

"So Here We Stand" -- John 1:29-34

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Circuit Pastors' Conference

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church

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Dear brothers in the Public Ministry of the Word, stewards of the mysteries of God, teachers of dogma, preachers of righteousness, voices in this world's wilderness, and shepherds of the flock which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers,

By the mercy, grace and revelation of the Lord our God, we stand beside the old captain of the grounded ship and from our viewpoint, through the solitary window on this world, we look out over the muddy land where we are stuck. We watch as the elder captain opens the window and releases the blackbird. The raven did not return evermore; opting rather to fly to and fro across the face of this water-logged world. This being so, the grandson of Methuselah releases the whitebird; but the winged creature found no place to negotiate a landing on the earth and returned to the vessel and her captain.

After half a fortnight, the son of Lamech releases the bird once again. The dove returns that evening bearing a sprig of olive leaf freshly plucked from a sprout growing below Ararat's slopes. When the fortnight was completed and the time fulfilled, God's prophet sent the dove forth for the third time. The thrice sent dove did not return, but rather, flew from the sight of the Ark's crew. Through the Word, dear fellow pastors, we are able to stand with Noah and watch the *peristeran*, the dove leave the Ark and disappear from sight.

The dove continues its flight and we follow it as we are permitted. The Dove is very much like the Word that goes forth from the mouth of God, not returning empty but accomplishing the purpose for which it was sent. The Dove is like that special Wind that blows where it wills. After the dove proceeds from the father and the sons in the Ark of Genesis 8, we do not see it flying or coming back to roost in any portion or passage of the Old Testament. Rather, its flight continues, and though we do hear reports of the winged dove from various prophets and at sundry times, they are only glimpses. The son of David likens his bride to a dove in the *Song of Solomon* (5:2) while King David prays,

*O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest;
Yea, I would wander afar, I would lodge in the wilderness. Selah. (Psalm 55)*

So here we stand, dear brothers as millenia have passed in the wilderness of this world. We are no longer aboard that gopher wood ship with the ancient mariner of olden days, but now we are with one of Noah's many descendants. Through the Word we are able to stand beside another preacher of righteousness, one whose congregation is gathered beyond the Jordan and which includes the ever-present pharisaic contingent. Indeed, here is that son of the priestly Zechariah and his aged wife, Elizabeth -- this man whose liturgical garb includes a camel hair cassock and a leather cincture.

The one who prepares the way of the Lord lifts up his eyes as Jesus draws near and we are about to hear John the Baptizer tell us that the Dove has landed. Under the theme of "So Hear We Stand," we listen to the preacher as written in the Gospel of John, chapter 1, verses 29-34 ...

"Behold, the Lamb of God, Who takes away the sin of the world! This is He of Whom I said, 'After me comes a Man Who ranks before me, for He was before me.' I myself did not know Him; but for this I came baptizing with water, that He might be revealed to Israel." And John bore witness, "I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven, and It remained on Him. I myself did not know Him; but He Who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on Whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is He Who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

Thus far the inspired and inerrant Word of the LORD our God.

Perhaps the first thing we notice about this text is that you and I, as pastors, have the same message that John the Baptizer had ... to proclaim the Word of the Word about the Word ... to point the people to the Savior. Dear people of God, behold Jesus. *Behold, the Lamb of God, Who takes away the sin of the world!* We announce that this Jesus, born in Bethlehem, alien in Egypt and resident of Nazareth is the Christ of God, promised by Moses, foretold in the prophets and sung by the psalmists.

In order for Jesus to be continually revealed to the Israel of God ... to the Church ... the pastor is called to proclaim the Law of God in all its sternness and severity. We invite the people under our care to stand with Noah and behold not only the saving Ark, but the consequences of sin and the destruction that sin brings to the impenitent. Look out that window of the Ark and together behold destruction. Early in the morning, stand with your people and with Abraham and with the Lord and look *down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the land of the valley, and beheld, and lo, the smoke of the land went up like the smoke of a furnace (Genesis 19:28).*

Don't, let your people become like the fundamentalist, right-wing evangelicals -- those liberal, legalistic Pharisees, ... don't preach a manageable law to your people -- the kind of law preaching that goes something like this: "If you are a better mom, God will love you. Try harder to be a better dad. God knows you can do it. He has sent His Son to show you it can be done. I hope my little pep-talk convinces you that you can do it."

