

The Festival of Ash Wednesday (Observed)

9 March 2014

Concordia Lutheran Mission

Terrebonne, Oregon

“The Acceptable Time is the Gospel Fashioned by Christ’s Passion.”

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

II Corinthians 6:20.

Introduction

Acceptable? Acceptable to whom? Acceptable to God. St. Paul writes of the time that men are acceptable to God.

But man is God’s creation. Wouldn’t man always at all times be acceptable to God? Remarkably, no. Man ceased to be acceptable to God when he fell into sin in the Garden of Eden.

God, however, interceded for man in Christ and by Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, made man once again acceptable to God, reconciling God to fallen man.

The knowledge of this Blessed Work and its Benefits God makes known through the Gospel. Through the Gospel men learn God no longer is angry with them because of their sin but accepts them for Christ’s sake. Through the Gospel, this Blessed Knowledge of God’s acceptance of them fashioned by Christ’s Passion¹, men are reunited to God and saved.

¹“... Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify cleanse it with water by the word” **Ephesians 5:25, 26.**

“[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.*” Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 51, p. 325.

“This Baptism is also founded upon the name of Christ ... because it was purchased by

The Acceptable Time is the Gospel² fashioned by Christ's Passion.

I. Christ Fashions Man Acceptable to God by His Passion.

A. Sin is the unacceptable time.

This Wednesday past was the Festival of Ash Wednesday and the beginning of the season of Lent, a penitential season. The imposition of ashes on the Festival of Ash Wednesday reminds us of what the unacceptable time is. The unacceptable time is whenever and wherever one finds sin because sin reduces men to ashes and dust.³ In the Garden of Eden, the Lord

Christ's vicarious satisfaction, as Eph. 5:26 expressly teaches, 'Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for it ..., that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word.'" The Rev. Dr. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III, p. 259.

²“But I with my prayer with Thee, O lord. It is the time of Thy good pleasure, O God.’ For behold the grain is being buried, there shall spring up fruit. ‘It is the time of Thy good pleasure, O God.’ Of this time even the Prophets have spoken, whereof the Apostle maketh mention: ‘Behold now the time acceptable, behold now the day of salvation.’ ... ‘It is the time of Thy good pleasure, O God. In the multitude of Thy mercy.’ This is the time of good pleasure, ‘in the multitude of Thy mercy.’ For if there were not a multitude of Thy mercy, what should we do for the multitude of our iniquity? ‘In the multitude of Thy mercy; Hearken to me in the truth of Thy Salvation.’ Because He hath said, ‘of Thy mercy,’ He hath added truth also: for ‘mercy and truth’ are all the ways of the Lord. ... Why mercy? In forgiving sins. Why truth? In fulfilling the promises.” St. Augustine, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, Saint Augustin: Expositions on the Book of Psalms, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., reprinted, May 1989, p. 304.

³“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-dustness” The 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.

“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.

reduced man to dust because of man's sin, clearly declaring, thereby, fallen man unacceptable to God. 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 was thou taken: for dust thou *art*, and unto dust shalt thou return.⁴

The unacceptable time is the time of man's sin.

B. Christ fashions man acceptable to God by His Passion.

Sin reduces men to ashes and dust because sin is the transgression of God's law. The Apostle St. John writes:

Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law.⁵

Because the transgression of the law constitutes the time men are unacceptable to God, the fulfillment of the law by men would mean men would be acceptable to God again. *But ashes and dust can't do much to fulfill the law and save themselves.* Hence, God became man in order to redeem man from his unacceptableness to God. Jesus says in **Psalm 69**, in the midst of His Passion⁶:

⁴**Genesis 3:17-19.**

⁵**I John 3:4.**

⁶**Psalm 69** is a Messianic Psalm. "Des Messias Gebet in seinem Leiden." (The Messiah's Prayer in His Suffering.) *Die Bibel oder die ganze Heilige Schrift Alten und Neuen Testaments, nach der Deutschen Uebersetzung Dr. Martin Luthers (The Bible or the Entire Holy Scripture, Old and New Testaments, according to the German Translation of Dr. Martin Luther)*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1905, p. 588.

