

A blessed and holy Lent to all of you. As we begin this most humble and repentant season of Lent, journeying for 40 days to Jesus' bloody cross, we continue by reading from Martin Luther's Small Catechism. Please open in the folders in your pew to the second section dealing with the Apostles' Creed. We focus today upon the Third Article.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

What does this mean? I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.

In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

In this Christian Church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers.

On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true.

The world seems to be lurching haphazardly from calamity to calamity. There seems to be one problem after another, one disaster after another, sometimes, even more than one crisis to deal with at a time. We struggle with the events of our daily lives, our relationships with one another, trying to just stay afloat, trying to stay ahead of it all. But we are drowning, we are gulping for air trying to catch another breath, clutching to anything and everything just to stay afloat. We are looking for a life preserver. We are crying out for someone to save us, to help us. The devil, the world and our sinful flesh tell us to just give up, to end it all. In our sin, we allow ourselves to become depressed, angry, bitter, we lose hope; we turn inward on ourselves and think there is nowhere to turn.

But as baptized children of God, having been forgiven of our sins, we can take great comfort in the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed. The words that we just recited together

teaches us that it is okay to cry out for help, it is a good thing to humble ourselves realizing that we can't do it alone, we can't save ourselves, not even a little bit. Like us, Jesus was tempted as He was in the wilderness for forty days, He prayed for help and like us in our baptism His heavenly Father gave Him the Holy Ghost, the Helper and comforter. The Third Article of the Creed makes us realize that everything depends on the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Ghost. He alone is faithful. He alone is an ever present reality in our time of need. He alone is our strength and our song, our mighty fortress. He is the One who has heard our cry for help and has stretched forth His right hand and saved us, defending us from all the evil that rises up against us.

On Ash Wednesday, we began to focus upon the three themes presented to us, by our synodical president, the Reverend Matthew Harrison, for our prayerful meditation. They are inscribed on the banner: Witness, Mercy, and Life Together. Today, on this first Sunday of Lent we will consider Witness. Witness, that is, making a right witness, a true confession about our God. The fundamental gift and task of the Christian Church and all the baptized children of God, is to bear witness to Jesus Christ and His death, resurrection, ascension into heaven and promise to come again to bring us to be where He is. Making Jesus and His love for us known to each other and all people, is our responsibility. Making a right confession about who Jesus is; that is our sacred task toward those who do not know Jesus, to those who reject Him, to our friends and family and even our enemies. All people need to know the hope and the strength that we have in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

We confess in the Third Article of the Creed, "I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Christian Church. The Christian Church has been established by God to preach Jesus Christ and

Him crucified to the ends of the earth. The Christian Church is to administer the Sacraments of Baptism, making disciples of all nations, teaching us to obey everything Jesus has commanded. The Christian Church is to absolve all remorseful and repentant sinners, forgiving us, restoring us to a loving and perfect relationship with our heavenly Father, reminding us that we are His dear children. The Christian Church is to eat and drink the very body and blood of Jesus, making the death and resurrection of Jesus known to all people.

The Word and the Sacraments, which we treasure so much, have one purpose, pointing us to Jesus Christ and His grace, mercy and peace for us sinners. The Christian Church's purpose is not to make us feel guilty about our sins, or to make us feel worthless in our relationship before God and neighbor; her purpose is to point us to Jesus Christ, that we would humble ourselves before Him and fear, love and trust in Him above all things. The Christian Church's purpose is to proclaim the truth of Jesus Christ. The Christian Church's purpose is to point out how our daily temptation to go it alone, to be our own little gods, to continue in sin, is the way of death and condemnation. The Church's purpose is to be the calm in the storm; a safe harbor during the time of distress. And as members of the Holy Christian Church, we are witnesses to that truth. We need to witness to others how good it is as children of God.

The Christian Church is the ship that calmly sails on, ever faithful, carrying us toward that moment in time when our glorious Lord returns to claim us as His own. She frequently contends with stormy seas. Winds blow ferociously and waves crash mightily against her hull, threatening capsize and shipwreck. Yet she sails fearlessly on in the one true faith, no matter how fierce the storm. The Church, with Jesus Christ at the helm, will ferry us through those threatening seas into the safe harbor. Jesus will bring us to be with Him in presence, seating us

at the right hand of the Father; that we would know eternal joy. The Christian Church will bring us to our heavenly home, where there is no suffering and pain, only rejoicing.

The message of the Church is “Repent, for the Kingdom is near!” and it is also “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” So in Christ, take heart. Do not be tempted to grow weary in what sometimes seems a hard and difficult life. Do not grow weary as husbands and wives, as fathers and mothers, as sons and daughters, as citizens and neighbors and friends. Place your fear, love and trust in Jesus, who said to the criminal on the cross, “Today you will be with Me in paradise.”

Place your fear, love and trust in Jesus your Good Shepherd, who is with you always as you walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Jesus restores your soul, His rod and staff they comfort you, He anoints your head with oil, your cup runs over, goodness and mercy follow you every day of your life. You have nothing to fear. You shall not be in want. Together, we shall call upon the name of Jesus and He will answer us, He will deliver us from all evil, He will keep us on the straight path, and because of Him we will win the victory.

The 40 day fast of Lent is a time of cleansing and renewal. Let us together lay our sins before our gracious and merciful Father in heaven. We can count on Him to hide His face from our sins and to blot out all our iniquities in the blood of His dear Son. Our Father in heaven will create in us a clean heart, that is why He sent His Son Jesus to die on the cross. He will and does forgive us all our sins. He will and does renew a right spirit within us. Let us give Him thanks and praise that it is so. That is what it means to be a witness of God in a sinful and dying world, a world that is tempted to go astray. Amen.