

To the church at Smyrna

St. John's Lutheran Church (LCMS) 8948 N 1900 Ave Geneseo, IL 61254 309-949-2516

February 24, 2021

Lent 1 Midweek

The order of worship is based upon Evening Prayer, from Hymnal Supplement 98 (CPH, 1998)

Service of Light

- $\overline{\mathbf{P}}$ Now is the time of God's favor;
- **C** now is the day of salvation.
- P Turn us again, O God of our salvation,
- c that the light of Your face may shine on us.
- **P** May Your justice shine like the sun;
- **and may the poor be lifted up.**
- **P** Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
- **C** It is right to give Him thanks and praise.
- P Blessed are You, O Lord our God, king of the universe, who led Your people Israel by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Enlighten our darkness by the light of Your Christ; may His Word be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path; for You are merciful, and You love Your whole creation and we, Your creatures, glorify You, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- C Amen.

Psalm 25

¹To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

²O my God, in you I trust; let me not be put to shame; let not my enemies exult over me.

³Indeed, none who wait for you shall be put to shame; they shall be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

⁴Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths.

⁵Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all the day long.

⁶Remember your mercy, O LORD, and your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.

⁷Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for the sake of your goodness, O LORD!

⁸Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

⁹He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.

¹⁰All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.

¹¹For your name's sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great.

12Who is the man who fears the LORD? Him will he instruct in the way that he should choose.

¹³His soul shall abide in wellbeing, and his offspring shall inherit the land.

¹⁴The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his covenant.

¹⁵My eyes are ever toward the LORD, for he will pluck my feet out of the net.

¹⁶Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.

¹⁷The troubles of my heart are enlarged; bring me out of my distresses.

¹⁸Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins.

¹⁹Consider how many are my foes, and with what violent hatred they hate me.

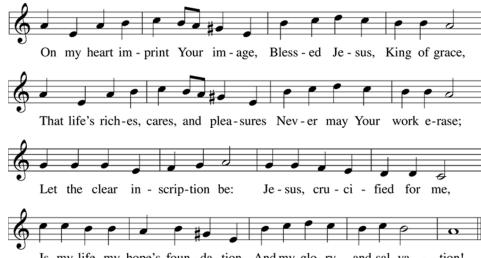
²⁰Oh, guard my soul, and deliver me! Let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.

²¹May integrity and uprightness preserve me, for I wait for you.

²²Redeem Israel, O God, out of all his troubles.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Canticle Hymn: 422 On My Heart Imprint Your Image



Is my life, my hope's foun - da - tion, And my glo - ry and sal - va - tion!

Readings

First Reading

Revelation 2:8-11

⁸ "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.

⁹ "I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.'

P This is the Word of the Lord.

C Thanks be to God.

The Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ I. The Lord's Supper

Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread, also called the Passover, drew near, and Jesus said to his disciples: "You know that after two days is the Feast of the Passover, and the Son of Man will be given over to be crucified."

Then the chief priests and scribes assembled with the elders of the people in the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, and consulted how they might take Jesus craftily and put him to death. But they said, "Not on the feast day, lest there be an uproar among the people," for they feared the people.

Then Satan entered into Judas, surnamed Iscariot, one of the Twelve. He went his way to the chief priests and captains and spoke together with them how he might betray Jesus to them. They were glad to hear him. He said to them, "What will you give me to betray him to you?"

They promised to give him money and agreed with him for thirty pieces of silver. He accepted, and from that time he sought opportunity to betray him in the absence of the multitude.

Then came the first day of Unleavened Bread when they sacrificed the Passover lamb. Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover, that we may eat it."

They said to him, "Where do you want us to prepare it?"

He said to them, "Go into the city and, when you have entered the city, watch for a man bearing a pitcher of water. When he meets you, follow him into the house where he enters. You shall say to the man who lives there, 'The Master says to you, "My time is at hand; I will keep the Passover at your house. Where is the room for me to eat the Passover with my disciples?"' And he will show you a large upper room, furnished and prepared; there make ready for us."

The disciples did as Jesus had directed them. They came into the city and found it as he had told them; and they made ready the Passover.