"The psalm speaks literally about the suffering of the Lord in His own person." Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 10, p. 351.

"But we ask: who is it that is speaking, sighing, and praying in Ps. 40 and 69? It is not David, nor for that matter any other pious servant of God, but is Christ, the Son of David. Ps. 40, 7: 'Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me' puts it beyond shadow of a doubt that the Messiah is speaking all the words of Ps. 40. The Messiah is He who is coming. What is written in the book, in Scriptures concerns and refers to the Messiah alone. See

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.⁷

Here we see that Christ fashions man and fashions the Acceptable Time, i.e. the Gospel, by His Passion.⁸ For at this time God hears the prayer of a man. Man, therefore, is acceptable

Heb. 10, 7. And the words contained in Ps. 69, 9: ‘For the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up; and the reproaches of them that reproached thee are fallen upon me’, which in the New Testament, in John 2, 17 and Rom. 15,3 are referred explicitly to Christ, attest that Christ is the Subject of Ps. 69.” The Rev. Dr. George Stoeckhardt, *Christ in Old Testament Prophecy*, tr. the Rev. Erwin W. Koehlinger, Ft. Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, p. 11.

“We cannot comprehend this anguish of Christ, for it is with us just as it was with the apostles, who slept and slumbered through it all. ... One has various types from the saints in the Old Testament on practically every aspect of Christ’s sufferings. But, regarding this inner (spiritual agony) and pain, one actually has no type. One would like to point to the fact that Jonah says that while in the belly of the ‘whale-fish’ ... he cried out from the belly of hell, thinking that he was forsaken before the eyes of God, [and] that his soul despaired within him, Jonah 2. David, also, sometimes complained about the anguish in his heart; however, it is all to be regarded as nothing compared to the spiritual sufferings of Christ; as insignificant as a tiny drop compared to a huge ocean.” The Rev. Dr. John Gerhard, *An Explanation of the History of the Suffering and Death of our Lord Jesus Christ*, tr. Elmer M. Hohle, ed. David O. Berger, Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 1999, p. 63.

⁷Psalm 69:13.

⁸The Gospel, i.e. God’s Word and Sacraments, is fashioned by Christ’s Priestly Work. “The grace which Christ proclaimed as Prophet He purchased for us as Priest. Observe how the offices of Christ are interrelated. ... If, ... through His substitutional life and suffering, Christ has brought about a real, a complete, an objective reconciliation of men with God, then the Gospel brings to all men the message of grace, which they need only to accept by faith in order to be made possessors of the grace gained by Christ.” The Rev. Dr. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. II, p. 342, underscore added.

Compare also the relationship between Priest and Prophet in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism: “... Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word” **Ephesians 5:24, 25**. In other words, Christ fashioned Holy Baptism by His suffering and death on the Cross in order that He might save us through the Blessed Waters of Holy Baptism. “[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.*” Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 51, p. 325. “This Baptism is also founded upon the name of Christ ... because it was purchased by Christ’s

once again by God's Mercy in Christ Jesus.

In the first place, Christ teaches us that God's Acceptable Time is His Mercy toward sinners, namely, freely forgiving all sins for Christ's sake because the Acceptable Time emerges from His Passion.

Secondly, Christ Himself is God's Mercy because He effects men's salvation by Himself being saved from the destitution of men's' sins. Hence, this Psalm, **Psalm 69**, a Messianic psalm, begins with the remarkable, astonishing – and, I might add, heartbreaking – plea of Christ:

Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto *my* soul. I sink in deep mire, where *there is* no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods over flow me⁹

Here Christ suffers the eternal terror of the *terra infirma* [quicksand] of God's forever forsaking Him and the everlasting suffocation of the waters of God's wrath flooding over Him.¹⁰ Hence, Christ cries out, "Save Me, O God..."

