Guide for the Preparation for Worship on 7 April 2024

AM Worship
Call to Worship: Psalm 98:1-3
Opening Hymn: 249 For the Beauty of the Earth
Confession of Sin
O eternal God and merciful Father, we humble ourselves before your great majesty, against which we have frequently and grievously sinned. We acknowledge that we deserve nothing less than eternal death, that we are unclean before you and children of wrath. We continually transgress your commandments, failing to do what you have commanded, and doing that which you have expressly forbidden. We acknowledge our waywardness, and are heartily sorry for all our sins. We are not worthy to be called your children, nor to lift up our eyes heavenward to you in prayer. Nevertheless, O Lord God and gracious Father, we know that your mercy toward those who turn to you is infinite; and so we take courage to call upon you, trusting in our Mediator Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Forgive all our sins for Christ's sake. Cover us with his innocence and righteousness, for the glory of your name. Deliver our understanding from all blindness, and our hearts from all willfulness and rebellion, we pray through Jesus Christ, our Redeemer.
Assurance of Pardon: Psalm 103:11-13
Psalm of Preparation: 102B Thou, O Lord, Art God Alone
Old Covenant Reading: Jonah 1:17-2:10
New Covenant Reading: Matthew 15:39-16:4
Sermon: *The Blinding Power of Sin, The Greater Power of God*
Hymn of Response: 436 My Faith Has Found a Resting Place
Confession of Faith: Nicene Creed (p. 852)
Doxology (Hymn 568)
Closing Hymn: 422 We Rest on Thee

PM Worship
116B I love the Lord, the Found of Life and Grace 1-5
116B I Love the Lord, the Fount of Life and Grace 6-10
447 Christ, of All My Hopes the Ground
Old Covenant Reading: Psalm 116
New Covenant Reading: Philippians 1:19-26
Sermon Title: Whether by Life or by Death

Adult Sunday School: Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 32

Q. Since we have been delivered
from our misery
by grace through Christ
without any merit of our own,
why then should we do good works?

A. Because Christ, having redeemed us by his blood,
is also renewing us by his Spirit into his image,

so that with our whole lives
we may show that we are thankful to God
for his benefits,
and that he may be praised through us,
and further,
so that we may be assured of our faith by its fruits,
and by our godly living
our neighbors may be won over to Christ.

Q. Can those be saved
who do not turn to God
from their ungrateful
and unrepentant ways?

A. By no means.
Scripture tells us that
no unchaste person,
no idolater, adulterer, thief,
no covetous person,
no drunkard, slanderer, robber,
or the like
will inherit the kingdom of God.

Suggested Preparations

Monday (4/1) Read and discuss Matthew 15:39-6:4

And after sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan.

And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah." So he left them and departed. (ESV)

Leon Morris writes:

> A generation here signifies the people alive at that time. [Jesus] castigates it as evil, for it has turned away from goodness and right. It is also adulterous, for it is false to its vows; it professed to be the people of God but walked in the ways of the evil one. It looks for a sign; it directs its energies to sign-seeking but, Jesus says, this is all in vain; the generation in question will not get the sign it seeks. The only sign it [will receive] will be the sign of Jonah (a prophet mentioned in the New Testament only by Matthew (5 times) and Luke (4 times); each time the name is used in

connection with the Jews' demand for a sign). At this point Jesus says no more, but in 12:38-40 He makes it clear that the sign of Jonah was that prophet's reappearance after being in the belly of the great fish for three days and three nights. The resurrection of Jesus would be a sign comparable with this. But the point is not elaborated. Jesus leaves them to think over the sign of Jonah. Matthew says simply that Jesus left them.

Read or sing Hymn 249 For the Beauty of the Earth

Tuesday (4/2) Read and discuss Luke 24:1-12.

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise." And they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened. (ESV)

Christ is Risen! And that changes everything!

In light of the rest of the New Testament, it is natural and right for us to think of the numerous blessings that we enjoy because Christ is risen, exalted, and seated at His Father's right hand:

1. Because Christ is risen, we have been forgiven and justified.
2. Because Christ is risen, we have a Great High priest – enthroned in heaven – who ever lives to make intercession for us.
3. Because Christ is risen, the Holy Spirit has been richly given to us … so that God the Holy Spirit dwells with us … and in us.

Those are fantastic truths, and we could all add many more. But I would like for you to focus, this morning, on two blessings which would have been more immediately obvious to His first Disciples:

1. First, the resurrection means that Jesus has conquered death. Therefore, Jesus is Lord and Caesar isn't. This will have profound ramifications for the Church as we see throughout the book of Acts and it is also worth remembering in our own day.

