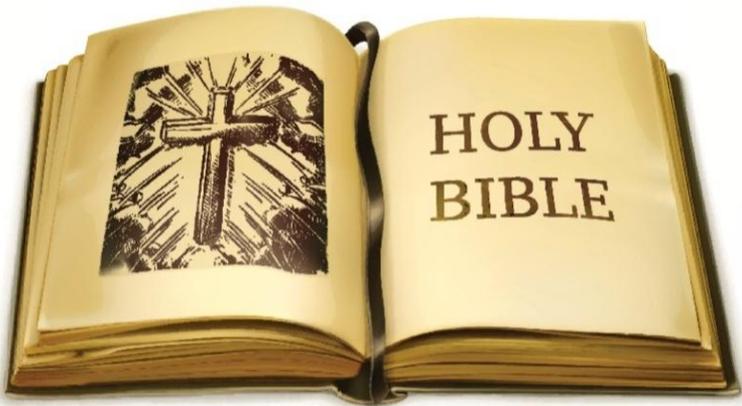


# Each Day in the Word



**January 4-31, 2026**

## FOREWORD

This booklet is compiled by the pastors of the Confessional Lutheran Ministerium for congregations and individuals not necessarily affiliated with any Lutheran denomination. Indeed, it is for anyone who finds it in their hands whether they are Lutheran or not. It is our prayer that God's people will be edified by this humble offering.

While it is tempting for everyone when reading daily devotional booklets to skip the Scripture lesson and read only the devotional material, it is highly recommended that the reader set their attention on the Scripture lesson before reading the devotion itself. The Holy Spirit tells us in Hebrews 4:12 that "the word of God is living and powerful." As the Scripture is the very Word of God, we ought to devote time and attention to it each day so that through it, God the Holy Spirit may strengthen our trust in His promises and kindle in our hearts love for God and our neighbor.

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The writer to the Hebrews tells us, “But now we do not yet see all things put under Him.” As we focus our gaze on the world around us, we see very little physical evidence of Christ’s reign and rule here below. Corruption runs rampant among our elected political leaders and evil rears its ugly head in all kinds of other ways: unbridled abortion, unchecked crime, ungodly marriages and relationships, open scoffing of Christianity and Christians everywhere, the gross over-commercialization of all that is holy, and many other abominations. The unbelieving world mocks and says, “There really is no God since all these things *\*could\** be stopped *\*if\** there was a God.”

You and I as Christians all too often shake our heads at these things and find ourselves wondering along with the world where God is in all this earthly mess. The devil whispers – and sometimes yells – in our ears that all is lost, that God doesn’t really care about us, and we may as well throw in the towel in defeat. God simply cannot or will not come through.

Although those wonderings are understandable and we are too often tempted to listen to the devil’s lies, we must repent of wallowing in the world’s sorrow. For “we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone,” and “He is able to aid those who are tempted.” *There* is our hope and strength: Jesus our Savior tasted death for us! Jesus our Savior also defeated death for us by His resurrection! Even if this evil world takes us out, we, by God-given faith and trust in Christ, still win the ultimate battle because we are with Him and in Him. He saved us in our Baptism and continually feeds us with Himself through His Gospel and Sacraments. His victory over sin, death, and the devil is ours. And that is more than enough reason and strength for us to persevere and look forward with absolute certainty to the life of the world to come.

Let us pray: O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today. Amen.

Early in Acts 4, Peter and John had been taken into custody for preaching Jesus and the resurrection. When they were asked the next day, “By what power or name have you done this?”, part of their answer included these words: “There is salvation in no other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” They were then reprimanded and commanded not to “speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus” – something they certainly would not stop doing!

Upon their release, Peter and John reported these events to their companions who praised God with great enthusiasm and then prayed that God would grant further boldness to the Apostles so that they would continue to speak of Christ and the resurrection and do signs and wonders to the glory of God.

Do you pray for your faithful pastor? If not, please do; if you do, do it more. He needs your prayers and support as he crafts a scripturally sound sermon each week and prepares to serve you through Word and Sacrament. He needs your support as he visits the sick and biblically guides and teaches his flock. He relishes your love and care as he may even sacrifice family time to carry out his calling as an under shepherd of the Chief Shepherd, Jesus. He appreciates your encouragement as he is literally on call 24/7. And as a faithful man, he joyfully delivers this word: Christ paid for all your sins and continues to come to you with His forgiveness through Word and Sacrament.

Give thanks to God for your pastor, for Christ speaks, acts, and gives you Himself through this man who serves Christ to you in order that your faith and salvation are strengthened, and for your own comfort and joy in Christ.

Let us pray: Send, O Lord, Your Holy Spirit on Thy servant now, we pray. Let him prove a faithful shepherd to Thy little lambs always. Amen.

The Epiphany of Our Lord (Jan. 6) is a major festival in the church Year as it focuses squarely on Christ. The traditional Gospel for Epiphany is the account in Matthew 2 where the Wise Men come from afar to worship the young Child Jesus in the house with Mary and Joseph.

The Church Year then fast-forwards to Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan River. St. Luke's presentation of this momentous event is a bit briefer than the parallels in Matthew 3 and Mark 1. Yet in all three accounts we have the appearance of all three Persons of the Holy Trinity: Jesus the Son, God the Father speaking from heaven, and the Holy Spirit alighting on Jesus in the form of a dove.