But what kind of a Savior cries to be saved? A Savior cries out to be saved who truly shoulders our ruin and suffers the destitution caused by our sin. Following this Blessed Teaching of **Psalm 69** and the rest of Scripture the prophet Zechariah writes of Christ:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he *is* just, and [being saved]; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.¹¹

vicarious satisfaction, as Eph. 5:26 expressly teaches, "Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for it ..., that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word." The Rev. Dr. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III, p. 259.

⁹**Psalm 69:1-2.**

¹⁰“Luther and the Lutheran Confessions accepted the teaching of the New Testament that in the Psalms there were numerous predictions about the Messiah. Moorehead wrote concerning this matter: ‘The Psalms are full of Christ. They speak about His humiliation and exaltation, of His rejection by the world and of His final triumph over all opposition. But they go deeper, as we may say; deeper even than the gospels; they *let us into the thoughts and feelings when the billows of wrath were rolling over Him, when the heavy cloud of judgment which was all our own burst upon His devoted Head.*’” *Exegetical Essays and Materials Dealing with the Interpretation of the Psalms*, Ft. Wayne, IN: Concordia Theological Seminary, Press, p. 28, emphasis added.

¹¹**Zechariah 9:9**, translation from the Hebrew in brackets is mine. “[be saved] is the only

Of this remarkable passage and Work of Christ the Rev. Dr. John Gerhard writes:

The question arises: *In Zech. 9:9, why is the Messiah not called [Savior] in the active sense, but ... "saved," in the passive sense?* We respond: ... Christ is not only "Savior" but is also Himself "saved." That is, because He wished to redeem us with His suffering and death, and descended into the depths of our wretchedness, therefore it was necessary that he be saved first, so that, having been saved, he might be able to save us too. "I looked around, but there was no helper¹²; I was in anxiety, and there was no one to help" (namely, among men). "My own arm" (the power of My divinity¹³) "has saved Me, and My anger" (or zeal) "has helped Me" (Isa. 63:5).¹⁴

Positively, Christ obeyed God perfectly at all times, fulfilling the First Commandments and, thereby, all the commands for all men¹⁵ even when God forsook Him on the Cross because He bore the guilt of our sins. The Apostle St. Matthew writes:

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama

correct translation and suits the context. ... the original Hebrew term always = poor, needy." The Rev. Dr. Theodore Laetsch, *Commentary on the Minor Prophets*, p. 454.

¹²Compare also **Psalm 22:11**: "Be not far from me; for trouble *is* near; for *there is* none to help."

¹³For example, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. Then said the Jews, Forty and six year was this temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days? But he spake of the temple of his body." **St. John 2:19**, underscore added.

¹⁴*Loci Theologici ... On the Person and Office of Christ*, tr. Richard J. Dinda, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009 p. 11

¹⁵This Blessed Work is called Christ's *Active Obedience*. "As my *Priest*, Christ *fulfilled the Law* in my stead perfectly (active obedience), *sacrificed Himself* for me (passive obedience), and still *intercedes* (pleads) for me with His heavenly Father." *The Small Catechism*, question 132 B, p. 108.

This teaching of Scripture is of great practical importance. In his life of faith the Christian continually resorts to Christ's vicarious fulfillment of the Law. Luther: "He satisfied the Law; He fulfilled the Law perfectly, for He loved God with all His heart, and with all His soul, and with all His strength, and with all His mind, and He loved His neighbor as Himself. Therefore, when the Law comes and accuses you of not having kept it, bid it go to Christ. Say: There is the Man who has kept it; He fulfilled it for me and gave His fulfillment to me. Thus the Law is silenced." The Rev. Dr. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. II, p. 375.

sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?¹⁶

Any other man would have cursed God and died.¹⁷ But Christ remained obedient to God, calling Him “My God” even in the midst of God forsaking Him utterly as no other man has ever been forsaken. Yet, this Simple, Pious Prayer shattered the gates of hell for all men. The Rev. Dr. George Stoeckhardt writes:

Yet, while Christ knows Himself totally forsaken of God in the abyss of hell, He cries, “My God, My God!” Even in such an abject condition, as He was in, He still clings to God as His personal God. This was a God-pleasing prayer that as it were issued from the pit of hell. This is something extraordinary, something unheard of. In the midst of the torments of hell Christ asserts that as His Son He will cling to God and claim Him as His own! Never before and never after has such a confident prayer issued from the abyss of hell on the part of those who are damned in that place. Ordinarily from those who suffer the torments of the damned come only cries and sighs of despair, never prayers of faith. It was by this prayer that Christ conquered and overcame the power of hell.¹⁸

Christ fashioned man acceptable to God by His Passion. By His Passion Christ suffered all the devastation we earned because of our sin. And in the midst of that devastation He re-established our relationship to God by loving God perfectly, even in the midst of our ruin, making man exceedingly acceptable and pleasing to God. *How could God not possibly love Such a Man?* Indeed, He could not but love Him and is well-pleased and delighted in This Man in every respect. The Apostle St. Matthew writes:

And, Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.¹⁹

II. This Day of the Gospel is Precious because it is the Acceptable Time Fashioned by the Son of God’s Passion and is Our Salvation.

¹⁶**St. Matthew 27:46.**

¹⁷Job’s wife urged him with the classic human response to suffering: “Then said his wife unto him, Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse God, and die.” **Job 2:9.**

¹⁸*Lectures on Select Psalms*, tr. the Rev. Dr. H. W. Degner, Ft. Wayne, IN: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, p. 67, underscore added.

¹⁹**St. Matthew 3:16-17.**

A. The Gospel is the Acceptable Time.

Whenever one has this Knowledge of man acceptable to God for Christ's sake, then is the Acceptable Time. The Apostle St. Paul writes:

... Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with washing of water by the word²⁰

Notice the value of Holy Baptism. It is exceedingly precious because it was purchased for us by the Blood of the Son of God, which Blood is of Infinite Value²¹. This Price reveals God's concern for us. So concerned was Christ for our salvation that in the midst of His Passion, His suffering the eternal anguish of the consequences of our sins, He was busy fashioning and purchasing the Blessed Waters of Holy Baptism for us so He could communicate and give to us the Blessed Fruits of 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

The Gospel, God's Word and Sacraments, is the time when fallen men are acceptable to the Lord down through the ages and across the globe

B. The Acceptable Time of the Gospel is the Time of Salvation.

²⁰**Ephesians 5:25, 26.**

²¹“Lutherans say that the blood of Christ, the blood of the Son of God, has infinite value in even its smallest amount – not the quantity, but the quality of the blood shed by the Son of God endows it with infinite redemptive worth – but on the other hand, since Christ poured out His blood according to the will and counsel of God, we may not say that He shed one drop of His blood superfluously. ... God regulated this matter.” The Rev. Dr. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. II, p. 381.

²²*Luther's Works*, Vol. 51, p. 325. “This Baptism is also founded upon the name of Christ ... because it was purchased by Christ's vicarious satisfaction, as Eph. 5:26 expressly teaches, ‘Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for it ..., that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word.’” The Rev. Dr. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III, p. 259.

Because the Gospel makes men acceptable to God by removing their sin, the Gospel is also the time of salvation from sin and sin's consequences, the wrath of God, death, and eternal damnation. The Apostle St. Peter writes:

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....²³

Hence, the Apostle St. Paul writes:

(For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured: behold, now *is* the accepted time; behold, now *is* the day of salvation.)²⁴

Conclusion

The Acceptable Time is the Gospel. Because the Gospel absolves of sin, the very thing that makes us unacceptable to God our Creator, the Gospel removes what makes us unacceptable to God, namely, our sin, and, thereby, makes us acceptable to God.

This Precious Time of the Gospel, i.e. the Time of God's Word and Sacraments, was purchased for us by the Blood of the Son of God. It is Precious because this opening to God was paid for by the Son of God through His Precious Blood and also because it restores us to God.

Because the Gospel makes us acceptable to God it saves, gives us life eternal, and the resurrection of the body.

Amen.

²³**I Peter 3:21.**

²⁴**I Corinthians 6:20.**