Because Christ is risen, ascended into heaven, and seated at the right hand of Almighty God, He is the King who commands our destiny.

2. Second, because Christ is risen, every Christian can know that one day we too will be raised and glorified to live and reign with Him forever.

This should put everything else about your current life into perspective. As Rico Tice puts it: "For the Christian, the worse thing … is never the last thing."

I like that. This is a saying that I want to keep reminding myself of in the coming week.

> "For the Christian, the worse thing … is never the last thing."

When I think back over the past four years, it is easy to see why so many of our neighbors, and not a few of us, feel so discouraged. The Covid pandemic has been wearing for all of us and for some of us it also involved the profound loss of parents or other loved ones. Our political situation is a complete mess. The war in Ukraine is more than 2 years old and the combination of inflation and interest rates has made it harder and harder for young people to even imagine purchasing their first homes.

We live in a fallen world where beautiful summer days, great music, and warm friendships are mixed with unemployment, personal conflicts, physical decline, and even serious disease and debilitating injuries.

If you listen to too much news, or spend too much time on social media, you can easily become discouraged that the economy is going to collapse, that China is going to invade Taiwan, or that the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is going to spiral out of control into a regional or even a global war.

And not one of us can know for certain that any or even all of these things are definitely not going to take place.

Nevertheless …

> "For the Christian, … the worse thing is never the last thing."

Whatever darkness we are facing, will one day be swallowed up by light and life. Because Christ is risen, we know that one day we too will be raised, we will be set free from corruption, and we will be like Him for we shall see Him as He is!

Read or sing Hymn 102B Thou, O Lord, Art God Alone

Wednesday (4/3) Read and discuss Jonah 1:17-2:10

And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, saying,

> "I called out to the LORD, out of my distress,
> and he answered me;
> out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
> and you heard my voice.
> For you cast me into the deep,
> into the heart of the seas,
> and the flood surrounded me;
> all your waves and your billows
> passed over me.
> Then I said, 'I am driven away
> from your sight;
> yet I shall again look
> upon your holy temple.'
> The waters closed in over me to take my life;
> the deep surrounded me;
> weeds were wrapped about my head
> at the roots of the mountains.
> I went down to the land
> whose bars closed upon me forever;
> yet you brought up my life from the pit,
> O LORD my God.
> When my life was fainting away,
> I remembered the LORD,
> and my prayer came to you,
> into your holy temple.
> Those who pay regard to vain idols
> forsake their hope of steadfast love.
> But I with the voice of thanksgiving
> will sacrifice to you;
> what I have vowed I will pay.
> Salvation belongs to the LORD!"
>
> And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. (ESV)

Kevin Youngblood writes:

> Of particular significance is Jesus' appeal to Jonah as a sign pointing toward Jesus' resurrection. A Jewish homily that circulated sometime between the first century BC and the 2nd century AD, preserved in the Armenian translation, refers to Jonah's expulsion from the fish as a "sign of rebirth." This same terminology resurfaces in the rabbinic work *Pirque Rabbi Eliezer* with reference to the mariners' witnessing Jonah's deliverance:

> The sailors saw all the signs, the miracles, and the great wonders which the Holy One blessed be He, did unto Jonah, and they stood and they cast away everyone his god, as it is said, "They that regard lying vanities forsake their own shame."

The word Eliezer uses for "signs," is the term one typically finds in commission narratives related to the confirmatory sign Yahweh bestows on His chosen agents (Exod 3:12; Judg 6:17). Thus early Jewish tradition apparently recognized Jonah as a sign in keeping with the story's nature as a commission narrative. This term entered into the NT via the Septuagint's preferred Greek equivalent for the word, the very term Matthew applies to the Jonah sign.

The sign of Jonah underscores Jesus' resurrection as the decisive sign of His divine commission. As Paul argued in 1 Corinthians 15, the entire gospel hinges on the resurrection. Therefore, the church must never waiver from her commitment to the centrality of this truth.

Sing or Read Hymn 436 My Faith Has Found a Resting Place

Thursday (4/4) Read and discuss Psalm 116.

I love the LORD, because he has heard
my voice and my pleas for mercy.
Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.
The snares of death encompassed me;
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;
I suffered distress and anguish.
Then I called on the name of the LORD:
"O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!"

Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;
our God is merciful.
The LORD preserves the simple;
when I was brought low, he saved me.
Return, O my soul, to your rest;
for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.

