

Isaiah 40.25-31; 1 Peter 2.11-20; John 16.16-23

Jubilate

8 May 2022

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Hallelujah! +

Hallelujah! Christ is risen. **He is risen indeed. Hallelujah!**

Beloved in the Lord: Grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The three readings appointed for today, *Jubilate* Sunday, serve as the basis for today's sermon, and especially these words recorded by Isaiah: "My way is hidden from the LORD, and my just claim is passed over by my God."

Oremus: haec, pater sancte, verba tua sunt, etc.

Suppose I gave you a huge, blank piece of paper right now with a big fat magic marker. Your job is to lay out a graph that expresses the course of the life of a Christian.

The bottom of your graph is the zero-line for apparent progress—for the apparent progress in your Christian life. Let's say there's a scale of 0 to 100. The higher you go on your graph, the greater the apparent progress.

The zero-line for "age" is to the far left, or for how long you've been a Christian. And the whole length of your life is measured out equally in years from left to right.

Do you have a picture of what that would like?

Okay. With your imaginary graph in mind, now try something. Start on the far left side of your graph and with your mind's eye chart out the Christian life. I'll give you a couple of seconds to envision that.

[Pause]

What does your graph look like? (This is actually an important little exercise.)

Does your line start in the lower left-hand corner and go up and up? Starting with Baptism and then a major bump at Confirmation and just getting better and better?

And then the year you finally conquered that one sin.

Followed by the one when you started having regular home devotions.

And then a little later than that, the time when you simply committed to being in church every Sunday except when you were sick. And so on.

Or maybe you're a little bit more of a realist. And instead of going up and up and your line looks more like a roller coaster ride.

It starts off, oh, about midway up the left-hand side with your Baptism and then as you think back over your life. And think of the many habitual sins you harbored in this period of life or that. And the open sins you reveled in and the ways you caused others to stumble. Or the difficulties you experienced. Loss

of a job. A terrific accident. Loss of a loved one. Disappointments and struggles. And the punishments you received in this life for your sins, the consequences you suffered. Opening that registered mail that contained the divorce papers. Or the summons to appear in court. A year of teary afternoons in your childhood bedroom. And then, in the midst of all that, there's the despair.

The bad times.

Along with the good times, of course.

The highlights of life. Your wedding day. A memorable birthday. Your first car. Your Lutheran confirmation day. The times when you didn't feel controlled by your own sin or the sin of others. The times when your track record in attending church was nothing to be ashamed about. The year you read through the whole Bible verse by verse, chapter by chapter, like we all did a couple years ago as a congregation. Those years when your home devotional life was, you'd have to admit, pretty good. Those weeks when your prayer life was spontaneous and rich.

So what you end up with is a wavy line, ending up about where it started. On a scale of 1 to 100 it starts at about fifty and ends at about fifty, but hits every other rating in between.

And that leaves us with two options. The upward trajectory. And the wavy line.

Fellow-redeemed: amazingly, the Christian life, for every appearance to the contrary, is like neither of those lines. Scripture's picture is entirely different.

It begins with your Baptism where you are literally put to death. Your Old Adam, that is. And every shred of righteousness you thought you had is ripped out of your hands. And then that process continues every day. Baptism isn't a one-time thing. It's the perennial life of the Christian. Every day through your Baptism the Lord rips the filthy rags of your righteousness out of your hands. Those things you'd like to hold before Him and say, "See, Lord? I'm making progress!" He doesn't need them. Your neighbor does, of course. But not the Lord.

And then, as if your life were a tent, the Lord continues with the life-long process of pulling up those stakes.

Your self-sufficiency He robs by showing you through personal trauma that your sufficiency is not of yourself.

Your ability to control things—people, your environment—He shakes to the core. Think of the pandemic, when we all learned that the might of the only remaining superpower crumble before an invisible virus, bringing society, economy, schooling, government—not to say church—to a grinding halt. Think: those moments when you can't talk any sense into your spouse or your kid or your boss. Think: all those times when the sin crouching at your door controlled you, and not you it.

And then your physical strength. Whether He takes it suddenly, in a terrific accident, or gradually, through age and disease and decline. It's gone. And then your health. And your eyesight. And even control over your own body. And at last your very life itself. And the tent of your life at last lies in a heap on the ground.