When the hour was come, Jesus sat down and the apostles with him. As they were eating, he said, "I have longed to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, for I say to you I shall not eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God."

As they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you. This do in remembrance of me."

In the same way also he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you; this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.

"Truly I say to you, I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in the kingdom of my Father."

There was also a strife among them as to which of them should be accounted the greatest. He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority over them are called 'benefactors.' It shall not be so among you. He that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that serves. For who is greater, he that sits at the table or he that serves? Is it

not he that sits at the table? But I am among you as a servant. You are they who have continued with me in my temptations. I appoint you to a kingdom, as my Father has appointed me. You shall eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

Jesus knew that his hour was come to depart from the world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who are in the world, he loved them to the end. Already Satan had put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him. Jesus knew that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going to God. He rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded.

When he came to Simon Peter, Peter said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?"

Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing you do not know now, but after these things you will understand."

Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet."

Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head."

Jesus said to him, "He who has been bathed does not need to wash more than his feet, for he is clean altogether. You are clean, but not all of you." He knew who was to betray him; that was why he said not every one was clean.

So after he had washed their feet and taken his garments and sat down again, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me the Master and the Lord, and it is good that you say this, for so I am. If I, then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. I have done this to show you the way to do as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his lord; neither is he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If you know these things, happy are you if you do them.

"I do not speak of you all; I know whom I have chosen. The Scripture must be fulfilled, 'He that eats bread with me has lifted up his heel against me.' Already now I tell you of this, before it happens, so that when it does happen you may believe that I am he.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives anyone whom I shall send, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives him who sent me."

When Jesus had said these things, his spirit was in turmoil. He bore witness and said, "Truly, truly, I say to you that one of you will betray me."

The disciples looked at one another dumbfounded about whom he spoke. One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was leaning on Jesus' bosom. Simon Peter said to him, "Ask who it is of whom he is speaking."

That disciple who was reclining on Jesus' chest said to him, "Lord, who is it?"

Jesus then answered, "It is the one to whom I shall give the piece of bread after I have dipped it."

He dipped the piece of bread he had in his hand and gave it to Judas, son of Simon Iscariot. After the piece of bread had been dipped, Satan entered into that one. Jesus said to him, "What you are doing, do quickly."

No one at the table knew what the purpose was of what Jesus had said to him. Because Judas kept the money bag, some thought Jesus had told him to buy what was needed for the feast or to give something to the poor. When that man had received the piece of bread, he went out immediately, and it was night.

When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and in him God is glorified. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify him in himself, and at once he will glorify him.

"Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going you cannot come.' A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you. For this I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, where are you going?"

Jesus answered him, "Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but afterwards you will follow me."

- In many and various ways God spoke to His people of old by the prophets.
- **©** But now in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son.

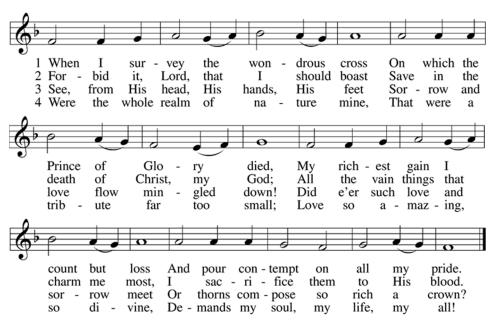
Litany

- **P** In peace let us pray to the Lord.
- C Lord, have mercy.
- P For the peace from above and for our salvation let us pray to the Lord.
- **C** Lord, have mercy.
- P For the peace of the whole world, for the well-being of the Church of God, and for the unity of all let us pray to the Lord.

