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**Sunday 4 December 2022 to Sunday 11 December 2022**

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Sunday 4 December 2022

# Our helplessness is not a problem for God

by Kimberley Pfeiffer

**Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight (Matthew 3:3b).**

Read Matthew 3:1–12

Do you ever find it difficult to confess the ‘I am a poor helpless sinner’ line at church? Does it hurt your ego or your old self (as we Lutherans say), maybe just a little? Does it ever make you think about how lost we are when apart from God?

Today’s reading reminds us that it is not a bad thing to find ourselves lost and aware that we are sinners. Every one of us holds on to sins that we think are ‘most important’ to our lives. We even do this without being aware of it. Every time we set any gift of God above him, our love of those things becomes a sin. Fortunately for us, being a ‘helpless sinner’ is a prerequisite for receiving God’s mercy. And don’t we need God’s abundant mercy and grace?

We, like the people of Israel, are so lost that we even need God’s help to know how bad our situation really is. And so, as John the Baptist came to prepare the way of the Lord to make the path straight for Christ to meet us, the Holy Spirit helps us too. With the help of the Holy Spirit and through God’s proclaimed word, we can know that we are sinners in need of divine intervention. This should be easier for us as Lutherans, realising that we are simultaneously saints. By baptism, we are already grafted into God’s family, and nothing can separate us from God’s love. Yet, we still sin, and that reality can sometimes overwhelm us. So, for us as redeemed sinners, as we return to repent of our sins Sunday by Sunday, we can be encouraged because our spirit is constantly renewed. As our hearts and eyes are turned from our own will and desires, we release the control that the old self has over us, and room is made for God to enter and continue his will and work in our lives.

This Advent season, take a moment to meditate on the gift of being restored to God through repentance. Ask him to send the Holy Spirit to prepare the path to Christ in your life and help to release the sins that have kept you company. May God also help you share the blessing of this release with others as you return to serve in your family, church and community vocations.

**Merciful Father, thank you for sending John the Baptist to show your people that we cannot come to Jesus without your help. Lord, have mercy on me, a poor helpless sinner, and send me your Holy Spirit to help me realise my own sins and place them at the foot of the cross. Lord, restore the joy of your salvation and uphold me with a willing spirit. By Christ’s blood, Amen.**

Kimberley Pfeiffer is married to Pastor Joshua, and they have four children. Kimberley served in various capacities in the LCA Churchwide Office before moving to the USA at the beginning of 2022 for Joshua to complete his PhD studies. In God’s provision, Kimberley has been given the opportunity to study a Master of Arts (Theology) degree at Concordia Theological Seminary, St Louis, which she says she is enjoying very much.

Monday 5 December 2022

# Come, Lord Jesus, into this weary world

by Kimberley Pfeiffer

**Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field until there is no more room and you are made to dwell in the midst of the land (Isaiah 5:8).**

Read Isaiah 5:8–17

In yesterday’s devotion, we remembered that sometimes we cannot fully know how bad our sinful situation is without it being pointed out to us. In today’s reading, God’s prophet, Isaiah, shows God’s people how utterly helpless they are and how hopeless their situation is because they have turned away from God.

Isaiah does this through a poetic series of ‘woes’. They caused me to stop and think about the challenges the church faces in the modern western world. Consider the shrinking number of faithful members, the few baptisms, confirmations and weddings in our churches, and even the slowing funerals. Consider the desperate situations that congregations find themselves in that lead them to join their churches with neighbouring parishes because they can no longer afford a pastor - or the growing isolation between congregations in rural and remote areas. Think about the limited number of workers we have for the harvest and the few willing servants entering Christ’s ministry compared with the many who are leaving. Surely we can relate to the list of woes Isaiah presented to God’s people in his day.

Yesterday we were reminded of repentance and being restored to God. One of the gifts of this restoration is that we have full access to our Heavenly Father in prayer, so what is better than to pray for help in these times of need? Let us pray for the future of our church and that God will lead his faithful people by his word of truth. Let us pray that God will raise up workers for the harvest to serve his people in this vast land of scattered and diverse people. Let us pray for young people to enter Christ’s ministry as pastors, church workers, volunteers and teachers in Australia and New Zealand to keep the lifeblood of Christ flowing in our churches. And let us thank God for Christ, who entered our troubled world to die for us to make his glory known on the cross. Let us ask him again to come, Lord Jesus, come. To remain with us as our strength and shield as we face the challenges facing his church in these days.

