

Devotions for the Third Week of Easter – April 15-17, 2024

Monday of Easter III – Prayer of the Week

O God, through the humiliation of Your Son You raised up the fallen world. Grant to Your faithful people, rescued from the peril of everlasting death, perpetual gladness and eternal joys; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

As a pastor it has been my privilege to preside at quite a few weddings. As a professor I got to do some more. Weddings are fun. I enjoy them. I especially like pre-marital counseling, getting to know these young people and talking about their wedding day and what happens next. It is that next part that sometimes gets interesting. I find that a lot of folks get wrapped up in the planning for a big day but do not really put half as much thought into what happens over the subsequent decades.

This prayer notices that we have been rescued from everlasting death. That is Easter Day and its corollary at the end of time when we are all raised from death. We have been rescued from the peril of death, but now what? The prayer is for what happens next. We pray for perpetual gladness and eternal joy. That is important. For an eternal life on the trajectory in which I find my current sin-filled life would not be heavenly, it would be hellish. If I lived forever but sinned like I do now, within a century or so I would probably be ostracized from community, lonely and doomed to an eternal loneliness.

We pray for eternal joy. In order to have that joy I will have to be a different sort of person. And so we might come back to the first sentence of this prayer. Through Jesus' humiliation on the cross and in his death, God has raised up the fallen world. That raising is not just making me alive and restoring to me a physical health which sin, age, time, disease, or violence has taken from me. It means rebuilding me from the ground up. God has a great deal of raising up to do in us. Praise him today. He answers this prayer. In lives gifted with Christ's forgiveness, patience, kindness, and humility, we get a taste of that eternal joy and perpetual gladness today, a taste which will become a great feast on the last day.

Tuesday of Easter III – Acts 3:11-21

¹¹ While he clung to Peter and John, all the people, utterly astounded, ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's. ¹² And when Peter saw it he addressed the people: "Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk? ¹³ The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. ¹⁴ But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, ¹⁵ and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.

¹⁶ And his name—by faith in his name—has made this man strong whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all.

¹⁷ “And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. ¹⁸ But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. ¹⁹ Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, ²⁰ that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, ²¹ whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago.

A few years ago, as I walked to my office at Concordia, I saw on the street by the entrance to campus a beautiful little blue VW Golf whose front fender, and only the front fender, had been ripped off. It was hanging from the front of the car. It had clearly been the victim of some terrible violence and the nature of the accident meant that it had to have happened right there. The car could not be driven as it was. What could have done such a thing?

I learned later that a delivery truck had taken a left turn from the narrow street where the car was parked. The rear bumper of the truck had swung out as the truck turned, caught the fender of the VW, and destroyed it. The truck’s driver, insulated from the sound and vibration by the loud diesel engine and mass of the truck, did not even know he had done this. He delivered his wares to Concordia’s kitchen and left by the other exit. From reports I heard, when they confronted him with the pictures of the carnage later that day, he was appalled at what he had unwittingly done.

The crowds in this reading rush to Peter and John today after the lame man at the temple has been healed and gone running and leaping through the temple courts praising God. They want to see what has happened, but Peter has some disquieting news for them. This is all because they have slaughtered the Messiah, the Author of Life, the long-promised Holy One of God. Can you imagine hearing that news? The lame man walking was like the photo shown to the delivery truck driver – what Peter said was true. God was authenticating Peter’s words with the miracle. They had indeed killed Jesus and Jesus was everything Peter said. What must have run through their hearts that day when they heard these words?

Peter goes on to encourage them to repent and be reconciled to the resurrected Christ. Has your life resulted in some collateral damage, some carnage in your wake? Every sinner can look back on at least one relationship harmed, one shameful moment. If Peter could offer these words to the people who had shouted “Crucify!” a few months earlier, know and believe, these words are for you too. Repent, make amends with those whom you have hurt and receive the piece of God. Times of refreshing come to you, better than insurance payments or even a new VW Golf.

Wednesday of Easter III – Psalm 4

- ¹ Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness!
You have given me relief when I was in distress.
Be gracious to me and hear my prayer!
- ² O men, how long shall my honor be turned into shame?
How long will you love vain words and seek after lies? Selah
- ³ But know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself;
the LORD hears when I call to him.
- ⁴ Be angry, and do not sin;
ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent. Selah
- ⁵ Offer right sacrifices,
and put your trust in the LORD.
- ⁶ There are many who say, “Who will show us some good?
Lift up the light of your face upon us, O LORD!”
- ⁷ You have put more joy in my heart
than they have when their grain and wine abound.
- ⁸ In peace I will both lie down and sleep;
for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.

You have surely seen the nesting dolls which are common in Slavic cultures, especially Russia. Brightly painted and tightly fitting together, they are a delight to open and explore.

This is a nesting psalm which reflects the outer and inner life of David the writer.