For you have delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling;
I will walk before the LORD
in the land of the living.

I believed, even when I spoke:

"I am greatly afflicted";
I said in my alarm,
"All mankind are liars."

What shall I render to the LORD
for all his benefits to me?
I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the LORD,
I will pay my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people.

Precious in the sight of the LORD
is the death of his saints.
O LORD, I am your servant;
I am your servant, the son of your maidservant.
You have loosed my bonds.
I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving
and call on the name of the LORD.
I will pay my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people,
in the courts of the house of the LORD,
in your midst, O Jerusalem.
Praise the LORD! (ESV)

Tim Keller writes:

> The psalmist almost died (verses 3 and 8). In his fear he called everyone a liar (verse 11), but he trusted God even when his emotions were out of control (verse 10). Now he has restructured his life on the basis of grateful love. The first mark of a thankful life is this: "I will call on Him as long as a I live" (verse 2). To call on God's name means two things in the Bible – to trust in Him and nothing else for your salvation (Romans 10:12-13) and to orient your whole life to prayer and worship (Genesis12:8). Grateful people should also walk before God (verse 9). This means to live conscious of Him at all times. It is to be both "wholly exposed [and accountable] but wholly befriended [and loved]. Love the LORD, for He listens.

Friday (4/5) Read and discuss Philippians 1:19-26.

For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.

But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again. (ESV)

Having the right goals in life is quite important. If you can only be happy if you become the CEO of Apple Computer, you are probably going to be quite disappointed. If your desire is to be stunningly beautiful, you will probably be quite discouraged if you live far into middle age. The truth is, even the most beautiful models will eventually see their outward appearance fade away. On the other hand, if your deepest desire is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever – then you are absolutely in a win-win situation. The Apostle Paul is locked in a Roman prison and facing the possibility of death. Let's be honest, most of us would find this to be horribly depressing circumstances. Paul himself recognizes that he faces the most difficult of dilemmas. In fact, he doesn't even know which one to choose. On the one hand, death means going to be with Christ – which Paul describes as "far better". We need to be careful here. Paul is not romanticizing death which he elsewhere describes as "the last enemy". Death is the brutal consequence of sin and it is something worth weeping over. Remember that Jesus Himself wept over the death of His friend Lazarus whom He was about to raise from the dead. What Paul is getting at is that Christ has taken the sting out of death by turning it from a destination to a passageway for us. On the other side of death believers will live, free from sin, with Jesus forever. Given the sufferings of this present age, who wouldn't want to depart and be with Christ now? Nevertheless, there is something that we can do right now that we will not be able to do in heaven. Right now we can serve Jesus by working for the good of our brothers and sisters in Christ and by sharing the gospel with unbelievers. In light of this truth, Paul tells the Philippians, "It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." May that be our expectation and hope as well.

Read or sing Hymn 422 We Rest on Thee

Saturday (4/6) Read and discuss Matthew 15:39-6:4

And after sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan.

And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah." So he left them and departed. (ESV)

Tom Wright comments:

Our generation is bombarded with signs. Drive along a city street, especially at night, and your eyes will be dazzled with signs of all sorts. Some of them are necessary to tell you where to go and where not to go: if you ignore red and green lights you will be in danger. Others are merely for decoration and information, pointing to particular buildings or illuminating them. Many others are designed to catch your imagination - and your money. Advertisements twinkle and flash enticingly until their message has worked its way into your memory.

Part of growing up is learning to distinguish signs that matter, which must be obeyed, from signs that don't matter, that can (and perhaps should) be ignored. Something of the same puzzle faces us as we read the gospels. Sometimes Jesus does things which He Himself speaks of as 'signs.' Particularly in John's gospel, but also in the others, some of His powerful deeds, especially His healings, are seen as signs of who He is, signs that the disciples at least, and probably others as well, are meant to notice, to 'read,' to understand.

But when the Pharisees and Sadducees ask for a sign, something different is going on. (They didn't normally work together; they must have regarded this as something of an emergency.) Matthew says they were trying to catch Him out; it was a test, a trick. Perhaps they were wanting to accuse Him again of being in league with the devil (see 12:24-45). Perhaps Jesus saw their challenge as being like the cynicism of Israel in the wilderness, putting God to the test to see whether He was really among them or not (Exodus 17:1-7). In any case, Jesus refused to comply with the request. He would not perform signs to order, as though He has to pass some kind of test. To do so would be to treat God Himself as a kind of circus performer.

Prayer: Please lift up tomorrow's morning and evening worship services.