

Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year C

May 9, 2010

Acts 16: 9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21: 10, 22-22:5; John 14: 23-29

Acts 16:9-15

{9} During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." *{10}* When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them. *{11}* We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, *{12}* and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. *{13}* On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. *{14}* A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. *{15}* When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

Psalm 67

{1} May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, Selah *{2}* that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations. *{3}* Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. *{4}* Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth. Selah *{5}* Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. *{6}* The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us. *{7}* May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere him.

Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

{10} And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.... *{22}* I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. *{23}* And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. *{24}* The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. *{25}* Its gates will never be shut by day--and there will be no night there. *{26}* People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. *{27}* But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.... *{22:1}* Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb *{2}* through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. *{3}* Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; *{4}* they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. *{5}* And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

John 14:23-29

{23} Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. *{24}* Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me. *{25}* "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. *{26}* But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. *{27}* Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. *{28}* You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. *{29}* And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.

Since today is Mother's Day, I thought it would be appropriate and fitting to point out an interesting fact from our first reading having to do with women. It turns out that Lydia and those in her household were the first

Christian converts on the European continent, since Philippi was located in what is now modern day Turkey. So, right from the beginning, women played a major and influential role in the spread of the Gospel message. Lydia became head of the church that met in her house, so some say that would have made her the equivalent of a “Bishop”. Lydia is, in a real sense, the “mother” of European Christianity.

Moving on...

Those among us who are “cradle” Lutherans no doubt remember having to memorize all or parts of Luther’s *Small Catechism* in preparation for Confirmation. Since there are many among us who are not “cradle” Lutherans, I’ll offer a brief explanation. Luther wrote the *Small Catechism* as a tool for instruction in the basics of the Christian faith. It was intended to reach as broad an audience as possible, particularly among the “common” folk, though Luther believed that most people at the time were poorly informed about their faith. So, it is brief, simple, easy to teach, and easy to learn. Typical of all catechisms of the time, it is in a question and answer format and covers topics such as the Apostles’ Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Sacraments. There is also a “Table of Duties” that you can take or leave, though I’d advise you to “leave” it. Near the end of the *Small Catechism* Luther provided some “model” prayers or suggestions for morning and evening (or night).

As I said, the *Small Catechism* is, by necessity and design, brief and simple, so it’s easy to miss some of the distinctive “twists” in Luther’s “grace based” approach to Christianity. Those two simple “prayer models”, I believe, contain just such a “twist”.

Two “disclaimers”. As far as I can tell, no one else has written or spoken about this, so it’s entirely possible that I’m either very original or very wrong. Second, since I’m not a “cradle” Lutheran and never had to memorize the *Small Catechism*, my memory of the actual wording was faulty, but I won’t let that stop me since the point nevertheless remains the same.

Both the Morning and Evening Blessings, as they are called, begin by suggesting that one makes “the sign of the holy cross”, prays the Apostles’ Creed and the Lord’s Prayer, and then something along the line of a model prayer Luther provided. Here’s the conclusion of the morning section: “After singing a hymn perhaps (for example, one on the Ten Commandments) or whatever else may serve your devotion, *you are to go to your work joyfully*. Now, here’s the conclusion to the evening section: “Then you are to go to sleep *quickly and cheerfully*.”

Why the big deal about that? Where's the "twist"?

We tend to forget that in his former (and formative) life, Luther was a monk and a priest. As such, he was obligated to a rigorous and exact regimen of prayers and devotions that included the right words, the right gestures, and the right times. Failure to do so was considered sinful. By all accounts, Luther had a sensitive or tender conscience (some might even say "tortured"). He also had a high sense of duty and so he took all this stuff very seriously and did his best to "measure up".

What we heard from the *Small Catechism* is brief, flexible, and marked by confidence and joy. It's not what one says or how long it takes that ultimately matters, but the One before whom one is praying, whether the words are brief or extended and whether one takes three minutes or three hours. It's not about *us*. That's a far cry from Luther's past experience, so what happened?

After many years of inner turmoil and struggle, of being "troubled in heart and afraid", something happened. Luther had a deep "conversion" experience, what some call his "Reformation Breakthrough". I've read his account of this before, though it's always worth hearing. It also happens to be my *second* favorite of Luther's writings, the first being a line from one of his eight sermons at Wittenberg where he stated that we must have confidence in God to bring about what God promises and that, basically, the reform of the Church occurred through God's power while he and his friends sat drinking beer in a pub. How cool is that?

Here's a little background. Luther was teaching and struggling with the biblical concept of the "justice" of God, especially as it appeared in the *Letter to the Romans*, which he understood to be a perfect God demanding perfection from us and punishing any transgression. Anyway, listen:

...I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that "the just shall live by his faith". *Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the "justice of God" had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven...*

If you have a true faith that Christ is your Savior, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God's heart and will, that you should see pure grace and overflowing love. This it is to behold God in faith that you should look upon his fatherly, friendly heart, in which there is no anger nor ungraciousness.

[Anyone] who sees God as angry does not see [God] rightly but looks only on a curtain, as if a dark cloud had been drawn across his [or her] face.

Luther had his own experience of “the city of God”, as it were, coming down from heaven to meet him (see the second reading), his own experience of God “making a home” within him. There was no going back. Luther was a prolific, but not necessarily systematic, writer. But, the one thread that I see running through the writings I have read is this air of freedom, joy, and confidence when it comes to God’s relationship with us.

You all know me well enough by now to know that one of the things that “gets me going”, that is sure to have me get out my “soap box”, is fear based religion, particularly within Christianity.

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

These words of Jesus are addressed as much to us, as individuals and as a congregation, as they were to those original disciples.

Much as I am tempted to provide answers, I am simply going to leave you with a question/invitation:

“What does it look like to live in a relationship with God that is not marked by fear and uncertainty, but rather by joy, peace, freedom, confidence, and security?”

“Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

Come, Holy Advocate. Come, Holy Comforter. Stand beside us when we are afraid. Remind us when we forget.

AMEN.