Even though all three Persons of the Holy Trinity are co-equal in power, majesty, and might, and the Trinity cannot be fractionalized – for when you have one you have them all – clearly Jesus is the central focus and figure. The Holy Spirit “points’ to Jesus by descending in bodily form, and God the Father literally ‘points’ to Jesus as He proclaims, “You are My beloved Son.” Even regarding Creation, Jesus is the central Actor “without whom nothing was made” (Jn 1:3).

Why is God the Father pleased with His Son? Jesus has perfectly obeyed His Father's will, that of fulfilling the Law and living the perfect life for all mankind, suffering for the sins of the world, dying for those sins, and rising again to defeat even death for us all.

Jesus is the One who does it all; He's the One who gets it right. He is the One who is worthy to take the place of all men, because He is more than a man. He is the Son of God and the Son of Man, the One in Whom His Father is well-pleased. Trust in Him by God-given faith and you are saved.

Let us pray: O God, who by the leading of a star manifested Your only-begotten Son to the Gentiles, mercifully grant that we, who know You now by faith, may after this life have the fruition of Your glorious Godhead; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Today's reading can be unsettling, for it is all Law, from John's earlier call to "Repent!" to today's "You brood of vipers!" and "Bear fruit worthy of repentance!" John lays waste to anyone's claim of earthly family lineage as a ticket into heaven and eternity when he says, "And do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.'" Abraham's faith is faith in the Old Testament promises of God's Messiah to come, but the Pharisees and Sadducees would rather rely on their supposed connection to a bloodline rather than the blood that Christ would shed for their sins.

How about you? Do you, in any way, claim anything about yourself as a basis for God loving you or taking you into heaven? Do you think that just because your parents were Christians that you have an "in" with God? Indeed, their example is God-pleasing, but they can't believe for you. Just because you show up in church do you think God will love you more than others who don't?

If any of that applies, repent, you brood of vipers, and bear fruit in keeping with repentance. When God's Law has its desired effect – that of killing, condemning, and destroying – then hear the sweet Gospel that Christ, about whom John preached, has paid for all your sins with His holy, innocent, bitter suffering, and death. Christ Himself has laid waste all the powers of sin, death, and hell in your place by taking your sins into Himself. Christ has also risen from the dead to give you the sure and certain hope of your own resurrection through God-created faith and trust in Him. You are no longer a child of the devil but a child of God. Rejoice, dear Christian! Christ is yours!

Let us pray: O God, our Maker and Redeemer, You wonderfully created us and in the Incarnation of Your Son yet more wonderfully restored our human nature. Grant that we may ever be alive in Him who made Himself to be like us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Luke sets this account in history with the precise and demonstrably true facts of these men, their positions, and their reigns. Among other things, the fact that these historical people are placed correctly in history demonstrates yet another way that Scripture authenticates itself.

And almost all of these men were key players in Christ's passion and crucifixion playing prominent but unwitting roles in God's plan of salvation. If nothing else, this reminds us that God has frequently used evil and unbelieving people to accomplish His will, particularly in bringing about the mock trial and horrid torture and crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ.

On one level, the terrible events of that first Holy Week seem grossly unfair and corrupt; they are downright offensive to the idea of human justice. Some might say that Jesus never really had a chance as all the corrupt political powers were overwhelmingly stacked against Him.

But the evil intent of these men in political power at the time was no match for God; He used them for His glory and purpose, even as He used evil and unbelieving Pharaoh in the exodus of the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt, and even used the devil against himself in Christ's crucifixion and death.

With God, nothing is impossible. So, when life seems impossible or all the worldly cards seem stacked against you, turn in faith to Christ who took your sins into Himself and was crucified for you, paying for all your sins and overcoming the Evil One for you. And by so doing, He demonstrated that He alone has all power and authority, and you are comforted and strengthened by Christ's words and work on your behalf

Let us pray: O God, our Maker and Redeemer, You wonderfully created us and in the Incarnation of Your Son yet more wonderfully restored our human nature. Grant that we may ever be alive in Him who made Himself to be like us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

We're not quite done with John the Baptist; not yet. In fact, he will occupy our thoughts for the next couple of days.

When John cries out, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," he is saying nothing less than this: Jesus Himself is at hand, for Jesus is the very embodiment of the kingdom of heaven. And very soon Jesus will take His place in the overall scheme of God's plan of salvation and make His adult appearance known for three amazing and stunning years of words and actions – all of which was foretold by the OT prophets, John himself being the last of them.

Scripture proclaims John as the forerunner of Christ. John runs before Christ. John is Christ's set-up man. John is very much like those coming attractions you see at the beginning of a movie which are intended to grab your interest in future movies and plant in your brain a desire to come back for more – including spending a small fortune on buttered popcorn, watered-down soda, and a few boxes of DOTS.

And we know that John's ministry was laser-focused on one thing, one person – Christ. John pointed to Christ as the One who would take people's sins away. This is epitomized in Jn 1:29 where he says of Christ and we sing in the Divine Liturgy, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

John's message is simple: "Repent," which is what we as God's people get to do. Repentance glorifies God. We confess our sins, then Christ forgives us by speaking through our faithful pastor the words of Holy Absolution "as from God Himself." And John's work of pointing us to Christ comes to fruition.