No, let the Law of God always accuse the old sinner ... that old recalcitrant ass, that stubborn donkey within the pastor and within each and every member of the congregation. Let such as these stand and hear the words of the son of Zechariah, *"His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor and gather His wheat into the granary, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire "* (Matthew 3:12).

In other words, take them to the brink of hell and show them and yourself what is deserved because of our sins against God's Holy Law ... my sins of thought, word and deed ... my sins of will, ignorance and weakness ... my sins of commission, omission, and no mission. Stand with your people at the rail of the ship and view the destruction and eternal death of the Flood waters. View the shower of brimstone and fire raining down upon a city where not ten righteous people were found.

Hear the voice of the Law, "*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the wrath that is to come?*" (Matthew 3:7)

Then, as you teeter on the edge and as your people soberly realize the consequences of the Fall into sin and the eternal condemnation deserved, do your proper work as a called and ordained servant of the Word ... do what you are privileged to do. Stand with the one who also prepared the Way of the Lord and announce the Good News ... dear people, *Behold, the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world.* Dear people, here is the Incarnate Son of God Who has come to take the penalty, consequences, guilt, suffering, death, hell and destruction of all your sins upon Himself.

Behold, the Lamb of God stands in a river to be baptized and fulfill all righteousness for us. The Word made flesh touches the water and sanctifies the wave, and now, wherever water and the Word are administered in His Name, the righteousness of Christ is bestowed upon newborns of all ages. Behold, dear pastors, *This is He Who came by water and Blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the Blood (1 John 5:6)*, and as such, lead the people under your care up to Jerusalem, to that room which is the Holy of Holies and let them hear the Savior say, "*Take, eat; this is My Body. Take and drink; this is My Blood.*" Let them stand with the weeping women of Jerusalem's streets and let them walk with Simon of Cyrene, following the scourged Savior along the way of sorrow and ascending to the Place of the Skull where His sin-atonement Blood was shed for their sins, and not for theirs only *but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2)*. Dear brothers, stand with your people outside the empty tomb and let them hear you say, "*Behold, the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world.* He is risen!"

However, there is a danger in preaching the Gospel -- in proclaiming this Good News and that danger is "when the Gospel is turned into a preaching of repentance" (Walther's *Law and Gospel*, Thesis XV). "When preaching the Gospel, you must not present it with a black cloud hovering over it, but proclaim free grace and unconditional consolation" (L&G, page 283). The Gospel is not a club to beat the parishioner and whack them into coming to church. Indeed the Gospel is not a taskmaster. Therefore, our posture as proclaimers of the Good News of Jesus Christ is one of beggars ... of getting on our knees to invite the people of God to hear the forgiveness of the Lord ... of being patient and pleading with congregational members to behold the Lamb of God Who bestows His righteous robe freely ... of even, if needed to convince them of your sincerity, to get down on your knees and beg the people of the Lord to be in His house and receive the service of the Divine.

So here we stand, and yet, dear fellow pastors, it is not like we are standing right next to Noah, Moses, Elijah or John the Baptizer ... Peter, Paul or Timothy ... Luther or Walther. Rather, we are standing in a line. Walter Kellerman, who was pastor here at Our Redeemer from 1926 to 1952, is behind me. Behind him is Luther. Behind Luther is Peter. Behind Peter is John the Baptizer. Behind John is Moses. Behind Moses is Noah. Behind Noah is Adam. Those patriarchs, prophets, evangelists, apostles and church fathers are behind us and they led the people of God under their care for as long as the Lord willed. We are called to do the same.