- **C** Lord, have mercy.
- P For this holy house and for all who offer here their worship and praise let us pray to the Lord.
- **C** Lord, have mercy.
- P For all pastors in Christ, for all servants of the Church, and for all the people, let us pray to the Lord.
- **C** Lord, have mercy.
- P For our public servants, for the government and those who protect us, that they may be upheld and strengthened in every good deed, let us pray to the Lord.
- **C** Lord, have mercy.
- **P** For those who work to bring peace, justice, health, and protection in this and every place let us pray to the Lord.
- **C** Lord, have mercy.
- P For those who bring offerings, those who do good works in this congregation, those who toil, those who sing, and all the people here present who await from the Lord great and abundant mercy let us pray to the Lord.
- **C** Lord, have mercy.
- P For favorable weather, for an abundance of the fruits of the earth, and for peaceful times let us pray to the Lord.
- **C** Lord, have mercy.
- For our deliverance from all affliction, wrath, danger, and need let us pray to the Lord.
- **C** Lord, have mercy.
- For the faithful who have gone before us and are with Christ let us give thanks to the Lord.
- **C** Thanks be to God.
- P Help, save, comfort, and defend us gracious Lord. *Silence for meditation*.
- P Rejoicing in the fellowship of all the saints, let us commend ourselves, one another, and our whole life to Christ, our Lord.
- To You, O Lord.
- O God, from whom come all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works, give to us, Your servants, that peace which the world cannot give, that our hearts may be set to obey Your commandments; and also that we, being defended from our enemies, may live in peace and quietness; through the merits of Jesus Christ, our Savior, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, God forever.
- C Amen.

- P Lord, remember us in Your kingdom, and teach us to pray:
- Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven; give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.
- P Let us bless the Lord.
- **C** Thanks be to God.

Office Hymn: 425 When I Survey the Wondrous Cross



Sermon

Text: Revelation 2:8-11

Title: "To the Church in Smyrna (and to Us)"

Prayer

Dearest Jesus, how thankful we are that You suffered on the cross for us, the innocent for the guilty; that You shed Your blood to cleanse us from all sins and died to give us life. The very sound of Your name is sweetest music, filling our hearts with joy, because You have called and enlightened us with the Gospel's message of pardon and peace through the cross. Truly, You have moved us from darkness to light and from

the shadow of death to the glory of eternal life! Lend us grace ever to believe that You are truly our Savior, and enable us to live fruitful lives filled with good works. Help us to crucify our sinful nature with its passions and desires.

Our everliving Lord and Savior, it is Your desire, and so also ours, that all people share with us the blessed privilege of knowing You in truth as Lord and Savior. Oh, that all nations might thrill to Your name! Oh, that all people everywhere might call upon You for mercy and life! Therefore spread Your Gospel throughout the world, and bless it wherever it is spoken and read. Make it a word of power to convert those who don not yet know You in truth, and to confirm the faith of all who already do. Make Your word a swift word, passing quickly from the ear to the heart, that as the rain and snow water the earth making it bud and flourish, so Your word will accomplish that for which it is sent: the conversion and consolation of sinners.

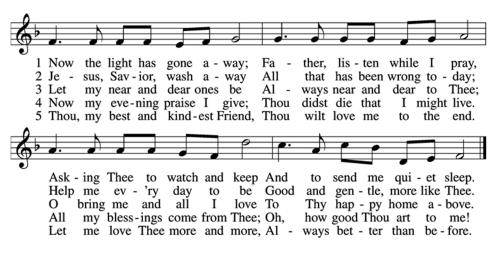
Teach us believers how we may use our time, talents, and treasures in service to the Gospel. Enable us to be faithful witnesses to Your saving name, lest we be silent when given the opportunity to speak up for You. Stir us up to send out and provision missionaries both far and near to work in those places where the Gospel is not being heard. Pardon our many sins, O Savior, and count not our failures against us. Sustain us as we journey through this wilderness of sorrow and sin, and according to Your own promise be ever near us. Hear us now and always as we pray in Your name.

- C Amen.
- Almighty God, grant to Your Church Your Holy Spirit and the wisdom that comes down from heaven that Your Word may not be bound but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people, that in steadfast faith we may serve You and in the confession of Your name may abide to the end; through Jesus Christ, our Lord.
- C Amen.

Blessing

- P The almighty and merciful Lord, the Father, the ♥ Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless and preserve you.
- C Amen.

Hymn to Depart: 887 Now the Light Has Gone Away



Silent Prayer

Acknowledgements

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1st Lenten Midweek Service February 24, 2021

Sermon Text: Revelation 2:8-11

"To the Church in Smyrna (and to Us)"

Grace and peace be to you from the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.