Continue to feast on Christ's Word and Sacraments where the fulfillment of John's work – Christ – comes to you for forgiveness and strength.

Let us pray: Hosanna to the living Lord! Hosanna to th'Incarnate Word! To Christ, Creator, Savior, King let earth, let heav'n, hosanna sing. Amen.

Family trees are important. Many people use websites and pay fees to dig far back into their family line. Some tell you your ethnic background, some tell you more about your ancestors than you ever thought possible, and sometimes you find something shocking. Perhaps you're a shirttail relative of Atilla the Hun or even Vlad the Impaler. Maybe you're related to George Washington or Martin Luther. The things you can learn!

For us Christians, however, there are only two connections to the past that count the most: one is that we are all descendants of our first parents, Adam and Eve, and the other is that we are all children of God by faith.

As descendant of Adam and Eve we have inherited the sinful nature thanks to their disobedience in the Garden. And because of that sinful nature, we are hopelessly impotent regarding our ability to save ourselves or to do anything that would impress God or earn His favor. As Scripture clearly confesses, we are by nature blind, dead, enemies of God; we are walking spiritual corpses. We can no more come to faith or affect our own salvation any more than a dead body can bring itself back to life.

But Christ, the Second Adam, the incarnate Son of God has power over death, both spiritual and physical. His substitutionary suffering, crucifixion, death, and resurrection purchased forgiveness for all and paid for everyone's sins. By God-created faith and trust in Christ's work for us, He pours His forgiveness, life, and salvation on us and into us so that we are now His beloved children, grafted into His family of believers. We are now part of Christ's family tree which includes all saints from Adam until Christ returns.

And when Christ comes again, that divine reunion in heaven will be far better than any earthly reunion as we will be gathered with all the saints from the beginning and for eternity.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, we thank and praise You for taking us into Your eternal family. Keep us, by Your grace, faithful to the end. Amen.

When Jesus came to the Jordan River to be baptized by John, John tried to prevent Him. John preached “a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” (Luke 3:3) but Jesus had no sins for which He needed to repent! John, being conscious of his sins and his sinful flesh, acknowledges that he needs to be baptized by Jesus. Jesus tells the Baptist to permit it at that time—that is, during His humiliation as He earns the world’s redemption—because it is fitting for them to “fulfill all righteousness.” When Jesus comes up out of the water, the heavens open. The Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove, remains on Jesus, and God the Father says from heaven, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

What does it mean that Jesus is baptized to fulfill all righteousness? Christ earned perfect righteousness for all people by His sinless, righteous life lived under God’s law. He earned the forgiveness of sins by His innocent, bitter sufferings and death. By being baptized, Jesus sanctified baptism as the instrument for applying the forgiveness and perfect righteousness He acquires in His life and death. By His baptism, He hallowed baptism as “the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit” for us (Titus 3:5).

Jesus’ baptism also reveals Him as the divine Son of God. God the Father testifies in an audible voice that this man Jesus is His true Son. The Holy Spirit descended and rested on Jesus, testifying to the fact that Jesus possesses the Holy Spirit not only according to His divine nature but His human nature as well. The presence of the God the Holy Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—at Jesus’ baptism also testifies that the Triune God is present in our baptism. When we are baptized with water in the name of the Triune God, God the Father applies the forgiveness and righteousness Jesus earned to us, adopts us as His beloved sons, and gives us His Holy Spirit. Being His beloved children by baptism, we are well-pleasing to God.

Let us pray: Help us, O Lord, to live in your baptismal promises each day, so that with sins forgiven and righteous in your sight, we may live righteously by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

John reveals Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. As the Lamb without spot or blemish, the Lord laid upon Jesus the iniquity of us all; by His innocent, bitter sufferings and death He made satisfaction for our sins, “and not for ours only, but also for the whole world” (1 John 2:2). That satisfaction for sin is forever effective for taking away the world’s sin because it is an eternal redemption (Heb 9:12). This is chiefly what John meant when He preached that Jesus is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.

Christ applies the benefits of His suffering and death – forgiveness of our sins – when we believe the Gospel. Sins are detached from us and removed “as far as the east is from the west” (Psalm 103:12). This is why we sing these words of John in the Divine Service immediately before Holy Communion. There Christ has mercy on us and takes away our sins as we eat and drink in faith, firmly believing His words that His body and blood were “given and shed for you for the remission of sins.” As we confess our sins and believe the Gospel each day, Jesus is taking away the sin of the world, thereby applying to us the perfect forgiveness He acquired for us on the cross.

When, living by faith in Christ’s promise, we fight sin in our mind and body by the power of the Holy Spirit, so that we do not let sin reign over us to fulfill its desires. He works in us by His Holy Spirit so that we flee sinful lusts and pursue the opposite virtues instead. We do so in the joy that Christ takes away our sin and gives us His perfect righteousness by faith. As we do this each day, Jesus is taking away the sin of the world in us. 1 John 3:8 reminds us, “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil.” He does this by taking away the sin of the world continually in us.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, we give you thanks for taking away the sin of the world upon the cross by making perfect satisfaction. Take away our sins by repentance and faith in your Gospel and increase in us Your Holy Spirit to live holy lives. Amen.

