

The Festival of Ash
Wednesday (Observed)
13 March 2011
Concordia Lutheran Mission
Terrebonne, Oregon

**“The Gospel, Christ’s Word and Sacraments, is God’s
Acceptable Time.”**

“For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now *is* the accepted time; behold, now *is* the day of salvation.”

II Corinthians 6:2

Introduction

What is the acceptable time of God? The acceptable time of God is wherever we have the Gospel. For in the Gospel we have God’s grace and His reconciliation to sinners through absolution of all sins for Christ’s sake.¹

Men became unacceptable to God and, therefore, condemned of

¹“There is also in Is. 49:8 the passage that the apostle cites in 2 Cor. 6:2: ‘I have answered you in an accepted time and in the day of salvation I have helped you.’ This the apostle follows up with ‘Behold, now is the acceptable time,’ thus explaining it as referring to the time of grace.” Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Volume 10, p. 258.

God through sin. The absolution of that sin makes men acceptable to God. And the Gospel, i.e Christ's Word and Sacraments², absolves men of sin, because Christ fashioned them by His Passion instruments of acceptance by God of men.³ Through the Gospel sins are absolved for Christ's sake, making men once again the righteousness of God and acceptable to God.

The acceptable time, then, is wherever we have the Gospel. For there God absolves of all sin and, thereby, makes sinners acceptable to

²The Gospel is the Word and the Sacraments: "But let us speak of the word *liturgy*. This word does not properly signify a sacrifice, but rather the public ministry, and agrees aptly with our belief, namely, that one minister who consecrates tenders the body and blood of the Lord to the rest of the people, just as one minister who preaches tenders the Gospel to the people, as Paul says, I Cor. 4, 1: *Let a man so account of us as the ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God, i.e. of the Gospel and the Sacraments.* And 2 Cor. 5, 20: *We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us; we pray you in God's stead, be ye reconciled to God.* Thus the term *leitourgia* agrees aptly with the ministry." *The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XXIV. (XII.): Of the Mass, Of the Term Mass.*80, 81, *Triglotta*, p. 411.

³"Thus we confess: 'I believe in the Holy Spirit and the holy Christian Church.' With these words we affirm that the Holy Spirit dwells with Christendom and sanctifies it, namely, through the Word and Sacrament, through which he works faith in it and the knowledge of Christ. Those are the tools and the means through which He continuously sanctifies and purifies Christendom. This also makes Christians holy before God, not by virtue of what we ourselves are or do but because the Holy Spirit is given us." *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vol. 24, p. 168, underscore added.

Himself now and forever.

I. Jesus Ushers in the Acceptable Time through His Passion.

A. Sin is the unacceptable time.

Why is any creature of God unacceptable to God? After all, hasn't God created him and sustained him to this day?⁴ No creature is unacceptable to God in and of itself. But when the creature departs from God's ways, then, that creature is unacceptable, making himself unacceptable and loathsome to God.

Man made himself unacceptable to God when he sinned in the Garden of Eden. That fact is evident in that God reduced Adam to dust, the just reward for his work of sin. Moses writes:

And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed *is* the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat *of* it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou *art*, and unto dust shalt thou return.⁵

⁴“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.” **St. John 1:1-3.** “... O LORD, thou preservest man and beast.” **Psalm 36:6.**

⁵**Genesis 3:17-19.**

The Festival of Ash Wednesday, which we are today observing, reminds us of this unacceptable time and reward of sin:

The ancient act [of the imposition of ashes] is a gesture of repentance and a powerful reminder about the meaning of the day. Ashes can symbolize dust-to-dustness⁶ ...⁷

The reward or wages of sin, then, is “dust to dustness”, i.e. death. And because we are all the children of Adam, we all have earned this wage. St. Paul writes:

Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all

⁶“And Abraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which *am but* dust and ashes” **Genesis 18:27**. “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it was thou taken: for dust thou *art*, and unto dust shalt thou return.” **Genesis 3:19**. Hence, we read in **The Order for the Burial of the Dead**, “FORASMUCH as it hath pleased Almighty God, in His wise providence, to take out of this world the soul of our departed *brother*, we therefore commit his body to the ground (to God’s acre); earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in the hope of the resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ, who shall change our vile body that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body, according to the working whereby He is able even to subdue all things unto Himself.” *The Lutheran Agenda*, p. 95, underscore added.