**Gracious Father, thank you for sending Jesus to give us access to you. Thank you for giving us repentance to give us a clear path to you. Now, Lord, hear our prayer, have mercy on your church on earth and send us workers to labour in your harvest. Encourage and strengthen our pastors to proclaim your word of grace and truth in love to a world that does not know its need for you. Through your Son, Jesus, we pray, Amen.**

Tuesday 6 December 2022

# Turn and be healed

by Kimberley Pfeiffer

**Behold this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for (Isaiah 6:7).**

Read Isaiah 6:1–13

Isaiah is freaking out! He knows no-one can see the face of the Lord and live (Exodus 33:20), and he just had a vision and saw God! He said, ‘Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!’ Many people think it would be cool to have a ‘spiritual experience’ like the shepherds in the field or Peter in the boat with Jesus, but the most common reaction in the Bible to a divine appearance is to be struck with fear.

Surprisingly, Isaiah was not harmed but healed by touching his lips with hot coal carried by a seraph, who said, ‘Behold this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for’. He was cleansed by God’s mercy so that he could be commissioned to do God’s work. Isaiah was then sent back to God’s people to show them their sins and urge them to return to God and be healed.

The words God gives to Isaiah to speak to his people in these verses point out that they have no way of truly knowing their need, let alone God’s wisdom, without God’s help. Isaiah tells them their eyes will continue to be blind, their hearts dull, and their hearing will have no understanding unless they return to God. When Isaiah asked God, ‘How long will it take for this healing to occur?’, God told him it would not happen until things were completely desperate and their hope looked like a dead stump in the ground.

But those in faith know that in the Bible, the stump is not just the place of something that was and is no longer, but that in God, it is a place where God creates new life out of what is seemingly nothing. Jesus is the shoot from the stump of Jesse. Through Jesus, God recreates his vision of new life in the world. Jesus is the only way for us to find God’s peace.

When God’s people learned this, some 700 years before Christ’s birth, though their hope may have seemed foolish to the world, it sustained them because it centred on Christ. Like the faithful who have gone before us, our eyes, ears and hearts can become dulled unless our spirit is constantly renewed by God’s healing gift of faith given to us through God’s word and sacrament.

**Merciful Father, thank you for showing your mercy to your people of old and giving them hope in Christ long before he was born. Help us not to grow dull of hearing your life-giving word. Let it create and nourish our faith in you. Thank you for revealing yourself to us through your word and sacrament. By your mercy, renew our hope through Jesus Christ and grant us the peace that surpasses all human understanding. Amen.**

Wednesday 7 December 2022

# The cross is our sign of hope

by Kimberley Pfeiffer

**Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14b).**

Read Isaiah 7:10–25

I recently heard a Christian woman speak about a period of great suffering in her life, where she prayed for and received a very tangible sign of hope from God amid her despair. In today’s reading, we find how common it is in Scripture for God to give signs to his people in their suffering to remind them of his faithfulness. God commanded Isaiah to go to King Ahaz and urge him to remain steady in faith because war was about to erupt around him. God offered Ahaz a sign. He said it could be as big or small as he liked, but King Ahaz didn’t take God up on his offer. He said, ‘I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test’. Although King Ahaz sounds a bit stoic and slightly pious to ‘not put God to the test’, his sentiment was not a good way to respond to God. Why? Because King Ahaz didn’t want to accept God’s sign and depend fully on God. If he did, he would be required to wait in hope for that sign to be fulfilled.

Even though Ahaz lacked faith, this story reminds us of God’s character. God cannot be anything other than faithful and merciful; his graciousness is not dependent on how fickle his people are. Even when they didn’t want to receive his mercy, God overarched their story so that his name could be magnified and proclaimed on all the earth (Romans 9:17). Despite King Ahaz’s hard heart, God gave his people a sign so shocking that when it came to pass, it couldn’t be counted as anything but a miracle from God. What was this sign? ‘Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel.’