Today we meet Andrew and his brother Simon. Both are examples for our faith and good works.

As Andrew and the other, unnamed disciple of John were conversing with the Baptist, John points to Jesus walking by and says, “Behold the Lamb of God.” Andrew is so eager to learn from the Messiah that he asks where Jesus is staying. Although it is late in the day, Jesus answers, “Come and see.” Jesus is eager to teach the one who seeks Him in faith and humility. Andrew, in turn, brings his brother Simon to Jesus so that he, too, can learn from Him about the kingdom of God and true righteousness. Andrew shows us that faith in the Christ is eager to learn from Him and that Christ is eager to teach those who seek Him with an honest heart. Andrew also shows us that faith is eager to bring others to where they can learn from Christ.

Upon seeing Simon, Jesus immediately gave Simon a new name, Cephas, which is translated “a stone” (but is the Aramaic equivalent of the Greek name Peter). This is not the first time the Lord has given someone a new name. He changed Abram’s name to Abraham. He changed Jacob’s name to Israel. A new name shows a new status with God as believing students and confessors of the true God. This is true of Simon. Christ calls Him Cephas because of the rock-solid confession of Christ he will make throughout his life.

Christ bestows a new name on all who come to Him in faith, humbly seeking to learn from Him. He says in Revelation 2:17 to the one who overcomes, “I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.” He says in Revelation 3:12, “I will write on him My new name.” The new name is ‘son of God.’ As sons of God by God-created faith, Christ calls us to learn from Him and make the rock-solid confession of Cephas, that Jesus is the Christ who takes away the sin of the world.

Let us pray: We give You thanks, O Lord, for the faith and good works of Andrew and Simon. Grant that we may learn from You and confess You before men as You give us opportunity. Amen.

Jesus told Nathaniel, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!” Nathaniel responds, “How do You know me?” Jesus says to him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” Jesus saw what Nathaniel was doing, for He is the eternal Son of God in human flesh and “in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (Col 2:9).

The Lord says in Jeremiah 23:23, “Am I a God near at hand,” says the LORD, ‘And not a God afar off? Can anyone hide himself in secret places, So I shall not see him?’ says the LORD.” David confesses in Psalm 139 that the Lord knows all his ways and understands our thoughts from afar. The intertestamental wise man writes, “No thought escapes him, and nothing is hidden from him” (Sirach 42:20). Nathaniel experiences Jesus divine omniscience and confesses, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

Christ knows us as He knew Nathaniel. He is acquainted with all our ways, even knowing the thoughts that we hide from others. Christ’s omniscience is both law and gospel for us. It is law in that He knows every thought in our heads and each wicked imagination in our sinful hearts. Just because others may not know our sinful impulses, Christ knows them. This should lead us to repent of our sinful thoughts and ask God to purify our hearts and minds as soon as we experience those thoughts.

Christ’s omniscience is also gospel for us. He knows us entirely—our concerns, our anxieties, and our hopes. We can pray with David, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties” (Ps 139:23). He knows our anxieties and worries and invites us to cast them upon Him because He cares for us. We can also pray with David, “See if there is any wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps 139:24).

Let us pray: O Lord Jesus Christ, cleanse our thoughts by Your Holy Spirit. Give us pure thoughts and desires that we may serve you joyfully. Remind us always to cast all our anxieties upon You because You care for us. Amen.

Every temptation we face is like Jesus' temptations in that every temptation entices us away from believing and living our baptismal identity. The Triune God adopts us as His beloved children in baptism and is pleased with us because we are covered with Christ's righteousness. Our temptations, whatever they may be, are temptations to doubt our baptismal identity.

Every temptation we face also fits under the three temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. The temptation to turn stones to bread is a temptation to lose faith in God's promises. "If you are really God's son, then why do you lack?" The temptation to throw Himself from temple pinnacle is the temptation to presumption, so that we apply God's word to ourselves outside of our callings or contrary to the meaning of His word. "If you are really God's son, you should be able to do whatever you want and He will protect you." The temptation to worship the devil in exchange for the kingdoms of this world is the temptation to attain the things of the world and adopt the ways of the world, rather than allow God to give us those things according to His will in His time. "If you are really God's son, why do the unbelieving heathen have a better life than you?" Whenever the devil, the world, or our own flesh tempts us, the temptation is a variation on these.

Jesus defeated the devil on our behalf, in His flesh, so that He might defeat the devil in us and our flesh each day. When we are tempted to disbelieve God's Word, to presume God will protect us no matter what we do, or to go along with the world to get ahead, we remember our baptismal identity. We remember that we are sons of God, and sons of God do not think, say, or do that which the devil, world, and flesh want us to think, say, and do. We want to do the will of our heavenly Father. Believing that He has given us His Holy Spirit, we resist the devil until He flees from us.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, keep us mindful of the identity you give us in Holy Baptism, so that amid temptations we may overcome and be victorious by believing the promises you give us in your word. Amen.

In these brief verses Mark shows us that Jesus wasn't immune from the devil's temptations, the dangers of this life, and persecution. Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness and in danger of wild beasts. His forerunner, John, was persecuted, imprisoned for preaching that Herod was sinning and needed to repent, be baptized, and bear fruits worthy of repentance. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the devil and the world were set against the Gospel and ministry.