⁷The Rev. James L. Brauer, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, editor, the Rev. Dr. Fred L. Precht, Authorized by The Commission on Worship of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, p. 166.

have sinned.⁸

Sin is the unacceptable time. And because Adam ushered in sin, then, the unacceptable time is wherever the children of Adam are found.

B. Christ fashioned the acceptable time by His Passion.

But, thanks be to God, man remained unacceptable to God for a very short time because of Christ's intercession. We see Christ's intercession affecting God's approach to men right after the fall. Moses writes:

And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him,
Where *art* thou?⁹

Here we see that man, even after the fall into sin, is still acceptable to God. Indeed, God even seeks out the sinful, fallen Adam. But how can this be? This miraculous turn of events comes about because Jesus has already interceded for man with the Father, His intercession stretching back into eternity¹⁰. Luther writes:

But God comes in a very soft breeze to indicate that the reprimand will be fatherly. He does not drive Adam away

⁸**Romans 5:12.**

⁹**Genesis 3:9.**

¹⁰St. Paul writes: "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will...." **Ephesians 1:4-5.**

from Himself because of his sin, but He calls him and calls him back from his sin. Yet Adam does not understand or see this fatherly concern, since he is overwhelmed by his sin and terror. He does not notice that God deals far differently with the serpent. He does not call the serpent. Nor – in order this way to call to repentance – does he ask the serpent about the sin that has been committed. But He condemns it immediately. This shows that even then Christ, our Deliverer, had placed Himself between God and man as a Mediator. It is a very great measure of grace that after Adam's sin God does not remain silent but speaks, and in many words indeed, in order to show signs of His fatherly disposition. With the serpent everything is done differently. And so, although the promise concerning Christ is not yet there, it is already noticeable in the thought and counsel of God.¹¹

In the Promise of the Seed of the woman shortly thereafter, we see vividly Christ's intercession and the reason for God's gentle approach with Adam. Moses writes:

And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.¹²

Here we see that God does not find Adam and Eve unacceptable, but quite the opposite: He finds them quite acceptable and draws them to His side, lining them up with Himself against the devil. But, someone, maybe even the devil, might ask, How can that be? It comes

¹¹*Luther's Works*, Vol. 1, p. 189, 181, underscore added.

¹²**Genesis 3:15.**

about because even though Adam and Eve are sinful fallen creatures worthy of condemnation, God has ceased reckoning their sins to them¹³

¹³As St. Augustine says, Sin remains after Baptism, but it not imputed. Luther writes: “I would not believe St. Augustine if St. Paul did not support him when he says in Rom. 8 [:1], ‘Those who believe in Christ have nothing damnable in them, because they do not obey the flesh.’ He does not say, ‘They have nothing sinful in them,’ but, ‘nothing damnable,’ for he has said previously that there is sin in the members and the flesh which is at war with the spirit. But since the spirit fights against this sin and does not obey it, it does no harm, and God judges a man not according to the sin which assails him in the flesh, but according to the spirit which is at war against sin, and is thereby like the will of God, which hates and fights against sin. ... God does not hold against us whatever sin is still to be driven out, because of our steady battle against sin which we continue to expel. He chooses not to charge this sin against us, though, until we become perfectly pure, he might justly do so. For this reason, he has given us a bishop, namely Christ, who is without sin and who is to be our representative until we too become entirely pure like him. ... Let us now conclude the discussion of this article — almost the best and most important of them all — with the beautiful saying of St. Augustine, ‘Sin is forgiven in baptism; not that it is no longer present, but it is not imputed.’ ... Here we see plainly that sin remains, but it is not imputed. The two reasons were mentioned above. First, because we believe in Christ, who, through faith, takes our place and covers our sin with his innocence; second, because we battle unceasingly against sin, to destroy it. Where these two reasons are not present, sin is imputed, is not forgiven, and condemns us eternally.” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 32, pp. 27, 28, underscore added. **Augustine.** One of the greatest of the Latin Church Fathers and one of the outstanding figures of all ages ; b. Tagaste, 354; d. at Hippo Regius, 430,. both in Africa. ... For more than thirty years Augustine was the

for Christ's sake, reckoned Christ's righteousness to them, and, thereby, called them to His side and lined them up with Him in battle against the devil. Luther writes:

Thus the sun of comfort, previously enveloped by black clouds, rises above the clouds and with its most welcome light shines on their frightened hearts. For Adam and Eve not only do not hear themselves cursed like the serpent; but they even hear themselves drawn up, as it were, in battle line against their condemned enemy, and this with the hope of help from the Son of God, the Seed of the woman. Forgiveness of sins and full reception into grace are here pointed out to Adam and Eve. Their guilt has been forgiven; they have been won back from death and have already been set free from hell and from those fears by which they were all but slain when God appeared.¹⁴

This Blessed Acceptance of sinners by God cost Christ, for, as

leading theologian and leader of the Church in Africa, his influence at the various synods and councils being decisive. As a defender of the orthodox faith he stands head and shoulders above his contemporaries, although in some points he did not reach the clearness in the doctrine of sin and grace which is found in the later writings of Luther. But he fought the Pelagian heresy ... consistently, chiefly in the interest of letting the grace of God stand forth in the fulness of its beauty over against man. Among his chief writings are: *De Gratia et Libero Arbitrio* (Of Grace and of Free Will), *De Catechizandis Rudibus* (a treatise on the art of catechizing), *De Doctrina Christiana* (Of the Christian Doctrine), *De Civitate Dei* (Of the City of God), and his *Confessions*." *Concordia Cyclopaedia*, pp. 49, 50, s.v. "**Augustine**".

¹⁴*Luther's Works*, Vol. 1, p. 190, underscore and italics added.

Moses writes, His heel was wounded in His clash with the devil. In other words, Christ suffered a wound to reconcile God and man, but not a mortal wound for He rose again on the third day – hence, a wound to His heel and a wound to the head of Satan, which was a mortal wound.

Christ, then, fashioned God’s acceptance of us by His Passion. In **Psalm 69**, Christ’s prayer in this midst of His Passion¹⁵, Jesus says:

But as for me, my prayer *is* unto thee, O LORD, *in* an acceptable time: O God, in the multitude of thy mercy hear me, in the truth of thy salvation.¹⁶

By His Passion, Christ suffers the penalty for that which makes men unacceptable to God: sin. Christ suffered the eternal torments and punishments for sin that we and all men deserved. The Rev. Dr. P. E. Kretzmann writes of Christ’s suffering recounted in **Psalm 69**:

The entire paragraph pictures the climax of Christ’s sufferings. Both in Gethsemane and on Calvary the anguish of soul with which He was battling was of a nature exceeding all human experience and understanding. All His calling at that time availed Him nothing; He was obliged to drink the cup of God’s wrath to the very dregs. His enemies, operating

¹⁵“**The Messiah’s Vicarious Suffering.** ... The psalm is referred to seven times in the New Testament, either by quotation or by unmistakable implication, as prophetic of Christ and the Messianic period. Cp. John 15, 25; 2, 17; Matt. 27, 32; John 19, 29.” The Rev. Dr. P. E. Kretzmann, *Popular Commentary of the Bible, The Old Testament, Vol. II, The Poetical and the Prophetic Books*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1924, p. 128.

¹⁶**Psalm 69:13.**

with the meanest falsehoods, set upon Him without reason, to take His life. But the supreme secret is found in the fact that He was called upon to replace, by means of this suffering, what He had not robbed. He bore the punishment of the sins of mankind; the guilt of transgressions as committed by countless human beings was charged to His account. It was a vicarious suffering which Jesus Christ endured, a vicarious satisfaction which He was called upon to render. God made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him, 2 Cor. 5, 21. It is as the substitute of mankind that the Messiah now laments.¹⁷

And because Jesus pays the full penalty for sin, He fashions for men the acceptable time to God because no sin remains imputed for men and God, God is reconciled¹⁸ and, therefore, finds them acceptable. St. Paul the Apostle writes:

To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath also committed unto us the word of reconciliation. ... For he hath made him *to be* sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.¹⁹

¹⁷*Popular Commentary of the Bible, The Old Testament, Volume II, The Poetical and the Prophetical Books*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1924, p. 128.

¹⁸This objective reconciliation everyone sings at Christmas in the hymn, *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*. “Peace on earth and mercy mild/God and sinner reconciled.” *The Lutheran Hymnal*, #94, stanza 4, verse 4.