As Christians living in these end times, we know God has already redeemed us through his Son, who was born of the virgin, as Isaiah prophesied. Like King Ahaz, our faith can grow weak when we do not trust completely in God. Our hope is found by way of the cross. Through Christ’s suffering, death and resurrection, he has won for us new life in him. We have hope in our own sufferings because, by our own crosses, we are encouraged because we know that through it, God is with us and for us and will be to the very end of the age.

**Merciful God, grant us the faith to trust in your promises and cling to you in hope. Help us along life’s way, especially when we are suffering. Grow our faith in you so we can remain firmly grafted in your love now and in eternity. Through Christ, our Lord, Amen.**

Thursday 8 December 2022

# Hope in suffering

by Kimberley Pfeiffer

**There will be no gloom for her who was in anguish (Isaiah 9:1).**

Read Isaiah 8:16 – 9:1

In 1518, Martin Luther introduced a new way of thinking to the church that he called a ‘theologian of the cross’. In his Heidelberg Disputation, Luther encouraged Christians not to be theologians of glory who only look to good things as signs of God’s presence and favour. On the other hand, a theologian of the cross understands that even and especially in suffering, God is present and at work – just as he was at Christ’s death on the cross. This is a helpful lens for us as we read today’s reading and as we realise that God is urging his people to become theologians of the cross. God asks them to put their trust in his promise because a time of tribulation is coming, and they will see God’s glory revealed by their faithfulness.

After Isaiah spoke God’s prophecy about Christ, he gave directions for it to be bound and sealed for history’s sake. Then, he went on to say the only thing to be done was to wait and rest their hope in God. Isaiah told God’s people that this would not be an easy season because God would be hiding his face from the house of Jacob.

The other aspect of being theologians of the cross is knowing that though we will not be spared suffering, we will be given hope through it. So, we know that we need not fear struggling as though it will destroy us because it is through suffering that God’s glory is revealed. As Scripture says, ‘there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish’ (Isaiah 9:1). This cannot simply be comprehended by worldly wisdom. So, lift up your heart. Wait for the Lord. Christ is coming, as he did on that first Christmas. Thanks be to God.

**Dear ever-present God, give us hope to trust in your promises when we struggle amid life’s trials. Strengthen our faith in you through these challenges and keep us secure in Christ in faith. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Friday 9 December 2022

# Let us live our lives by the Light

by Kimberley Pfeiffer

**The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness – on them a light has shined (Isaiah 9:2).**

Read Isaiah 9:2–7

Generic spirituality continues to thrive even in our secular culture. People want spirituality without religion. They want the ‘divine light’ without being responsible to the Divine. Many different little ‘lights’ compete for our attention. They each can illuminate one small part of life, but none light the whole or, more importantly, penetrate the darkest places of our souls.

Today’s reading is the prophecy about the coming of Christ, the Divine Light, into the darkness of the world. Jesus said, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life’ (John 8:12). God the Father has revealed himself to us in Christ so that by him, we are given true light to see all the little lights for what they are. To paraphrase Martin Luther, it is by the light of the cross that we can see a thing for what it actually is.

This will seem foolish to your non-Christian family and friends, who think they can see clearly a way of life that works for them. I also know that Christmas is a time of pain for Christian mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters and friends who grieve for the lack of faith in the lives of their loved ones. So, take a moment to pray to God through Christ, by the Holy Spirit, to draw those you know into Christ’s light. Ask in boldness because you are a child of the light given the gift of faith in Christ, who intercedes to the Father on your behalf. Ask God to light up the lives of your loved ones this Christmas. May Christ’s abundant light illuminate your faces, homes and churches, pointing the way to his kingdom.

**Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for giving us the gift of light and life and every good thing because of the sacrifice of your Son. Renew our hearts to receive Christ this Advent – our true light. We ask you to shine your light on those who walk in darkness. Bathe us in the light of your Spirit so we can be beacons of light for your glory through Christ. Amen.**

Saturday 10 December 2022

# God is bigger than we know

by Kimberley Pfeiffer

**Blessed are those … whose hope is in the Lord their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, who keeps faith forever (Psalm 146:5,6).**

Read Psalm 146:5–10

In 1882, Friedrich Nietzsche provocatively wrote, ‘God is dead. And we have killed him’. What he meant is that God, who used to be our highest value, now has no value. Yesterday, we reflected on the little lights of the world that are competing for our attention and promising to make life better. Some commentators argue that these things have such sway because we are now living in a time of ‘normal nihilism’, meaning that we cannot help but think of ourselves as choice-makers shopping in a ‘values marketplace’. This raises the question: where does that leave God?

