

19th Sunday after Trinity
Gospel: Matthew 9.1–8, esp. v. 2
18 October, 2009
St. John's Ev.-Luth. Church (LC–MS), Topeka, Kansas

❖ in nomine Iesu ❖

Dear fellow-redeemed: grace be unto you and peace from God our heavenly Father and from the Lord Jesus. Amen.

What wouldn't you give to know what's in someone's head? You can maybe think about what kind of power or what kind of reassurances you could have if you knew what your parents, or your boss or your friends or even your spouse was thinking—about you!

How much more the case in matters dealing with us and God. As we walk through this life that seems like nothing more than a living death, filled with suffering, filled with sorrows and pains, filled with disappointments: how important for us to know what God thinks of us, to know how God is disposed toward us.

“That cancer I was just diagnosed with—is it a sign of God's displeasure toward me for what I did 20 years ago? My inability to get and hold down a job, why? Why is God doing this to me? What have I done to deserve this? What's going on? Does God frown on me? My depression that I just can't seem to shake; my child going off to college under the burden of a shaken faith; my uncertainty about my own future. God's in control. That much I know. But then how come things are like they are? He must frown. He must be ill-disposed toward me.”

That's what happens when read God out of what happens in life. God is hidden behind all these things. That is, the God who fills my life with disappointments, who strikes me with cancer, who takes my spouse from me, who allows my child's faith to be shaken, who takes from me every security in life—that God's intentions toward me are hidden behind all those things. I vascillate between moments of euphoria, utter euphoria—the birth of a child, the birth of grandchild, a milestone achievement in my career—and moments of utter depression. And when I try to discern what God thinks of *me*, how God is minded toward *me*, in the midst of all that, I am driven to insanity.

Worse yet, no matter how depressed, how euphoric I might be, this I know for sure: I shall die. The God who is control of all things will lay me six feet under, a cold, lifeless corpse, a fitting conclusion to a life of uncertainty and suffering. And such a God, such a God like that who's hidden behind the events of life and death, the hidden God, looks like the devil himself.

If you think this way, you're not alone. What do you think God looked like to the paralytic who was laid before Jesus? It had perhaps begun innocently enough with a playful child's dive into the Sea of Galilea. But then in an instant, it all changed: his head struck a rock on the bottom or waterlogged timber. Brief pain shooting through his body. And then....then, nothing. His friends dragged him, with no power to move, from the lake. “Will it come back? When will I be able to shift my weight and roll over?” he

must have thought. But the first five minutes turned into an hour turned into day turned into week turned into a month, a year, a decade—a lifetime. “Surely God frowns on me. Surely God doesn’t care. Or if He does, He’s using this as payback.” What else could the paralytic have concluded? That’s just how the God hidden behind struggles of my life, the struggles of your life, the struggles of the paralytic’s life looks.

And what wouldn’t we give to know what He really thinks? What He really thinks of *me*? Whole, entire religious systems have been dedicated to this: Catholic monasticism, Catholic penance, the evangelicals’ gospel of succe\$\$, our own little religiosities and pieties meant to turn away God’s displeasure. “If I can just kick this habit,” so I reason, “then I’ll turn the tables. I’ll make myself pleasing to God. He’ll change His mind about me. He’ll give me success in everything I do. If I pray fervently enough like a good pious person, even for others and not just myself, He’ll remove this awful disease from me.”

That’s how we deal with the God hidden behind our life and His Law. And when He doesn’t deliver, or when He delivers for a time—like with Job—but then takes it all away, He’s even scarier, more terrifying, completely untrustworthy. Because then it’s apparent to me that for my sins, for my sinfulness, for my failures to live according to His Law, nothing can be done to save myself. And I am desperate. I cry out with King David—I must cry out with King David:

“The waters have come up to my neck.
 I sink in deep mire,
 where there is no foothold;
 I have come into deep waters,
 and the flood sweeps over me.
 I am weary with my crying out;
 my throat is parched.
 My eyes grow dim
 with waiting for my God.
 More in number than the hairs of my head
 are those who hate me without cause;
 mighty are those who would destroy me,
 those who attack me with lies.
 What I did not steal
 must I now restore?
 O God, you know my folly;
 the wrongs I have done are not hidden from you.” [Ps. 69]

What then we wouldn’t give to know what God thinks of us, how He is minded toward us, what His intentions are. What wouldn’t the paralytic have given just *to know*?

