

# "The Strange Work of God"

## Isaiah 28:21

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church  
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Dear friends in Christ, ... The prophet announces God's strange deed. The messenger proclaims the Lord's alien work. The doom is of a sort that the Lord God Himself will exercise His hand of judgement. He will appear on the scene, as He did once when defending the children of Israel against their enemy when, in the days of David, they were in battle against the Philistines at Mount Perazim. On that day, the Lord intervened to deliver His people. Then there was the intervention at Gibeon. At that time, too, He appeared to help His own. But now there is a difference. God will suddenly turn on His own people, and in doing so, will perform a strange deed, an alien work.

In the 28th chapter of the Old Testament book of Isaiah, the holy prophet conveys the message of the Lord God to His people. Please listen to verse 21 and consider ...

*... The Strange Work of God*

*For the Lord will rise up as on Mount Perazim,  
He will be wroth as in the valley of Gibeon;  
to do His deed -- strange is His deed!  
and to work His work -- alien is His work!*

*Thus far the inspired and inerrant Word of the Lord our God.*

The message is that the Lord God Almighty will suddenly turn, become an adversary, confront His people with the Law, and do battle against them as He did when He rose up against His people's enemies on Mount Perazim and in the valley of Gibeon. A certain point is reached and God suddenly turns, now becoming an enemy of His people and engages in the strange deed and His alien work. He attacks His own people just as He had attacked His enemies.

Whether on a group basis or individual person, the thought that God confronts His people is frightening. The truth that God has done this, does do it, and will do it is terrifying. Isaiah terms such an awe-full confrontation that brings panic and death as the strange, alien work of God. The Lord's proper work is to console, comfort, and bring Life. *As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel? (Ezekiel 33:11).*

"These are the two chief works of God in men, to terrify, and to justify and quicken the terrified. One or the other of these works is spoken of throughout Scripture. One part is the Law, which reveals, denounces, and condemns sin. The other part is the Gospel, that is, the promise of grace granted in Christ. 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" (*Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XII, Penitence, paragraph 53*).

Since Jesus is true God, Begotten from His Father from eternity, His work of confronting and terrifying with the Law is also the alien or strange work of God. Therefore, we not only hear Him proclaiming His proper work when declares, *I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly (John 10:10)*, but also when He engaged in confrontation for the purposes of terrifying when He made such declarations as, *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves (Matthew 23:15)*.

The Son of God is involved with doing the alien or strange work of God. In the Bible, the Lord Jesus proclaims both the Law and the Gospel. The confrontation of the former is intended to bring the comfort of the latter. The latter does not come, however, unless there is sorrow over sin and looking to God for forgiveness. *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9)*. The preaching of the Law "is an 'alien work' of Christ by which He comes to His proper office - namely, to preach grace, to comfort, to make alive" (*Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article VI, Law and Gospel, paragraph 10*).

Then one day, a day long after Isaiah wrote the words of our text, we hear the wonderful words of God the Father concerning God the Son - words spoken about Jesus as He stood in the depths of the valley - a place where the baptismal waters of the Jordan flowed over the face of the land and the head of our Lord, *This is My Beloved Son, with Whom I am well pleased (Matthew 3:17)*. Then one day, a thousand days later, the Voice speaks again and we hear the magnificent words of God the Father concerning God the Son - words spoken about Jesus as He stood on the heights of the mountain - a place where the baptismal clouds overshadowed the face of the land and the transfigured Son of Man, *This is My Beloved Son, with Whom I am well pleased; listen to Him (Matthew 17:5)*.

Then another day came, a shadowy day when God the Father suddenly turned His back on His own Son, doing the strange work of not saying anything as Jesus hung upon the cross - the Divine reaction against all sin being heaped up and placed upon the innocent, perfect, sinless, Incarnate Son of God. Darkness covered the Light of the world when God became the Stranger to Jesus. In this alien deed, we hear the sound of silence from God the Father. Only from the lips of Jesus do we hear God speaking, *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (Mark 15:34)*. Indeed, the Son of God takes part in the alien work of God that the proper work of God might be heard and believed by you and me.

So also, then, the Holy Spirit is involved with doing the alien or strange work of Lord God. Therefore the Holy Spirit "must not only comfort but, through the office of the Law, must also convince the world of sin. Thus, even in the New Testament, He must perform what the prophet calls 'a strange deed' [that is, to rebuke] until He comes to His own work [that is, to comfort and to preach about grace]" (*Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article V, Law and Gospel, paragraph 11*).

The Church is charged, not only with the wonderful work of proclaiming God's forgiveness in Christ, but also with doing the alien or strange work of the Lord God. Jesus speaks to His followers, "*Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, even so I send you.*" And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "*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 20:21-23). The Church is to discipline all nations by baptizing and by teaching everything, all of the Law and all of the Gospel, -- all things whatsoever the Son of God has commanded (Matthew 28). At times, the strange work of God is to be done in the distant mission field. At other times, it is to be done a bit closer to home. In some places and to some people, the disciples were told *if any place will not receive you and they refuse to hear you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet for a testimony against them*" (Mark 6:11).