The devil and the world continually attack Christ and His apostles throughout their ministries with temptations. Paul tells the Corinthians that he was often "in perils in the wilderness" (2 Cor 11:26), and the book of Acts and the church histories show the persecutions the apostles faced. There is an important lesson for us in this. Christ is the Head of the body, which is His church. As it goes for the Head, so it goes for the body. Christians should not be shocked when they are tempted by the devil, in worldly danger, or persecuted for God's word.

Christ was tempted by the devil to doubt God's Word. We are tempted in the same way so that we put their trust in ourselves, our own hearts, the government, the economy, or anything other than our heavenly Father. Christ was persecuted, slandered, blasphemed, and eventually crucified. The Church through the ages has similarly been persecuted whenever she has remained faithful to Christ's Word and preached against—and lived contrary to—the world's sin.

The Lord allows Satan to tempt Christians, not to punish them, but to exercise them in their faith and use of the word. He allows Christians to face worldly dangers to teach them to flee to Him in faith and prayer. He allows the world to persecute His Christians so that we rely not on our own strength and resources, but God's promises. As it went for the Head, so it goes for the body; and, as the Head was victorious, so is His body.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, protect us in every temptation, danger, and persecution we face, so that we may overcome by faith and rejoice in Your provision. Amen.

After the kingdom of Israel split into two separate kingdoms, the king of the northern kingdom thrust Israel into the darkness of idolatry. Jeroboam, son of Nebat, built golden calves at Dan and Bethel, the northernmost and southernmost cities of Israel. King after king refused to remove these idols and encouraged Israel into deeper spiritual darkness. As punishment, the Lord allowed the king of Assyria to deport the people of Israel and replace the exiled population with heathen peoples who mixed their false beliefs with the true faith. The land that God had formerly given to the Israelite tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali land eventually became known as Galilee of the Gentiles.

Yet the Lord promised through the prophet Isaiah that the people who dwelled in the darkness of idolatry would one day see a great light. The words of Isaiah are fulfilled when Jesus departs for the region of Galilee to dwell in Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee. Christ Jesus is the “light and life of men” (John 1:4). He shined in the darkness of Zebulun and Naphtali by proclaiming the kingdom of heaven is at hand and is to be entered by repentance and faith in the gospel. He especially blesses this area by choosing to dwell in Capernaum and doing many works of power there.

Jesus is still that light that shines in the world which is darkened by sin and idolatry. His word reveals the idols in our hearts which we fear, love, and trust more than our Father in heaven, whether our idols be possessions, relationship, or lifestyles He hasn't given. Christ enlightens our hearts so that we repent of our idols and flee to Him for perfect forgiveness for every sin, which He reveals to us in the Gospel. Believing the Gospel, His Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, teaching us how to walk as children of the light.

Let us pray: Gracious Lord, illumine our hearts by Your law so we repent of fearing, loving, and trusting other things more than You, and drive away the darkness of our sins by Your Gospel so that we may walk as children of light. Amen.

Jesus doesn't dismiss Peter's inquiry. Rather, as God is prone to do, He levels the field and takes care of any prideful comparisons through the parable of the workers in the vineyard, 20:1-16 (which should *always* be connected to 19:27-30). Luther brings great understanding to the warning in verse 30:

“We must now look at these two words ‘last’ and ‘first,’ from two viewpoints. Let us see what they mean before God, then what they mean before men. Thus, those who are the first in the eyes of man, that is, those who consider themselves, or let themselves be considered, as the nearest to or the first before God, they are just the opposite before God, they are the last in his eyes and the farthest from him. On the other hand, those who are the last in the eyes of man, those who consider themselves, or let themselves be considered, the farthest from God and the last before him, they also are just the opposite, in that they are the nearest and the first before God. Now whoever desires to be secure, let him conduct himself according to the saying: ‘Whosoever exalteth himself, shall be humbled.’ For it is here written: The first before men are the last before God; the last in the eyes of men are first in the eye of God. On the other hand, the first before God are the last before men; and those God esteems as the last are considered by men to be the first.” (Sermons from Church Postils of 1525)

It may sound strange to the world, but believers understand, “Thanks be to God for humbling us to never trust in our flesh, but always fixing our eyes on Jesus, who, through faith alone, our only acceptability is given!”

Let us pray: Almighty and everlasting God, who governs all things in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the prayers of Your people and grant us Your peace for all our days; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Through these recruitments God is revealing that He planned all along to use men in the spreading of His New Testament. Why else recruit them? Of course, these lowly men – and the other lowly men to follow – will be equipped with the means of grace, means which *appear* lowly to man’s reason. Yet, because they are equipped with God’s Word, their words and the means of grace will, indeed, have power.

Christ’s words that immediately precede the text for today carry weight: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matt 4:17). These are the very words of Christ that sank deep into the men that were recruited and converted by Christ. These same words will not only resound in keeping the Apostles dying and rising through faith in Christ, it is the means of grace that also revert back to these words.

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” is right there with all preaching. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” is right there with Holy Baptism. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” is right there with confession and Holy Absolution. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” is right there with Holy Communion.