And then, in a moment, in an unexpected moment, God in Christ lifts the veil. God in Christ bridges the gap between His hidden self and the paralytic who needs an answer. God in Christ brings into focus what was distorted by His hiddenness refracted through the Law. God in Christ breaks the silence He had maintained and speaks to the paralytic and says to him, “Take heart, My son, your sins are forgiven you.”

In those words and in that Person, every distortion, every element of the hidden mind of God is brought to light, and He calls *you* son. He calls *you* daughter. He calls *you* child. Because in those words and in that Person, He removes sin. God in Christ steps out from behind His mask and delivers a certain Word, a Word that opposes every uncertain deduction you make about God on the basis of events in your life. In Christ, the One you could not be certain about becomes the One in whom you can have every certainty and assurance and reassurance. In Christ, God enters the fray on your behalf and Himself opposes every evil in your life.

When Christ speaks those words to the paralytic, He's saying, "You had no heart, you had no courage, because when you tried to understand God apart from Me, you could only come to the most pessimistic of conclusions. But I tell you: Take heart. Because in Me, God has come to men. In Me, God Himself has borne your sins. In Me, God Himself has carried your sorrows and your pains. It is I who am forsaken by God, for you, not you. It is I who carry the chastisement of us all. And if I carry it for all, there's nothing left for you to carry. No burden of sin, no burden of sorrow, no burden of suffering but that I don't remove it. So take heart."

What words! That God should see the paralytic as he really is—a sinner—and should still call him son. That God Himself should remove the paralytic's sins, should forgive them, by taking them upon Himself. That God should look at the paralytic, bowed down in depression, suffering, uncertainty, come to his side, and say, "Take heart."

Fellow-redeemed: Those words are so powerful that they did what they said to the paralytic; they were so powerful that they later healed the man of his paralysis. And in their power, they are restless—restless words that Jesus made into an authority given to men, restless words recorded for our learning for all time on the pages of Holy Scripture, restless words that leap off the pages of the Bible into the congregation of saints, here, at St. John's, where they continue to do what they did to the paralytic. No relics, these words. No mere records of events past. But living, active, powerful words on the lips of servants Christ Himself has given to speak them. To you. "I forgive you your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." "I wash you in water connected with God's promise for the forgiveness of your sins." "I give you the Body of Christ, the Blood of Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins."

And those restless words are impatient words. They want to do what they say and so they are impatient of a hearing—your hearing. They seek to be heard *by you*. They seek to oppose themselves to what you imagine God does, might, could think about you. They seek to set the record straight, for you. They seek to disclose to you the heart of God, God's intention for you, revealed in Jesus Christ.

Who can hear these words and know their source and still hold try to understand God in His hiddenness? Who can hear these words and know their source and still try to *do something* to get into the good graces of the hidden God? Who can hear these words and know their source and still think that even in the midst of the greatest suffering, even in the midst of death, they have a mysterious, remote, hidden God and not a God who is with them, who is on their side, who has conquered sin, death, and the devil, who in

their very flesh has quenched the fires of hell for them? If the words themselves have their way, none can and none will.

So, fellow-redeemed: as you walk through this life, filled with sorrows, cares, suffering, and death wondering about what God thinks about you, look no further than Christ's words falling off the lips of your pastor, coming to you in your Baptism, entering your mouth in Holy Communion. Because they all say the same thing: Take heart, My son, My daughter, My child; your sins are forgiven you. In those words you have everything, because where there is the forgiveness of sins, there is life and salvation. That is how God is minded toward you; that is His intention toward you; that's what He thinks of you.

God the Father grant it through the Holy Spirit for the sake of Jesus Christ His Son our Lord. Amen.

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