creation, the God of Israel, is our God too. The great I AM revealed to Moses is the I AM revealed in John’s gospel, Jesus the Christ, Lord of all creation. He is our companion on the road who never falls asleep but vigilantly watches his children.

Today on your pilgrim journey, rest in the peace and assurance that the Lord is your keeper.

***Loving Father, always watching over us and guarding our way, give us your peace as we journey towards our home with you. Walk with us, Jesus; show us the way. Comforter Spirit, please encourage us when the journey is hard and fill us with joy. Keep our eyes on the horizon, taking the long view to your heavenly city. Amen.***

Sunday 5 March 2023

**Jesus – the door**

by Rev Antonio Reyes, President of the Lutheran Church in the Philippines

**I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture (John 10:9).**

Read John 10:1–9

A door is very important. It gives access to those coming and going out of a building. A door protects and keeps unwanted people and danger out of your home.

In John 10:9, Christ calls himself the door. What does this mean? This means that Christ Jesus alone provides access to eternal life. After the fall of man into sin, heaven’s door was closed to humanity. Only the door to damnation was open. In fact, ‘there seems to be a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death’ (Proverbs 14:12). In our hopeless condition, when heaven’s door was closed, God poured out his love for us. He sent his only Son, Jesus, to save us lost and condemned sinners.

Through Christ Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross and his resurrection, he defeated death, sin and Satan, who is the door to hell. Jesus’ resurrection on the third day opened the door to heaven for us – the entrance to the presence of God. Eternal life is ours right now through faith in Jesus, our only door to that life. Jesus is the only way … no-one can come to the Father except through him.

On Good Friday, when Jesus committed his Spirit into the hands of the Father, the curtain of the temple was torn in two (Luke 23:45,46). The curtain was torn from top to bottom and not from bottom to top. Hence, it was God’s action that opened the door to heaven for us. So, any effort of humans to reach out to God by doing good works is futile and cannot gain entry through the only door to heaven. For it is only through faith in Jesus, who is the door, that we can have forgiveness of sins and eternal life and thus entry to heaven. Through faith in Jesus, our door, we now also have access to the Father as we call on him in prayer and as he answers us through his word.

The forty days of the Lenten season are a call to repentance and remembrance – remembrance of the love of God poured out for us through Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross to pay for our sins. His resurrection, which brings eternal life to us, proved that his perfect sacrifice was accepted by the Father. This season also helps us remember to be repentant, reminding us of our sins, our mortality and appreciation for what Jesus, our door, has done and is still doing for us through the word and sacraments.

May God, the Holy Spirit, help us celebrate the Lenten season in a meaningful way. In Jesus’ name!

***Heavenly Father, we pray for the Lutheran Church in the Philippines as it commits to strengthening and equipping God’s people in the areas of witness, worship, fellowship, nurture and service. Amen.***

*The devotions from this week are taken from LCA International Mission’s* 40 Days – A Lenten Devotion and Prayer Guide. *They are written by a variety of people who are connected with LCA International Mission. Some are LCANZ members who support International Mission in different ways, and others are from partner churches throughout the region. You can download the full prayer guide from the International Mission website: https://lcamission.org.au/join-gods-mission/pray/*