¹⁹**II Corinthians 5:19, 21.**

Christ, then, by His Passion, by His suffering and death on the Cross to Atone for what makes men unacceptable to God, namely, sin, fashions and ushers in the Acceptable time of God.

II. The Acceptable Time is Wherever the Gospel of Christ Crucified for the Sins of Men is Found because there is Forgiveness and Salvation.

A. Christ fashions the instruments of God's acceptance of men, i.e. the Word and the Sacraments, through His Passion.

And in the midst of His Passion, Christ was fashioning for us the Acceptable Time because He was fashioning for us the Gospel²⁰. St. Paul the Apostle writes:

... Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by

²⁰The Gospel is the Word and the Sacraments: “But let us speak of the word *liturgy*. This word does not properly signify a sacrifice, but rather the public ministry, and agrees aptly with our belief, namely, that one minister who consecrates tenders the body and blood of the Lord to the rest of the people, just as one minister who preaches tenders the Gospel to the people, as Paul says, I Cor. 4, 1: *Let a man so account of us as the ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God, i.e. of the Gospel and the Sacraments.* And 2 Cor. 5, 20: *We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us; we pray you in God's stead, be ye reconciled to God.* Thus the term *leitourgia* agrees aptly with the ministry.” *The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XXIV. (XII.): Of the Mass, Of the Term Mass.*80, 81, *Triglotta*, p. 411.

the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.²¹

Notice that St. Paul says that Christ suffered on the Cross so that He could save us through Holy Baptism. Whenever, then, we see Holy Baptism, we are seeing the Passion of Christ and the Acceptable Time He ushered in by His Passion. Luther writes:

[H]oly baptism was purchased for us through this same blood, which was shed for us and with which he paid for sin. This blood and its merit and power he put into baptism, in order that in baptism we might receive it. For whenever a person receives baptism in faith this is the same as if he were visibly washed and cleansed with the blood of Christ. For we do not attain the forgiveness of sins through our work, but rather through the death and the shedding of the blood of the Son of God. *But he takes this forgiveness of sin and tucks it into baptism.*²²

And Holy Baptism obviously ushers in the Acceptable Time because it, as St. Paul writes, sanctifies, cleanses, and makes us glorious, spotless, without wrinkle, without any blemish, and holy. All that is obviously acceptable to God. Luther writes:

Thus we confess: “I believe in the Holy Spirit and the holy Christian Church.” With these words we affirm that the Holy Spirit dwells with Christendom and sanctifies it, namely, through the Word and Sacrament, through which he works

²¹**Ephesians 5:25, 26-27.**

²²*Luther's Works*, Vol. 51, p. 325.

faith in it and the knowledge of Christ. Those are the tools and the means through which He continuously sanctifies and purifies Christendom. This also makes Christians holy before God, not by virtue of what we ourselves are or do but because the Holy Spirit is given us.²³

Wherever, then, we have the Gospel, there we have God's Acceptable Time, where God receives men by forgiving them their sins and sanctifying them.

B. The Gospel is the acceptable time because it saves.

And, moreover, the presence of the Gospel ushers in the Acceptable Time of God because the Gospel saves. St. Peter, for example, writes that Holy Baptism saves:

The like figure whereunto *even* baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ....²⁴

Likewise, St. Paul writes that the Gospel saves:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to

²³*Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vol. 24, p. 168, underscore added.

²⁴**I Peter 3:21**, underscore added.

the Jew first, and also to the Greek.²⁵

Because salvation is present in the Gospel, then, today is the Acceptable Time for us and for all men just as it was in St. Paul's day, for the Gospel was present also in St. Paul's day and that, then, was the Acceptable Time. St. Paul writes that we know the Acceptable Time of God is at hand where we have salvation:

For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now *is* the accepted time; behold, now *is* the day of salvation.²⁶

Conclusion

The Acceptable Time of God is wherever the unacceptable time of sin is reversed. Sin is the unacceptable time because it makes men unacceptable to God. The reversal of that sin through the Gospel sanctifies men by absolving them of all sin for Christ's sake and making them, thereby, acceptable to God once again.

And where we have the Acceptable Time, there we also have salvation. For being accepted by God once again means being reunited with God now and forever.

Amen.

²⁵**Romans 1:16.**

²⁶**II Corinthians 6:2.**

