

### “First, the Bad News”

In case you didn't know, God has no place for sinners in his presence. How's that for a sermon opening? But this is not my opinion, nor is it an attempt to be funny or shock you. It is the very word of God. Psalm 5 says it this way: “For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you. The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers”(v 4-5). Uncomfortable yet? Well, hold on because it gets worse. “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear (Isaiah 59:2). I think it's pretty clear that God cannot tolerate evil, he hates all evildoers, and sin has caused a separation. It's not his fault. He is the perfect almighty God who lovingly created humankind in his own image. But the crown of his creation willingly chose to deny their maker and we inherited the consequences. “Just as sin came into the world through one-man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all have sinned” the scriptures tell us (Rom.5:12)

Somebody send out an SOS because we are all going down. Sins of every kind— the big ones, the small ones, the things we have done, and the things we have left undone —all of them offend God and there's nothing we can do about it. God's law continues to confront us. “This is my will for your life,” his word tells us over and over again. “You are to do these things.” Deep down we all know it. But still, day after day we make our opinions, our desires, even society's expectations our gods and by doing so reduce the rest of God's commandments to mere suggestions. We might think we put up a good fight but really all we do is make excuses.

“I'm a pretty good person.” “I try to do the right things.” “I help people when I can.”  
“Most of the time I do the best that I can— God should be happy about that.” “Hey, at least I'm not as bad as some people.”

We've all been there. Most of us are still there in one way or another. But God is not interested in our excuses or even our improvement. In no way does he validate us based on how much progress we are making, as if each victory over sin gets us a little

bit closer to him. A new and improved sinner is still a sinner. And as we've already heard, God has no place for sinners in his presence.

This is our condition. We've been talking about it over the past three weeks, and today, we are wrapping this whole thing up. And if my opening made you squirm in the pew—if my opening troubled you, or even made you question a lot of things, with all due respect I say, good. Because all of us, no matter how young, how mature, how intelligent, or how Lutheran must first confront the reality of who we are and the news is not good. We're on the outside and can't get back in on our own. Send out the search party. We're done. Because sinners must die.

Yes, it's really this grim. Yes, our sinful condition is really this bad. And yes, we should all be begging God for another chance, pleading with him for new life. But he has always known this is where a genuine recognition of our sinfulness would bring us— it's called repentance. And he loves his children too much for hell to be the only option. But it had to be exclusively on his terms. Because to solve this problem, only he could intervene and make things right. And that's just what he did beginning with a promise he made all the way back in Genesis chapter 3.

“The Lord God said to the serpent, because you have done this...I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (v14-15).

It's amazing really, because right in the middle of the fall into sin and the deadly consequences not only for Adam and Eve, but all of creation, including every single person after them, is a word of promise. Right after the curse of ongoing hostility between the serpent, the woman and their future offspring, God says, “He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” And there in these few words, God gives his promise that the relationship would be restored. From a woman would come one who would bruise, crush, and eventually destroy Satan's power. What seems so raw, and even kind of hard to understand, is actually the first announcement of a solution to sin.

And Jesus is that solution. God in the flesh born of a woman who lived a life of perfect obedience only to suffer and die, shedding his own blood for our redemption. He is the one who defeated death and whose resurrected perfect body gives us the complete assurance that the day is coming when things will be exactly as God created them to be—a perfect world with no more sin, no more death, and no more Satan. And this solution, which brings us back into God's presence, is completely outside of ourselves.

Sinners still must die—that hasn't changed. But now, through his grace, we die in the waters of Holy Baptism only to be raised to new life in Christ.

Our epistle reading from Romans sums this whole thing up: “Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you must also consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 6:8,10-11).

Dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Not dead in the sense that we don't sin anymore...we all know that's not true. Not dead in the sense that we have freedom to sin just doing whatever we want...That's ridiculous. But dead to the power of sin, because that power was put to death with Christ. Yes, we still live in the tension between God's law and his Gospel, which means we can never afford to deny the reality of sin. Denying his love will still take us away from him. But through faith, we are alive to God and have his assurance that in Christ we can always turn to him. That is the life of the baptized— “that the old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned with all our sins that a new person should daily come forth” as Luther describes (SC).

But sorrow for our sins and repentance isn't some kind of mechanical formula we follow. We will still have questions and even doubts. “What if I keep doing those same sinful things over and over?” “Did I repent enough?” “Is my faith strong enough?” “Am I really forgiven?” Questions like this will always be there. But the questions don't change the reality. Jesus saves sinners. Hear it again. Jesus saves sinners! Not because of what we have done or what we will do. In fact, despite what we have done or what we will fail to do, through faith alone, Jesus saves. The bad news is not the final word my friends, because we have been brought from death to life by the Word. And that Word is the Word made flesh. Thank God we live in the promise of His victory.

In closing today, I want to share with you a simple little phrase that I have heard Pastor Wagner, our Pastor Emeritus, say many times at the beginning of a prayer. Many of you have probably heard it as well. It's a phrase that captures the essence of our faith, and one that I use most everyday in my own prayer life. I'm sure he would be honored if you did the same. It goes like this: Heavenly Father, thank you for loving me even though you know me (repeat). Through faith in Christ, we are not forgotten or ignored in spite of who we are, but loved. And that love lasts forever. Now that's the good news! In the name of Jesus. **Amen.**