

"Congregating in the Presence of the LORD God"

Exodus 24:3-11

17 August Anno Domini 2003 -- Trinity 9 / Pentecost 10 B

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church of Emmett, Idaho

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Grace, mercy and peace to you in the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Dear Baptized,

The patriarchs (Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and others) "understood that the Christ would be the price for our sins, they knew that our works could not pay so high a price. Therefore they received free mercy and forgiveness of sins by faith, just as the saints in the New Testament. ... Therefore the patriarchs, too, were justified not by the law but by the promise and faith" (AC IV 57f). "This promise is repeated continually throughout Scripture; first it was given to Adam, later to the patriarchs, then illumined by the prophets, and finally proclaimed and revealed by Christ among the Jews, and spread by the apostles throughout the world" (AP XII 53), and has come down to each of us and to entire congregation through the Ministry of the Word.

Since this is the same Law and Gospel was preached and taught from shortly after "in the beginning" (Genesis 1:1); that is, after the Fall into sin, then it ought also to be true that the Divine Service then and now are of the same substance; that is, the present, historic, ancient liturgy of the Church is nothing other than the pastoral proclamation of and the congregational confession of salvation by the grace of God through faith in Christ, "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). This is mostly certainly true and the Old Testament Reading assigned to the Church for this day demonstrates this similarity. As you have gathered here this day, please listen to that portion of God's holy, inerrant Word and may the Holy Spirit grant us to behold the Church's ...

... "Congregating in the Presence of the LORD God"

"Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, 'All the works which the LORD has spoken we will do.' And Moses wrote all the words of the LORD. And he rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.' And Moses took the Blood and threw it upon the people, and said, 'Behold the Blood of the Covenant which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.'

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel; and there was under His feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.

Thus far the Word of the LORD our God.

We begin the sermon at the same point that this text begins. The children of God, living in the wilderness of this world, having been called forth to congregate in the Presence of the LORD God Almighty. One by one the members of the Church come forth from their tents and houses, leaving behind them, at least for a short time of rest, herds and offices, fields and factories, the grinding wheels and the multiplication tables. The individuals and the families within the Family of God have drawn near the holy place. Men, women and children - ordinary people bearing the burdens of sins, the pangs of regret, the weight of heavy-ladened souls - walk to or are brought into the place where God has descended mercifully and graciously to be with His people; that is, the place of Word and Sacrament. This congregating is in the Name of the LORD God ... in the Name of the Father Who created by His Holy Word and of the + Son Who is the Word and of the Holy Spirit Who hovered over the waters of the deep, bearing witness to the creating Word.

The Invocation has already occurred, both here and now as we congregated and then and there on the day when "Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD." This Invocation of the LORD is from the earliest of times, for its genesis, that is, its beginning, was in the midst the wrenching throes of individual mortal pain, and of the family's bitter tears of grief within this fallen world of death. For "at that time men began to call upon the Name of the LORD" (Genesis 4:26). This is done at the foot of the mountain and in the sanctuary - in the large churches in the cities and in the small gatherings in the Diaspora - in the nomadic tents near Sinai and in the military tents in Kuwait - in the family devotions led by the heads of the household as well as those whose leaders are chaplains and missionaries. According to God's promise, whenever two or three gather in His Name, there He is in the midst of them ... of you.

We have continued in this service in the same manner in which the Divine service in the text for today continues. The children of God, now gathered and standing in the Presence of the LORD God Almighty, hear the Invocation and respond with the "Amen." "Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, 'All the works which the Lord has spoken we will do.' What words? What doings? The Ten Commandments. "I Am the LORD thy God, thou shalt have no other gods in My Presence" ... "Thou shalt not take the Name of the LORD thy God in vain," ... Thou shalt remember the Sabbath Day to keep it Holy" (Exodus 20). What doings? Well, we should fear, love and trust in God above all things ... we should fear and love God that may not curse, swear, use witchcraft, lie or deceive by His Name, but call upon it in every trouble, pray, praise and give thanks ... we should fear and love that we may not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.