The alien work of God is to be done, amazingly and often contrary to the desire of both pastor and people, in the Church. Our Redeemer Lutheran Church has no option in this matter. The congregation, if it desires to remain Christian, must not ignore the Word of God - neither the Law nor the Gospel. This congregation is charged with teaching and announcing the alien or strange work of the God, doing so for the sake of all the members and doing so in preparation for the proper work of the Lord, namely to comfort and give Life by the teaching and announcing of the Good News of Jesus' sin-atonement Death and victorious Resurrection. As such and according to our Constitution, members of Our Redeemer congregation agree to "permit themselves to be fraternally admonished and corrected when they have erred" (*Constitution, Article IV, Membership, paragraph 1.f.*). This is intended to lead to the announcement of complete and total forgiveness. This gracious Gospel is freely bestowed on the penitent (like King David in 2 Samuel 12:13) and completely withheld from the impenitent (like the young rich man in Matthew 19:21).

The alien work of God is, therefore, also to be done by the pastor and is not optional. Pastors are called and charged by the Lord God to *take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the Church of God which He obtained with the Blood of His own Son* (Acts 20:28). Pastors are called and charged by the local congregations to proclaim the harshness of God's Law and the comfort of God's Gospel, *noting the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in His kindness; otherwise you too will be cut off* (Romans 11:22). On September 23, 1984 this congregation extended a Call to have a pastor do just that. On October 31, 1984, a pastor accepted that Call. Among the eight specific charges that Our Redeemer Lutheran Church required and requires of its pastor are the following.

"We authorize and obligate our called minister: To perform the functions of a pastor in an evangelical manner; to aid, counsel, and guide members of all ages and social conditions; to visit the sick and the dying; to admonish the indifferent and erring; To guide the congregation in applying the divinely ordained discipline of the church agreeably to the Word of God" (*Supplement to the Diploma of Vocation, Our Redeemer Lutheran Church, Emmett, Idaho September 23, 1984*).

Once again, the alien work of God is to be done by the pastor, amazingly and often contrary to the desire of some and perhaps even most of the individual members of the congregation, as well as the pastor himself. This alien work is no more apparent than when Jesus charged His disciples to exercise the steps of Church discipline.

*"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in My Name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:15-20).*

God wants Adam and Eve to be with Him in eternal paradise and so He sends them forth from the Garden of Eden into a world of pain, suffering, and death. The Church wants all of her members to remain with her and so it is necessary to exclude on occasion. My guess and my hope is, that not one of us here today likes to be involved in proclaiming or announcing this alien work of God. I know of no pastor who desires and enjoys confronting people and then leading the congregation in the steps of church discipline. It's alien; it's strange; and ... and it's required.

In the congregation in Corinth there was a man who had committed and remained living in a grievous public sin. The Apostle Paul writes, *It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. For though absent in body I am present in spirit, and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment in the Name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled, and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the Day of the Lord Jesus (1 Corinthians 5:1-5).*

The strange work is the delivering of the man to Satan - of telling the man that he is no longer a member of the Church and no longer a disciple of the Lord, but rather, is now outside the Christian faith and is, therefore, under the dominion of darkness. I know of no pastor and no congregation that enjoys or looks forward to such a confrontation and such an alien deed. The strange work is done, however, in order that the proper work of forgiving and comforting might be able to be done one day. Or, as the Apostle Paul declares, that the man *may be saved in the Day of the Lord Jesus.*

A godly pastor will be faithful to His Call, doing this strange, alien work and praying that he will be permitted to do the proper work of God - of announcing the comforting, consoling, Life-giving message of complete forgiveness. So a pastor will find himself having to bind someone with the Law, not giving the impenitent a dot of the Gospel, withholding any and all forgiveness, clamping harder, and binding tighter with the chains of the Law. He must proceed with this work in spite of his own sinful nature and in spite of his own actions which are not always righteous and pure. He must proceed, but not on the basis of his personal opinions and desires, but because of his Call to be the undershepherd of Christ, always looking for, seeking, praying that, and hoping for the time when he will be able to announce God's total, complete forgiveness to the penitent sinner.

*When I declared not my sin,  
my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.  
For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me;  
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah.  
I acknowledged my sin to Thee, and I did not hide my iniquity;*

*I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord";  
then Thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin. Selah  
(Psalm 32:3-5)*

During our meeting later this day, it will be important for us to remember the distinction between a sin and the persistence in a sin. The sin itself does not make a person impenitent. The sin makes a person a sinner, and that we all are - we are all sinners. In fact, *if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us (1 John 1:8)*. The man who was sorry for his sin, looked to the Lord, and cried out, *"God, be merciful to me a sinner" (Luke 18:13b)*. Not the sin, but the persistence in the sin is what makes a person impenitent. Paul declared this truth when he wrote, *Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed (Romans 2:4b-5)*.

Therefore, dear people, even though the task before us this day is part of that strange, alien work of God; and, even though it is a work that many, if not all, would like to avoid; it must be done for the sake of the individual involved and for the sake of the Church. It is my heartfelt desire and our sincere prayer that we may be able, at some point in the future, to do the proper work of God and speak the Word of forgiveness in the Name of and for the sake of Jesus.

May the Lord help us all to will and to do what is good and pleasing in His sight. Amen.