Smyrna was an ancient city on the west coast of Asia Minor, about 40 miles north of Ephesus, where the Turkish city of Izmir now stands. It was a real gem by human standards. It was a wealthy and beautiful seaport. It had a library, a stadium where athletic games were held, a theatre, and many temples. The city had an intense allegiance to Rome, and this was strongly attested to by Smyrna building a temple to Tiberius Caesar, Livia, the wife of Caesar Augustus, and to the Roman senate. In addition, they were the first city in the ancient world to build a temple to *Dea Roma*, the "goddess of Rome." Patriotism, which included worship of the imperial cult, was strong in Smyrna, and city's citizens received many benefits for that allegiance.

Christians in Smyrna, on the other hand, were not nearly so fortunate. The church was suffering. Not only were they facing the difficulties that everyone in this life faces, health issues, financial insecurities, death of loved ones, etc., they were also facing harsh persecution simply because they were Christians. Thus the risen, ascended, and exalted Lord Jesus says to them,

"I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan."

While we can't say for certain that *every* Christian was facing persecution, we do know that the majority of them were suffering for their faith. The poverty that they were experiencing cannot be explained away by the claim that the majority were of the lower class, nor due to seaport economics. Likely work and business patronage were being withheld. Maybe groups looted their homes and shops. Whatever the actual specifics were, we know that these Christians were suffering. And we know that it was caused in no small part by the slanders of the Jews.

At this time, ca. 95 AD, the Jewish faith was legal, but not Christianity. However, most of the Roman authorities looked on Christianity as a sect of Judaism, and thus tolerated it. But despite the Jewish dislike of, and even hatred for, the pagan world, they had no problem slandering Christ and His followers to the Gentiles, trying to instigate both legal crackdowns by the authorities, as well as mob violence upon Christ's Church.ⁱⁱ

Therefore, the verdict of Almighty God on the unbelieving Jews is not only completely understandable, it is fully justified. They are *not* His chosen people, despite such claims even to this day. As John the Baptist once warned them, "And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham." No, they are the synagogue of Satan, for they carry out Satan's work in the delusion that they are being loyal to the Law and Prophets, the very Scriptures which spoke of Christ Jesus, the very ones that now condemn them for their rejecting Him as their Messiah. It is as Jesus said to them during His earthly ministry, "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your

father's desires." Yet, despite the trials the Christians were currently facing, their Lord warns them that there was yet more to come. He continues,

"Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life."

The devil, through his human agents, especially the unbelieving Jews, would incite the authorities to action against the Christians. One such accusation was atheism, because Christians would not participate in the imperial cult, which then meant that they were viewed as traitors to the state. Another was murder and cannibalism, since Christians gathered to eat a body and to drink some blood. Now of course both of these accusations were false. While not praying to the emperor or state, Christians regularly prayed *for* both of them, just as we still do today. So also, as we well know, the charge of murder and cannibalism could easily be refuted if a fair inquiry concerning the doctrine of the Lord's Supper was conducted. But Satan does not play fair.

Therefore, for an intense and set period of time, the "ten days," Christians would suffer imprisonment in dungeons, and examinations by the authorities, which often included violent scourging and other tortures. An example of such suffering for the faith was the man Polycarp, a student of the Apostle John and the bishop, or pastor, of Smyrna, likely at this time. Thus he would have witnessed the suffering spoken of in Revelation and, in fact, later in the "ten years" (ca. 155 AD), was himself martyred in Smyrna because he refused to compromise his Christianity on *any* level, not in faith, teaching, or life. And he was not the first.

My dear fellow believers who have been called to pick up our crosses and follow Jesus, what would our response be if the ascended Lord informed us as a congregation that we would suffer some intense persecution for His name's sake? What would we do if others quit doing business with us just because we are Christians? How would we respond if our church, businesses, vehicles, and homes were looted, damaged, or destroyed because we follow Christ? What would our reaction be if violent gangs or mobs insulted us, slandered us, even beat us, and the government looked the other way? What if the government was the one that was grabbing us, throwing us into prison, torturing, and even killing us? What if it was our spouse, parents, or children who were suffering because they follow Jesus? Would we encourage them to remain faithful, or would we encourage them to say whatever was necessary so the suffering would stop?