Were there other words and more doings? Certainly, for there are seven more commandments and their meanings, plus all the ordinances. "And Moses wrote all the words of the LORD." But this is the Law and the Law always accuses the fallen Adam of old in Genesis and the old Adam in each of us. The Law can not save us. Our doings do not earn even an inkling of our salvation. If the Law is all that had been revealed to Adam and Moses, then there would be only eternal destruction for each one of us and for all of us. Each of us has broken God's commandments by thought, word and/or deed. Each is guilty of sins where we have committed one thing or omitted some other thing. "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it" (James 2:10). Thus says the LORD God. "No human being will be justified in His sight by works of the Law, since through the Law comes knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20). Alas! If this Law of the Almighty were

the only utterance from His mouth we would be eternally driven from the merciful and gracious Presence of the LORD, lost forever and consigned to our own place in hell forever.

However, there are more to the words of the LORD than Law. After writing the Word according to the Holy Spirit, Moses "built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar." In order for the sinful people of God to come into His Presence there must be a sacrifice and the shedding of blood, because "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Hebrews 9:22), "for it is the blood that makes atonement" (Leviticus 17:11).

All the bloody sacrifices of the Old Testament pointed to the One Sacrifice for the sins of the world - when, on the altar cross of Calvary when Jesus was crucified, the Blood of God was shed to pay for all those sins ... to atone for every one of your sins. Moses in all that he wrote directed the hearers of the Word and John the Baptizer in all that he preached pointed the hearers to behold the Christ, Who is "the Lamb of God, Who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Indeed, Jesus is "'I AM' before Abraham was" (John 8:58) and thus, Moses wrote of Jesus (John 5:46). Jesus, the Son of God come into this world at Bethlehem for you, to begin bearing your burden of sin, disease, and death to the place of the Sacrifice. Three decades later, with the weight of the world's sins on His whipped back, He ascended the cross where and when His Blood was shed for the forgiveness of all your sins, where your diseases afflicted Him, and the death you deserved He died in your stead. That is the Good News ... the Gospel and it differs from the Law in that there is forgiveness of sins ... and since this Gospel grants forgiveness, it also gives salvation and eternal life.

We have continued in this service in the same manner in which the Divine service in the text for today continues. The man of God opened His mouth and read the Word, extending the invitation to be forgiven. Then Moses "took the Book of the Covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.'"

Obedient!/? But isn't that of the Law? It could be, but it also, especially in this case not be the doing of the Law, but in the continually abiding in the invitation. Consider it as the invitation to confess your sins to the LORD God and hear His Word of forgiveness. For example, "Beloved in the Lord, let us draw near with a true heart and confess our sins to God our Father, beseeching Him in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ to grant us forgiveness." That is invitation. When you and I respond, "O Almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor miserable sinner, confess unto Thee all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended Thee and justly deserved Thy temporal and eternal punishment. But I am heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them, and I pray Thee of Thy boundless mercy and for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of Thy Beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to be gracious and merciful to me a poor miserable sinner" (The Lutheran Hymnal).

When you and I confess the truth of our sin according to God's Law and of our Savior according to His Gospel, then we have accepted the invitation and are obedient unto Him Who wants us to "enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise" (Psalm 100:4). The Christian desires to abide in this continual confession of both sin and grace until the moment when called this vale of tears to the heavenly mansions wherein there are no tears, no sin, no suffering. Until that day, we abide in the invitation that Old Testaments Christian received, saying, "All that the LORD has

spoken we will do, and we will be obedient."

What is God's response to such confession of sin? He declares His cleansing Word to you and announces the basis for you being able to come into His Presence; namely, that you are forgiven of all your sins in the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. The LORD God does this through His called servant of the Word. Thus, "Moses took the Blood and threw it upon the people, and said, 'Behold the Blood of the Covenant which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.'"

Then came the eating and drinking in the Presence of the LORD. It was then, as it is now, a closed Communion. Not everyone was invited to come to the Lord's Table and eat in His Presence and behold Him. Why? Well, to be quite blunt, they weren't invited. The Bible states it like this: "Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel; and there was under His feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank."

All the others, those at the foot of the mountain, were not invited. Now, this does not mean that those who weren't invited to the place where the others ate and drank in the real Presence of Jehovah weren't saved, or that they weren't children of God, or that they were second class members of the Church. Being a child of God - having eternal life - being forgiven - having salvation - being an heir of heaven does not depend on one going to the Lord's Supper ... it didn't way back then and it doesn't today.

