

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany
26 January, Anno Domini 2025
Romans 1:8-17

Beloved in the Lord,

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

It is a terrible plague upon our times that everyone feels the need to be entertained. Everywhere we go, we expect a good show - even in places where that's not normal. Our children expect school to be fun and exciting. Every event and interaction has to be sensationalized. We want a big, showy process and equally big, showy results - big bang for our buck or we'll take our buck elsewhere.

That's certainly what Naaman was expecting. He wanted a show. He wanted a wave of the hands. He wanted signs and wonders. He wanted mystical waters. But God isn't in show business. He's not selling you a product and doing whatever it takes in order to get you to buy it. He is in the business of saving you from the death of your sin. He knows better than to stroke Old Adam's ego and give him what his itching ears and eyes want. Because what our ego wants is to be told it's special, that it shouldn't have to suffer, it shouldn't be denied its desires, that it shouldn't have to be uncomfortable, it shouldn't be inconvenienced or have to subject itself to the needs of others. Our ego demands that it be placated and amused and never challenged.

But repentance is not comfortable. It's not entertaining. It is humiliating. It is sacrifice. Repentance is ultimately the rejection of self and the acknowledgment that there is nothing good in me - not my desires, not my thoughts, not even my intentions. There is only sin and death and wretchedness. Repentance isn't fulfilling. Just the opposite. It is to empty yourself of any vain notions that you are or can be righteous. It is to critically reflect on your words and deeds and be willing to see where you were in the wrong and admit it. Repentance is anything but fun. In truth, it can be quite terrifying because it insists that you look honestly at yourself - no varnishing, no excuses. Just the raw truth of the wretchedness that lies within your heart; your angry, covetous, lustful thoughts; the lies and cruel words that come out of your mouth. Repentance confesses "I am unclean, O Lord."

That kind of repentance, the repentance that God works by pounding our stony

hearts with the Law, has no interest in flash. Having a good time doesn't fix sin. Having a good time can't take away death. It can distract you for a minute but that's all. The sin, the labored conscience, still remains. The truly repentant sinner longs after one thing, will only find comfort in one way - the mercy of God, the declaration and promise that God will not, in fact, judge him as he most certainly deserves. That alone can bring a cowering and trembling sinner out of the depths of despair and death into the glorious joy of heaven.

That's why the world despises the Gospel. That's why our sinful flesh resists the Gospel. That's why we perhaps find ourselves less than enthusiastic about the things of God - prayer, devotions, Bible study, being in the Divine Service, bearing witness to the Gospel. There is absolutely nothing outwardly flashy about these things. Faith, not sight, values them and sees in them the profound glory with which God Himself has filled them. "Would you like to wake up early on Sunday morning, spend an hour standing and sitting, sing some songs, say many of the exact same words week after week, give up a portion of your possessions and when it's all said and done, walk out without so much as even a parting gift?" Week after week we stand before this altar and what do we get? We aren't suddenly different people when we walk out. We don't receive an action plan to put into place to live a better, happier life.

We receive a word. What we receive is the glorious revelation that God's anger that once smoked and burned against our sin has all been poured out upon Jesus. What we receive are those very familiar words "Shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." With those words sin and death are driven back into the shadows, fear gives way to courage, our souls are snatched out of the depths of hell, and we are ushered into the joy of God's merciful presence. Dear sinner, it is a great word that the Lord God has spoken to you; will you not do it? Has He actually said to you "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved"? Yes! This is exactly what He promises you - Baptism now saves you! Are you a sinner? Christ has died for you. He has paid your ransom price. He has willed to make you clean.

Life, salvation, perfect eternal healing, the resurrection of body and soul to eternal life, victory over all your enemies, the kingdom of your heavenly Father, the certainty of your daily bread - all of these things are contained and are given to you in a word, in the promises of your Lord. You don't see these things, but your Baptism assures you that they are, nonetheless, yours this very hour and every hour. When suffering and persecution and trials assail you with doubt and fear and anxiousness, the Word of the Lord stands fast forever. All that He has promised to you, you will receive when Christ comes again to lift us out of the valley of

sorrow. And in the very proclamation of these things, the Holy Spirit works to create and strengthen faith so that there is nothing sweeter or more certain in our hearts than God's promises. The Word which you have heard this very hour is a Word filled with life and power and the Holy Spirit Himself. This Gospel is the very power of God to raise sinners from death to life, from eternal judgment to the very gates of paradise.

This is certainly not a thing to be ashamed of but a thing to raise our voice in hymns and prayers of praise and thanksgiving. It may not be filled with entertainment but it is absolutely cause for great joy and rejoicing. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and be baptized in His Name. That's the formula. That's the program. Put down your vanity, your selfish expectations, or any notion that God will be placated by any attempt on your part. He will not. He has been more than placated by the Blood of Jesus Christ. Only believe, receive the gift which God offers you in His Word, which He wraps and delivers in the font and the Holy Communion.

Here, there is no flash. But there is Jesus, crucified and risen for you for the forgiveness of all your sins. That will never change because your Lord and His promises never change. Thanks be to God!

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.