We recognize that such persecution of Christians has occurred throughout the centuries, seen already in the earliest days of the Church as recorded in the Book of Acts. We may even be aware that the very same violent persecution still goes on today in many parts of the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Yet, it still seems so far away from us. Maybe it has been too far away from us for too long. Maybe that is why the Lord is permitting it to resume here, subtly at first, so that we actually have a strong faith muscle and sturdy Christian backbone when real troubles begin!

The Lord declared to the Christians in Smyrna, "Do not fear what you are about to suffer." How could He say this? Suffering is certainly anything but pleasant! But the same Lord who calls us to perseverance in suffering also gives us the answer. First, He said in no uncertain terms, "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

Those who oppose Christ and His people, Satan and all the demons and the unbelievers who are their human agents, may be given permission by God to harm us in our bodies now, but only God has the authority to cast body and soul into hell. We are reminded of Luther's explanation to the First Commandment, "We are to *fear*, love, and trust in God above all things." We are to fear God's wrath and punishment, which includes eternal condemnation, far more than anything we could ever suffer at the hands of Satan and those who are his tools. To fail to confess Christ in word and life out of fear of persecution is *idolatry*, for in that case we fear something more than God Himself. We must remember Christ's warning, "Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it." But there is more reason to be willing to suffer. Through His apostle Paul, our Lord says,

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. ix

Thus, it is through the fiery trials that we face that the Lord purifies our faith and the Holy Spirit increases within us the Christian virtues of patient endurance, noble character, and the hope of deliverance, especially the final, eternal deliverance from all suffering and evil. So the Lord brings great good out of evil for His people who remain faithful, even unto death!^x

Our Lord still says to us today, "Do not fear what you are about to suffer." Whatever we are about to face, whether the "normal" trials living in a fallen world, or specific crosses because we are Christians, our Savior promises to be there for us. *This is the same Jesus* who lived a life of poverty, whose family thought He was crazy at times, who was deserted by his closest friends, mocked, beaten to a bloody pulp, and finally violently executed by being nailed to a tree to slowly suffocate to death in great agony. He *truly* knows what pain and suffering is through firsthand experience. And He knows your tribulations; and He cares, promising to see you through them.

You can trust His promise, having absolute confidence that His words are never empty. For Jesus is the First and the Last, the eternal Son of God, the one who died and came back to life, forgiving your sins and raising you to new life with Him, life which lasts forever. Thus He says to His people then and now, "He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death."

We all shall face physical, temporal death. But the second death is the lake of fire that burns both body and soul forever. That death will not touch us because we are God's children through faith in Christ. We shall not be touched by the flames of hell, but instead we shall receive the crown of life, rising in victory to a new and perfect life of perfect peace and exulting joy in the new heavens and earth where we shall reign with Christ forever! There is nothing greater!

When Bishop Polycarp was told to renounce Christ or be burned alive he said: Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me wrong; and how can I now blaspheme my King that has saved me?...You threaten fire that burns for a moment and is soon extinguished, for you know nothing of the judgment to come, and the fire of eternal punishment reserved for the wicked.xi

God will allow our faith to be tested and so be strengthened and, ultimately, proven true. God grant us such faith that we do not fear anything that the devil or the world would threaten us with, but that we would cling solely to Christ, who has endured all things for us that we need not fear suffering, death, nor hell, for our hope in heaven is secure. Amen!

ⁱ Revelation 2:9. All quotes are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

ii The book of Acts, recording events that took place 40-50 years earlier, notes a number of times the Jews directly persecuted the Christians as well as at least tried to get the Roman authority to act against them. This attitude of the Jews toward the Christians did not improve.

iii Luke 3:8.

iv See John 5:39, 45-46; 12:48.

^v John 8:44.

vi Revelation 2:10.

vii Matt. 10:28.

viii Luke 17:33.

ix Romans 5:3-5.

x See Romans 8:28.

xi Ecclesiastical History, Eusebius; Book 4, 15:20, 24.