Although seeming to be scarce, God *does* raise up faithful pastors to continue in the spreading of His very words—creating and sustaining repentant faith through the Office of the Holy Ministry and the means of grace that He instituted! Thanks be to God, indeed!

Let us pray: Almighty and everlasting God, who governs all things in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the prayers of Your people and grant us Your peace for all our days; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Upon reading these Beatitudes – or Blessings – they don't sound very much like blessings. Being poor in spirit, mournful, meek, or hungry and thirsty aren't attractive to a way or of a theology of glory, which caters to sinful flesh—desiring to evaluate God's grace and live by sight and circumstance.

This is why the conclusion of the Beatitudes – the verses beyond the assigned text – reveals God's way, or theology, of the cross through which God brings the New Man to live by faith. In verses 11-12 Jesus proclaims: "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Christ is pointing out to all of the believing/baptized children of God who will hear His blessings repeated that, even as He fulfilled these Beatitudes for them, and in turn these sometimes-uncomfortable blessings will again be exuded through believers, they need not be concerned while living in this fallen world which hates and rejects God. Rather, because God sees the believer's repentant faith in the fully atoning merits of Christ, such faith is imputed – accounted – to them as the righteousness of Christ and they are, indeed, blessed possessors of great heavenly reward! Amidst all appearing tensions Christ remains our peace!

Let us pray: Almighty and everlasting God, who governs all things in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the prayers of Your people and grant us Your peace for all our days; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

In today's reading Jesus delivers a summation of some of God's Commandments the likes of which reveal how inescapable it is for any man to say that they have never broken them. The mirror of God's Law unavoidably reflects brightly when it is revealed that the breaking of God's Commandments can occur simply within one's imagination—without actual action—yet, ever-stemming from one's heart.

Jesus knows that God's Commandments have been, are being, and will be taught by sinners. Because of fallen, self-centered flesh different slants of God's Commandments come about – sometimes as if they are only civil laws. Jesus wants His disciples to have a clear, beyond-worldly understanding which goes to the heart of His believers. Thus, Jesus numerously states: “You have heard that it was said to those of old...” — “But I say to you...”. Jesus is not contradicting or correcting Moses. Jesus came to fulfill the very Law that was given by Moses. Rather, Jesus is making sure that God's Law not just be a civil law for a civil court, but in the heart of every human.

As God's Law reveals the depravity of our hearts, it is those brought to recognize their sins and confess them who can stare at Christ the crucified and further confess that His sacrifice – His fully atoning merits, His making full satisfaction – was for me. “In His wounds is my peace!”

Let us pray: Almighty and everlasting God, who governs all things in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the prayers of Your people and grant us Your peace for all our days; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount continues, and various topics are presented: good works, prayer, fasting, treasures, and the lamp of the body. In each of these Jesus is emphasizing genuineness—meaning no fence-riders, no imitators will stand. The genuineness of God-created faith is the clear focus.

Jesus pointedly teaches His disciples to pray in such a way that forgiveness of sins be an *on-going* petition to the Lord. This begs the question to anyone who believes in a false teaching known as Universal Objective Justification—which teaches that God accounts all of sinful humanity as completely forgiven and justified *apart from faith* because of Christ's resurrection. The question would be: "If God already declared all of sinful humanity as forgiven—and faith is unnecessary—then why would Christ direct His disciples to *continually* pray for on-going forgiveness from the Lord?"

The fifth petition, however, is not only asking for on-going forgiveness, it is a faith check as well! Having God-created faith in Christ's fully atoning merits is so important that Jesus re-emphasizes it after the Lord's Prayer, saying, "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (v. 14-15).

Properly understood forgiveness and justification matters!  
And it is received through faith alone!

Let us pray: Almighty and everlasting God, who governs all things in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the prayers of Your people and grant us Your peace for all our days; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Jesus continues His exhortation of the importance of God-created, rightly-focused faith. Man's flesh is legalistic by its very nature. It always thinks better of itself than it ought. Luther called this belief of the flesh, "Presumed righteousness" which simply means that man's flesh believes itself to be so good – good enough – that no help is needed when it comes to righteousness including, and especially, any help from outside of itself.

Does anyone really believe that they haven't been, or will ever be, judgmental toward their neighbor? It's Christ who points out that anyone possessing such a Pharisaical, presumed righteousness—conceited enough to think that one can measure others against oneself — is considered a "hypocrite" by God Himself! Christ remedies such trust in the flesh by wielding His "plank in your own eye" Law language.

So how do planks get removed? By having that Old Adam, through daily contrition and repentance, drown and die! They are removed by confessing to those planks and vanquishing them through the Gospel of Christ's full atoning merits promised through God's means of Word and Sacrament and received through faith alone. With Christ having made full satisfaction for sins—and on-going plank possessors trusting alone in Him who is the narrow gate—then it's the gracious gift of the Father, Christ Jesus, who is to be offered to others as their only rescue from the specks that ail them.

Let us pray: Almighty and everlasting God, who governs all things in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the prayers of Your people and grant us Your peace for all our days; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The world, our sinful flesh, and the devil bring about a constant yet futile search for anything to give us security—ever avoiding and excluding the very the One who is the source of our security. This very understanding is proclaimed in God’s holy Scripture: “For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected *it* in hope” (Romans 8:20).