But who is ahead of us? We may say for certain only the One Whom the Baptizer proclaimed, *After me comes a Man Who ranks before me, for He was before me.* But who, in terms of men, is ahead of us? Unless you are retired or taken a call to a different place, truly, only God knows. However, one day, unless the Lord returns during the time we occupy local pulpits, someone else will take our place and we will then be behind that man. Each one of us prays that we might be able to state to our successors who will occupy these pulpits after us what Paul wrote to his former congregation, *for I*

delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

The line began in the Garden of Eden when Adam was entrusted with the Word. It continues today and we are called to stand together and be faithful stewards of the mysteries of God and faithful undershepherds of Christ. We are called to administer the sacraments as Christ has instituted them and to fulfill all the duties and obligations of our Call. We are to keep the pulpits of our congregations free of Sadducees and the communion rails of Lodge members, and to know that this is not optional. We are called to protect the Church from false doctrine from those outside the church and from false sons within her pale. We are supposed to have a oneness of doctrine that establishes the communion, instead of the other way around as we are attempting to do too often in our synod, of trying to have a communion based upon an outward demonstration of our oneness. We are called to practice close communion and abide by the promises that pastors and congregations, as members of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, have made to each other in the presence of God. We are called to feed the sheep with the Divine service at the right hand of the Lord, not entertain the goats with contemporary, man-centered worship at His left.

As Christians, but especially as pastors, we are to stand for the truth, and to suffer all things, even death, rather than fall away from the Lord and His Word. We are to have a zero tolerance for false doctrine, false confession and false practice. Just how much truth do you think the Lord wants compromised? Just how much error does He want foisted on His Church? How pleased is God when His Gospel is used like a cattle prod to shock, frighten and terrorize His people; to stir up anger and bitterness within them and ultimately drive them away? Indeed, can we not make the application in our congregations that Paul urges with dads in families? Reverend *fathers do not provoke your children to anger lest they become discouraged (Colossians 3:21 KJV).*

This Jesus is the One Who has warned that *"whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the man by whom the temptation comes!" (Matthew 18:6-7)* What will He do to a pastor who leads an entire congregation away from Word and Sacrament? Truly there must be a special spot in hell for such men. This is the Lord God Almighty Who, at any moment, might require of you or me an accounting of our stewardship of His Word in His Church!

So here we stand ... poor, miserable, wretched sinners ... and I say to you, ... *"Behold, the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world."* In our unrighteousness we behold Jesus standing in our place, fulfilling all righteousness as the swaddling cloth mantle of His Father's stole is placed upon His shoulders at His ordination in the Jordan River ... when the eternal, incarnate Son of God is baptized by a sinner and as the Dove descends upon Him and as His Father makes heavenly declaration. So here we stand, each of us having fallen to temptations of food, testing and power, and I direct your attention to the Savior doing what we could not do and doing it in our place ... defeating Satan in the wilderness ... not turning stones into bread, not succumbing to the temptation, not bowing down to Satan's offer. Then look later. Do you not see the crown of thorns digging into the head of God for all the times we have not used our heads in godly ways. Behold the Lamb of God being scourged in our place, taking upon His back the punishment we deserved.

Dear brothers, Jesus suffered hellish, ungodly assault as well as God's holy wrath when He was crucified on the crude crossbeam at the Place of the Skull. Listen to our Redeemer as He petitions His Father concerning those who were responsible for Him being pinned to that accursed tree. *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do (Luke 23:34)*. Do you not see the Sacraments of the Church pour forth as the heart of Jesus is broken and pierced for all the times we have not properly used our hearts in dealing with the lives of our families, our congregations, and our selves?

So here we stand on the day after Good Friday and the Day before Easter. Listen to the stillness of Joseph's tomb on the seventh day of the week. From within that tomb we hear every sin of ours and every sin of the people of our congregations, that Jesus has not paid for, that He has not atoned for, and that He has not covered. Do you hear anything from that newly-hewn tomb? Dear brothers, listen to the silence!

Behold, the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world has risen and reveals His holy wounds to His people who have assembled behind closed door in the now sanctified place where Jesus is. And what does He say to the likes of us as we stand in His presence. *Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me; even so, I send you. ... Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained (John 20:19-23)*. Tolerate no false doctrine or practice as you patiently and pastorally serve the Lord and His Church ... yourself being admonished by the Law and comforted by the Gospel. May it please God, that at the end of our days we may be able to stand with the faithful pastors before us, the faithful pastors after us, and John the Baptizer and declare, *I have borne witness that this is the Son of God*.

.... So here we stand ... and sing the *Te Deum*.