1. The first and last verses form the outer layer. David anxiously prays and God gives him peace and makes him dwell in safety.
2. The next layer is made up of verses 2-3 and 6-7. This is the interface between the outer and inner person. Someone, David does not tell us who, is verbally attacking David. David trusts in God. They look for but do not find God’s blessing. David, on the other hand, already has a heart filled with joy from God.
3. Verses 4-5 are the central element, the inner David. Be angry but do not sin. Do not act upon it. Your mind will race as you lie in bed, you cannot help that, but you can be silent. Offer the right sacrifice to God and trust Him. Faith lies at the core.

There is much in these days which would stir us up and make us afraid. I read an article by a Lutheran pastor who was pretty sure that in the pandemic restrictions he saw an attempt by the government to silence the Gospel. Is he a conspiracy-believing fool? Is he a prophet? Discernment sometimes eludes me. The psalmist speaks to the thoughts that race through our heads as we lie awake at night or find ourselves alone with our smartphone screens shining disquieting images into our minds. Silence is good. Carefully think before you post. Make the right sacrifices which God has defined as a faithful, humble life which is lived in service to others (Micah 6:8 and Mark 12:32-34). Most importantly trust in the Lord.

Notice how all the anxiety in the first part of the psalm is met with peace, joy, and rest in the second part of the psalm.

Thursday of Easter III – I John 3:1-7

¹ See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ² Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

³ And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

⁴ Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.

⁵ You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. ⁶ No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. ⁷ Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous.

I have heard that it takes 10,000 repetitions to master truly a physical act like swinging a bat or a golf club. What is more, your 10,000 swings must be in good form. You might be reinforcing a mistake if you do not pay attention to way you do these repetitions. John writes in the second paragraph above about practice, an ongoing doing of something.

Really, this is about the goal of what we are doing. Are we aiming at heaven or something else? John is not saying that you must be perfect in this. Anyone who has taken up a new sport or a new skill knows that early attempts are not pretty. Even experienced golfers can fight a hook or a slice. That is why we practice. John is more interested in the goal of our practicing. We will sin. He knows that. But do we make it our practice? Or is our sin the problem we are trying to eliminate from our lives? Are we practicing righteousness? These goals are important.

Because the goals are important, so too is the first paragraph of this reading. We are already God's children. Our true nature is not yet visible, in fact, it is likely buried under an old and sinful nature. The one whose hope is in the One who appears and reveals our true selves, that one purifies himself. You will not always be able to control your impulses, desires, and feelings of your heart. Try. You can get better at this. But know that the One who has already laid claim to you in baptism is working through your hopeful faith in Him. He imparts his purity to you today. He works toward that purity in every facet of your life. Time to practice.

Friday of Easter III – Luke 24:36-49

³⁶ As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, "Peace to you!" ³⁷ But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. ³⁸ And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" ³⁹ See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." ⁴⁰ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹ And while they still disbelieved for joy and were

marveling, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?”⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish,⁴³ and he took it and ate before them.

⁴⁴ Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,⁴⁶ and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead,⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.⁴⁹ And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”

In 1905 a 26-year-old patent clerk in Bern, Switzerland rocked the world of science with four groundbreaking papers which would lay out a revolutionary new way of looking at the physical world in which we live. The man’s name was Albert Einstein. About 50 years later another pair of researchers in England published a brief, two-page, paper which described the shape of DNA for the first time, enabling deeper understandings of how living creatures reproduce and how our cells themselves work. Their names were Watson and Crick. These discoveries continue to shape our world, even making possible the rapid development and deployment of the vaccines against all sorts of diseases such as we saw in the recent COVID pandemic.

That first Easter Jesus showed up among his disciples. After a few moments of disbelief dispelled by his hands and feet and a meal of fish, Jesus unlocks the Scriptures for them. Of course, the NT had not been written yet, so Luke means the OT here, Moses, the prophets, and psalms. The key is Jesus himself. It is all about Him. He is the fulfillment of all of it.

I wish I could have heard what Jesus said. Peter, Matthew, and John were in that room. I have their profound interpretations of the OT through the lens of Jesus in Gospels and letters. I think Jesus must have done the same for Saul of Tarsus on that road to Damascus. Paul’s own reflections on the OT continue to amaze me. But I do not really understand what Einstein or Watson and Crick wrote about. I do not need to understand the intricacies of DNA or subatomic particles in order to get a vaccine or even power up this computer on which I write these words. I am blessed by knowledge. Peter and the rest of the apostles bore witness to these truths. Jesus has fulfilled the will and plan of God. He is life and is resurrection means both my forgiveness and life.

I am grateful, though, that the Spirit of God continues to open the Bible for me and you. I have found God’s Word to be like a mysterious puzzle. I hear and understand the Gospel, but then, in another reading, the Word appears with a new gem which I had never seen before. I am currently wondering how joy leads to disbelief. Did you catch that in vs. 41? I look forward to a little “opening of the Scripture” to me on that.