The key words of that sentence are that God subjected creation to futility “in hope”. Christ and His fully atoning merits are that secured hope! Yet, how can one hear of—and, by God’s grace, have—such secured hope? Only by receiving the proper teaching of God’s Holy Scripture, which, through God’s Law and Gospel, brings one to repentance and belief!

Jesus’ sermon on the mount delved mostly into things to expect in the coming kingdom, namely, future honors and comforts. In today’s text Christ concludes His sermon by dealing with the here and now; and, go figure, the emphasis is on faith having its proper object. Jesus reveals how life is befallen with tumultuous trials, tensions, and suffering. Security isn’t in the trust of earthly idols. The proper believing, teaching, and confessing children of God, however, are rightly focused. For, right in the midst of life’s tribulations, Christ and His teachings are the rock through whom come true security and peace!

Let us pray: Almighty and everlasting God, who governs all things in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the prayers of Your people and grant us Your peace for all our days; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Jesus issues two related instructions in today's reading: a warning against putting stumbling blocks in the way of other Christians, and a simple procedure for dealing with other Christians when they sin against us, so that our failure to forgive does not become a stumbling block.

Jesus has a heart for the "little ones," both little children who believe in Him and adults who retain a sincere, child-like faith in Him. The unbelieving world sets all sorts of obstacles or "offenses" in the way of these little ones, to ensnare them in sin or to deter them from believing the Word of God; and the Lord has chosen to allow these things to remain in the world. But He will not hold guiltless the people responsible for them. On the contrary, an unimaginable punishment awaits them.

Jesus' warning here should make Christians especially careful never to be the ones responsible for derailing the faith of His precious little ones. That includes derailing their faith by failing to forgive, because we are to be imitators of God, and if Christians refuse to forgive when we ought, what are we teaching our brother about God's forgiveness?

But here we should note carefully the process of forgiveness outlined by Jesus, which is not the common advice of "just forgive everybody for everything, no matter what." No, when a brother, a fellow Christian, sins against you, you are first to rebuke him, telling him how he sinned. If he repents – if he recognizes his failure and shows himself to be sorry for his sin – then you are to forgive him, every time, immediately, in the same way that God forgives you after bringing you to repentance. But where there is no repentance, there can be no forgiveness. Where there is no repentance, you should pray for your brother and show him mercy in whatever way you can. But you cannot forgive a sin that someone wishes to keep holding onto, just as God does not forgive us if we refuse to repent.

Let us pray: Father in heaven, keep Your little ones safe from all who would do them harm, and keep us from causing anyone to stumble. Amen.

Jesus spent a whole Sabbath day in Capernaum manifesting who He was: the Conqueror of demons, the Healer of the sick, the One who is kind and good and ready to help, at no charge and for no reward. Matthew is the Evangelist who ties Jesus' goodness and His healing miracles to Isaiah's prophecy of the Suffering Servant. We often think of Jesus "bearing our griefs and carrying our sorrows" (Is. 53:4) with reference to what He suffered for us on the cross and throughout Holy Week, and rightly so. But as Matthew explains, it also refers to the fact that the Christ would actually take away the pains of His people while He was with them on earth.

No longer is Christ with us so that we can go to see Him to have our every illness healed. But we do well to go to where He still makes Himself available to us, to the ministry of the Word, not for the healing of earthly illnesses, but for the healing of our souls in the forgiveness of sins, in the strengthening of our faith, and in the protection He provides against the power of demons.

As the rest of today's reading teaches, following Jesus in this world will not be easy; He offers no earthly amenities. But following Him should be the most important thing in the world to us whose very life depends on the refuge He alone provides against sin, death, and the devil. And if, by God-created faith – we remain with Him to the end, He'll take away all our pains and provide the perfect healing of our bodies and our souls in the resurrection.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, have mercy on us in the midst of all our afflictions and make us ready to follow Jesus at all times. Amen.

The account of Jesus casting the legion of demons out of the men and into the herd of pigs is the most vivid, detailed account of Jesus' interactions with the demons in the Bible. The other Evangelists record the superhuman strength of the possessed man, along with the violence he displayed toward himself and others. But Jesus did not have to fight against the demons. He stood as the Almighty God, unthreatened and unafraid. Indeed, the demons were the ones who cowered in fear of Him because they knew who He was and that He had the power to torment them even then, before the Last Judgment, when He will cast them into the everlasting fire, prepared originally not for men, but for unclean spirits like these.

In their fear and desperation not to be cast immediately into hell, they begged to be cast into a herd of swine, and Jesus granted their request. The pigs drowned, and, apparently, the demons were free to go back to "going through dry places, seeking rest" (Matt. 12:43). Why would He grant this request, or any request on their part? Perhaps because Jews had no business keeping unclean animals in the first place. Perhaps as a sobering reminder that God is not yet ready to rid the world entirely of the devil's assaults. In any case, Jesus' sovereign power and authority are highlighted for us. That power caused the people of that region to fear Him and to want to be rid of Him. But for those who have been baptized into His name, it gives the greatest comfort. Not even a legion of demons can touch us, as long as we are close to Him.