So that you're forced at every step to cry out, "My way is hidden from the LORD, and my just claim is passed over by my God." That is, "God's not paying any attention to me and my life is gone to hell in a handbasket. And my just claim is this: The Lord made me His own through my Baptism into Christ. I belong to the Lord. He is my God. A child can call for help to its mother no matter what the circumstances and she'll come running. But when I call to my God, I get nothing, even though I can claim everything because He made me His own child!"

No. The true graph of the Christian life either starts somewhere up here and ends up down here at zero.

Maybe better yet: it's flatline all the way, for this is how Paul puts it: "for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." (Colossians 3.3)

Luther says, "These three things make a theologian: *oratio, meditatio, tentatio.*" Prayer. Meditation on God's holy Word. And trials and tribulations.

And the Lord wants to make a theologian out of all His baptized children. And He will. No matter today if you're young or old; rich or poor; well-adjusted or awkward; strong or weak; in control or out of control—no matter what, the Lord desires and wants to make a theologian out of every one of you. And He will.

And thanks be to God for that. Because that's exactly what you need to be—a theologian, a true theologian, who takes God *at His Word and promise.*

And this is His promise to you: He strips you of your righteousness so that God's own Son, who suffered and died for your sins, can be your righteousness. He strips you of your self-sufficiency so that you might hear and know what the apostle heard and knew: "*My grace is sufficient for you.*" He strips you of your strength and powers and makes you weak so that His power may be made perfect in your weakness. And He kills you so that the body of *sin and death* may be put to death. And lays you under six feet of dirt in a concrete box so that you can see and have no resurrection. So that Christ, who is the Resurrection and the Life, may be *for you your* resurrection and life. He takes it all away from you. Everything. Righteousness, life and breath. Everything is gone. Everything. But He does this to fulfill His promises to you in your Baptism. That "Christ might be all in all" for you.

Fellow-redeemed: that's what it means to be a Christian. God's promises must appear void: "My just claim is passed over by my God." The promised glory must be cloaked in the actuality of shame: "My way is hidden from the Lord." God must appear to be absent. "A little while, and you will not see Me." Your very laughter must appear to be tears: "You will weep and lament." Even your earthly joy must appear to be the opposite: "the *world* will rejoice; but you will be sorrowful." And every comfort must become pain, like a woman in childbirth. And in the midst of all that suffering for the sake of, because of, on account of the Gospel, here's your charge from the mouth of St. Peter himself: to do good, that you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men; that you might silence the world who delights in the sorrow of the children of God.

This is a difficult teaching.

But our graph isn't complete. Because there's another line we have to draw. I've hinted at it. You might call it the "hidden reality line." The line that marks what's actually happening in the Christian life. In *your* life.

Your line is either descending precipitously from left to right or you've flatlined.

But the hidden reality line? It only ascends from left to right. It goes from strength to strength. That's God's promise to you. This is how Isaiah puts it:

"Have you not known? Have you not heard? The everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth—He neither faints nor is weary. His understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might He increases strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall. But those who wait on the Lord? They shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint."

Why? Because God's power is made perfect in human weakness. He has chosen the weak and insignificant things of this world to bring the strong and important to naught. That no one boast in His presence. And His grace is sufficient for you.

And that's just Jesus' point today. You will weep and lament; you will be sorrowful. You will have pain. In this life.

But your sorrow will turn to joy. Your anguish will be forgotten. The God from whom your ways seem hidden—He will return. He will see you again. Again, when He becomes for you all in all. When He becomes for you, visibly and tangibly, your righteousness and strength and power. Your Resurrection and your Life.

And as a pledge of that, today He who is the Resurrection and the Life gives you His holy Absolution. The sins that crowd your life? They have been forgiven for the sake of the suffering and death of Jesus.

And He turns your head from your sorrowful life to the joys hidden in your Baptism, where He has already made Himself your righteousness.

And He gives as a pledge of your own resurrection, as the end of your own anguish, His own crucified and resurrected Body in the Sacrament. For the forgiveness of sins. And for your life and salvation.

Fellow-redeemed: take heart. For your sorrow in this life will turn to joy in the next.

God grant it to you all for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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