This provides us with the opportunity to take a moment to consider three points of practical application. First, there is the topic of preparation for the Lord's Supper in the House of God. Because of your confession of the faith here in this congregation on the day when you confirmed the Christian faith, you have an invitation to be prepared for and to attend the Holy Communion. Preparation can be done using questions in Luther's Small Catechism. Also, if you desire private confession and absolution prior to communing, please speak with your pastor.

Second, there is the matter of proper table manners in the House of God. Just as you would not presume to walk into someone's house without an invitation and sit down expecting to be fed, so also at the Lord's Supper at another congregation. It would be most rude and dangerously presuming to attend the Sacrament of the Altar without an invitation. If you are a confirmed member and, on a particular Sunday, you are visiting a sister congregation with which we are in fellowship, you may be permitted to commune. Bear a few things in mind if you desire to commune at that altar. Of primary importance, you need to speak with the steward of the Feast; that is, to talk with the pastor. Please allow sufficient time before the Divine Service begins, say 20 minutes or so. He may ask you if you are prepared. He may ask you if you are under church discipline in your home congregation. He may ask you if you are a member of a lodge or a secret or unionistic society. He may ask you why you desire to commune and what it is that you seek by communing, for true Christian pastors "do not intend to admit to the Sacrament and administer it to those who do not know what they seek or why they come" (Preface, Large Catechism). He may extend an invitation to partake of the Supper or he may even ask you to wait on communing. Please do not be offended if he asks you to wait. He is merely trying to be a faithful pastor and is looking out for your spiritual well-being. If he asked you to wait and you are angry about this, then know that that pastor surely has made the correct pastoral decision.

Third, take heed, when you attend the Holy Supper - either in your home congregation or at another altar - that you not allow pride and a haughty spirit that considers this "your table" instead of the Lord's Table - thus turning the invitation into license that manifests itself in transgressions against the first three commandments. This is a danger more for the leaders of the church, particularly the pastors. In our text for today, "Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up." Certainly this is a privilege to behold God and to eat and drink in His Presence.

But not long after this took place, the Bible tells us that the same "Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer, and put fire in it, and laid incense on it, and offered unholy fire before the LORD, such as He had not commanded them. And fire came forth from the Presence of the LORD and devoured them, and they died before the LORD." (Leviticus 10:1-2).

The word for "unholy" fire also means "profane" or "strange." While the Bible does not specify exactly what this means in this particular incident (and evidently for good reason), there was, based upon the consequences, something syncretistic or pagan taking place. This introduction of something new in the Presence of the LORD God - whether it be another god or fire dedicated to or proceeding from another god - resulted in condemnation and death. Likewise, in the Holy Communion today, we are not given license either to attend in unbelief or to introduce novelty. It's the "Lord's" Supper, not ours and it, like the entire Divine Service, is intended to be a blessing. Misuse of it, through the impenitent unbelief of the communicant or the foolish altering of the Sacrament by the celebrant, results in the opposite of the intended blessing.

For example, the Apostle Paul writes to the congregation in Corinth, "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the Cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the Body and Blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the Body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died" (1 Corinthians 11:27-30).

This is not what God intends for anyone. He desires that all be blessed and to be His heirs as His children. To accomplish that He sent His Son to be the Sacrifice for the world, to shed His Blood on the cross, to die in your place, to rise again from the dead and to ascend into heaven. To bring those blessings to you He sent His Holy Spirit to work through the Word to bring you to faith and to keep you in the faith. This He does in the means of grace in the Divine Service where and when the Church assembles in His Name and in His Presence.

Thus the children of God may return to the wilderness of this world, leaving the Presence of the LORD of Hosts. One by one the members of the Church return to their tents and houses, herds and offices, fields and factories, multiplication tables and grinding wheels. The individuals and the families within the Family of God depart from the holy place. Men, women and children they are - ordinary people who have been and are declared perfect in Christ, recipients of eternal life, inscribed as heirs of heaven, assured of their salvation through Jesus, bearing the Good News to others, and all this because you are forgiven of all your sins in the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.