Today’s psalm reminds us of who God is – the ‘maker of heaven and earth’. We are his creatures, and no matter how prevalent the dominant ideas of our age are, they cannot change God and his nature. God has broken into our world and has chosen us like he chose Jacob and gave him his promise. Jesus died and rose from the dead to give us new life in him and the gift of faith through his word and sacraments into eternity. Further, he has given us a helper, the Holy Spirit, who is with us in our every trial and joins our prayers to Jesus, our great High Priest.

Nietzsche was kind of right. We did kill God when Jesus was crucified, but even death could not hold him down. Jesus rose to reign in time and eternity. Our God is not a God of our own making. We don’t need to defend God or present God as a reasonable option in the marketplace of ideas, nor do we need to be embarrassed because people cannot see who God is by his light. Instead, we are called to share our hope, speak his life-giving word and trust that the Holy Spirit will be at work through that proclamation. Indeed, this truly surpasses all human understanding. So, thanks be to God for his goodness and mercy to us. Let us pray with the psalmist: ‘Praise the Lord!’

**Dear Heavenly Father, forgive me for allowing my culture to cast doubt in my heart about the power of your word. Restore to me a new and right spirit so that I can continually sing psalms of praise. Praise God, from whom all blessings flow. Praise him, all creatures here below. Praise him above, ye heavenly host. Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.**

Sunday 11 December 2022

# Jesus’ encouraging word for the truth-tellers

by Pastor Matt Bishop

**When John, who was in prison … (Matthew 11:2).**

Read Matthew 11:2–11

Truth-tellers of God’s word often end up being badly treated. This is despite the sacred office they hold. An early New Testament example is John the Baptist languishing in Herod’s gaol for daring to call out Herod’s sexual promiscuity. He eventually lost his head in the climax of a salacious booze-filled party.

Jesus was impaled with nails on a cross at the hands of the mob. Stephen was stoned for speaking the wisdom the Holy Spirit gave him. During the European Reformations, Brother Henry of Zütphen, a student of Martin Luther’s, was burned at the stake in Meldorf, Germany, for his Reformation teaching. Scottish Lutheran Sir Patrick Hamilton, a former faculty member of St Andrews University in Scotland and famous for his focus on preaching properly distinguished law and gospel, was burned at the stake in 1528. In the 20th century, there was Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s martyrdom at the hands of the Third Reich. Closer to home is the poor treatment that Hermann Sasse, Bonhoeffer’s one-time colleague on the Bethel declaration of 1933, received up to the end of World War II and its aftermath. Sasse eventually took up a position at the then-Immanuel Seminary in North Adelaide, South Australia, in 1949.

In today’s reading, Jesus doesn’t try to address the evident injustice John is facing. He just points to his kingdom work of restoration. ‘The blind receive sight, the lame walk … the good news is proclaimed to the poor’ (verse 5). In times of persecution, this is the truth Jesus will keep pointing us to. It’s the only truth that will stand the test of time. And he adds this beautiful beatitude of promise, ‘Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me’ (verse six), meaning, blessed are the ones who can accept the truth that Jesus’ cross –horrific and counterintuitive as it is – is the means by which we have peace with God and deep, lasting life.

History tells us that we shouldn’t be surprised if the world, governing agencies and even our churches treat God’s truth-tellers poorly. But history also tells us that Jesus has not badly treated us – despite our sins – and has acted to restore all those who walk in his truth.

**Gracious God, help us when we suffer for speaking your word of truth. Help us to always speak your truth in love with gentleness, respect, great patience and careful instruction.**

Pastor Matt Bishop serves the congregation and primary school at St Paul Lutheran Church Blair Athol, in South Australia, and is chair of the LCANZ General Pastors Conference. He is married to Melissa, delights in his three young adult daughters, and enjoys caring for his five chickens and five budgerigars. He says he would like to spend more time at Venus Bay on South Australia’s Eyre Peninsula fishing for King George Whiting, but he loves being both a pastor (mostly) and sharing the gospel with everyone God puts in his path (always).