

Restore Us Again, O God

Nativity of St. John the Baptist

June 24, 2018

Psalm 85:1-13

¹ LORD, you were favorable to your land;

you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

² **You forgave the iniquity of your people;**

you covered all their sin.

³ **You withdrew all your wrath;**

you turned from your hot anger.

⁴ **Restore us again, O God of our salvation,**

and put away your indignation toward us!

⁵ **Will you be angry with us forever?**

Will you prolong your anger to all generations?

⁶ **Will you not revive us again,**

that your people may rejoice in you?

⁷ **Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,**

and grant us your salvation.

⁸ Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,

for he will speak peace to his people, to his saints; but let them not turn back to folly.

⁹ Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him,

that glory may dwell in our land.

¹⁰ Steadfast love and faithfulness meet;
righteousness and peace kiss each other.

¹¹ Faithfulness springs up from the ground,

and righteousness looks down from the sky.

¹² Yes, the LORD will give what is good,

and our land will yield its increase.

¹³ Righteousness will go before him and make his footsteps a way.

In the Name of Jesus.

It doesn't make a lot of sense to anyone looking on, but Elizabeth bears a son. She been unable to have children before. None of her neighbors could possibly see this coming, but Elizabeth in her advanced years is given a child.

Do not be afraid,

the angel had said to Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah,

for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. [Luke 1:15]

And the angel gave the promise,

And [your son] will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.

John is the Lord's man. The Lord has set him apart. When John grows to be a man, the Lord sets him apart even more, placing him outside Jerusalem at the Jordan river. John is set out there eating strange food—locusts and honey—and dressed just as strangely.

When you look at John, there is no confusion. He is about the Lord's business. Nobody possibly thinks John is about his own business. He's dressed so strangely, eats so strangely, and is located so remotely—he cannot possibly be about the business of establishing his own wealth or of running a school or starting a political party or anything else.

He's the Lord's man. And the Lord's business for him is this: *To prepare the way of Lord*. The Lord has come in the flesh, the cross is prepared for him, and his way to the cross will be prepared by having sinners baptized into repentance for forgiveness. Luke 3:3:

And [John] went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

The Lord's business is repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

This is a reversal. For, the sinner thinks repentance is the business of the sinner. And it is. The sinner is called upon to repent. To turn back from sin. To turn to the Lord.

But, can the sinner repent? To repent, the sinner would have to be not a sinner. But you can't not be what you are. A snake might as well identify himself as a cuddly guinea pig. You can't make up your own identity. You are what you are. And a sinner is a sinner.

We were born into this; it's the sin of our origin—and as long as we're in our sinful flesh, we're not done with it.

So, the repentance we do on our own is a sinful repentance. It's us thinking that, from an unclean heart, we can devise a clean repentance.

So, the Lord gives us the mirror of the Law to look into, to give us a realistic look at who we are, and know, then, that we are sinners and can't be otherwise. In this way, the Lord makes repentance his business. If the sinner is going to be repented, it will be the Lord who does it.

Psalm 85:4:

³ You, [O Lord,] withdrew all your wrath;

you turned from your hot anger.

⁴ Restore us again, O God of our salvation,

and put away your indignation toward us!

⁵ Will you be angry with us forever?

Will you prolong your anger to all generations?

⁶ Will you not revive us again,

that your people may rejoice in you?

The words from our lips will serve our own purpose. So, the Lord gives us the words to pray.

On the lips of sinners, the Lord places holy words. These are words by which he has us call on him. These are words, also, by which he reveals to us who he is and what he does toward us.

Psalm 84:3:

³ You, [O Lord,] withdrew all your wrath;

you turned from your hot anger.

We can do nothing to induce him to withdraw his wrath. But the Lord wants nothing more than to withdraw his wrath. He desires to turn to us his face of blessing. So, he gives us to pray,

Restore us again, O God of our salvation,

and put away your indignation toward us!

[Psalm 85:4]

The word the Psalmist uses here for “restore” is the same Hebrew word elsewhere translated as “repent.”

It's the sinner pleading to God, ***O Lord, I cannot repent myself. Therefore, if I am going to be repented, you must repent me. So, O God of our salvation, restore us again, repent us again.***

Then verse 6, the Psalmist gives us to pray,

**⁶ Will you not revive us again,
that your people may rejoice in you?**

Again, we are given to pray to the Lord that he turn back to us and give us life, revive us.

**⁷ Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,
and grant us your salvation.**

[Psalm 85:7]

Repentance: no sinner can do it, no sinner is worthy to claim it, and if we were able to repent, then we wouldn't be sinners in the first place.

So, the Lord does what we can't. Pure gift.

First, he speaks his Law. He convicts us. He sets in front of us the mirror of the Law—for his Law always accuses—and by this mirror he reveals our sin so that we have no hope in our own worthiness.

This is contrition. It is sorrow. It is even despair. But not yet repentance.

So, the Lord speaks to us his Gospel. He proclaims to us the free salvation of the cross. He declares us to be righteous by the redeeming blood of his Son. He frees us from guilt. He justifies us. By this justification, he creates in us a clean heart—a heart rejoicing in his lovingkindness and clinging to his Word of grace.

This, then, is repentance.

Repentance, not as a work performed by the sinner, but as gift bestowed by the Lord. The repentance of

a sinner who now stands righteous, because, having been driven *from* God by the Law—for the Law always accuses—he is now been restored and brought back by the Word of Gospel.

This is repentance as gift. Repentance as what the Lord is doing toward the sinner whom he loves. It is the repentance of a heart cleansed by the Lord's Word, so that we are now given to rejoice:

² You forgave the iniquity of your people;

you covered all their sin.

⁷ Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,

and grant us your salvation.

[Psalm 85 v.2 and v. 7]

So, when the Son of God came into the flesh to accomplish this promised salvation, but before he accomplished it on the cross, but while on his way to the cross, the Lord prepared his way by having John baptize sinners into repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This fulfilled the promise given to Zechariah, his father, when the angel said,

And [John] will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.

[Luke 1]

The children of Israel would not turn to the Lord their God. Rather, the Lord would turn them. He would do it through his prophet John. John, by the promise of the Gospel, would turn them back to God, for he was baptizing them into repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Everything in the Church is ordered toward this: repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

We no longer have John. He served his purpose. He cleansed those given to him to cleanse, baptizing them into repentance and forgiveness.

The Lord has us living after John. John is not our prophet. He served out the Lord's gifts as he was given to do, then he went to be with the Lord when Herod killed him.

But in the Church, as the Lord continues speaking his Law to place us in front of the mirror showing us our sin—for the Law always accuses—and as the Lord continues speaking his Gospel to stand us in his righteousness, the Lord is continuing to restore sinners to repentance for the forgiveness of sin.

And in the Church, as the Lord continues to gather sinners to the Blood once shed on the cross but now distributed in the Church, the Lord is continuing to restore and revive sinners.

The Large Catechism puts it this way:

Everything then, in the Christian Church is ordered toward this, that we shall daily receive in the Church nothing but the forgiveness of sin through the word and sacraments, to comfort and encourage our consciences as long as we live here. So even though we have sins, the grace of the Holy Spirit does not allow them to harm us. For we are in the Christian Church, where there is nothing but continuous, uninterrupted forgiveness of sin. This is because God forgives us and because we forgive, bear with, and help one another.

In the Name of Jesus.