Let us pray: O Lord Jesus, be ever our mighty Defender against the crafts and assaults of the devil! Amen.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus didn't only perform outward healings; His ministry was mostly spiritual. He called sinners like Matthew to leave their sinful life and follow Him, and they did. He went to the houses of sinners and ate and drank with them, showing them that they were safe with Him—not safe to go on living in sin, but safe to confess their sins, with the assurance of full and free forgiveness with Him and from Him. He had come to call sinners to repentance. To them He opened wide the doors of heaven, and He still does.

At the same time, He slammed the door shut on those who pretended to be righteous or healthy. To them, religion was about external deeds, of which they thought they had done plenty. Their pride had two tragic consequences. It prevented them from receiving help from Jesus, and it caused them to begrudge His help to others whom they considered to be unworthy.

Even John the Baptist's disciples, who were familiar with repentance, were fixated on external religion, on outward piety. They couldn't understand why Jesus' disciples didn't openly fast as they did. Jesus used the parables of the cloth and the wineskins to illustrate that the new covenant is different from the old. The Gospel is focused on mercy, not sacrifice, obedience from the heart, not external ceremonies, true repentance and faith in Christ, not a perfunctory show of religiosity. The joy of the Gospel of Jesus' compassion is too big to be confined to a strict schedule of obligatory fasting.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, great Physician, You are righteous. We are not. Blot out our sins and heal our souls, for Your mercy's sake alone, and stay with us until the end to keep attending to our healing. Amen.

The blind men in today's reading trusted in Jesus to heal their eyes, but not to command their mouths, as they flagrantly disobeyed His order to keep their mouths shut about this particular healing. Another man's mouth was opened by Jesus, and the crowds were amazed at how easily He was able to command the demon. But the Pharisees were quick to attribute His power to the devil instead of God. Jesus tirelessly taught and preached and healed in all the cities and villages of Israel, but it was never enough; the people of Israel remained weary and scattered, like sheep without a shepherd, and His heart went out to them. His teaching was clear, and yet many did not obey. His preaching was pure, and yet many charged Him with false doctrine. His shepherding was perfect, and yet the sheep were prone to wandering.

If the Son of God could suffer so many setbacks in His earthly ministry, why do we imagine that we should see fewer? Sin has so corrupted our race that we are barely kept within the fold by even the best ministry. And yet the ministry of the Word, instituted and regulated by Christ, remains the only thing that stands between us and eternal death. It is still Christ's tool on earth for gathering His sheep into His holy Church and keeping them gathered there. The harvest may not be as plentiful in any one place as it was at the time of Jesus, but there are now more places to live and more people scattered throughout the world. The need for laborers and for prayers for laborers remains just as great!

Let us pray: Lord of the harvest, send laborers into Your harvest field, and sustain them in the face of both opposition and apathy. Amen.

See what happens when a person asks the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest! Sometimes the one who prays becomes the answer to his own prayers.

That was the case for the twelve apostles. Out of the multitudes of disciples who followed Jesus, learned from Jesus, and believed in Jesus, He chose some—only some—to be apostles, “sent ones.” These were the ones who were to go out and preach His Gospel. In this first sending, they were not to go into all the world. They were to go “first to the Jew” (cf. Rom. 1:16). Such was the privilege of being of that race. They had been entrusted with the very words of God. They were the recipients of His promises of the coming Christ, the invited guests to the marriage feast. Therefore, they were to be the first to hear the call to the feast, “All things are ready! Come to the wedding!” (Matt. 22:4).

In the words of today’s reading, Jesus establishes a precept that remains in place for those whom He sends to preach: “A worker is worthy of his food” (Matt. 16:10, cf. 1 Cor. 9:3-14). His preachers have a right to receive a decent wage from those to whom they preach, and their hearers have an obligation to give it. Some, like the Apostle Paul, would not use this right, but all have it alike. Even more importantly, those who hear the Word of Christ from His messengers have the obligation to receive it, to believe it, and to obey it.

Let us pray: O Lord, we thank You for giving some to be ministers of Your Gospel among us. Help us never to despise this gift, but to use it, and to support those whom You send. Amen.

The widespread rejection of Jesus' apostles which we heard about in today's reading would not take place during this first sending, but it would certainly take place later, and at various times until the end of the world. Peter and John would be the first to be arrested, interrogated, and beaten. James would be the first apostle to be put to death. And countless other Christians, both ministers and laity, would be unjustly targeted and brutally tortured and killed within the next three hundred years. During much of that time, there would be nowhere in the world where it would be safe to be a Christian.

And yet Jesus promises divine help to give an answer and to make the good confession. He assures His Christians that they matter to Him, even when it looks like they've been abandoned, and that He will be their Avenger, too, though not at once.

This is the way it must be on this earth. Those who confess Christ must be made to resemble Him, first before God, through faith, in perfect righteousness and holiness; then before men, through confession, in great humility, and shame. No one and nothing can come before Him—not our families, not even our own life. But the rewards He promises after this life are so great that they cannot be compared with these present sufferings. This is why we commemorate the martyrs of every age, that we may be encouraged by their example and trained to imitate it.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, strengthen us to confess You before men. Grant us wisdom and a mouth to speak, that Your name may be glorified and Your Church edified through Your Spirit's work in us. Amen.