

First Reading: Acts 16:9-15

⁹ During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” ¹⁰ When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

¹¹ We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, ¹² and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. ¹³ On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴ A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. ¹⁵ When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.” And she prevailed upon us.

Second Reading: Revelation 21:10, 22 – 22:5

¹⁰ And in the spirit [one of the angels] carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

²² I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³ And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴ The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. ²⁵ Its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there. ²⁶ People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. ²⁷ But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who

practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

^{22:1} Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³ Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; ⁴ they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵ And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

Gospel: John 14:23-29

²³ Jesus answered [Judas (not Iscariot),] “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. ²⁴ Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

²⁵ “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. ²⁶ But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. ²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. ²⁸ You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. ²⁹ And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.”

Grace to you, and peace, from God, the source of life, and from Jesus, the Christ, who is that light and life in the world. Amen.

I have to say before I begin my message: that child Julian is the most remarkably well-behaved child I think I have ever seen at the baptismal font! Once again, on behalf of the congregation, my warm congratulations to all of you, as you formally welcome your little one into this world. It is good to be with you for this special day.

This morning, as I said at the introduction, I am going to put all of you to the test. Aren't you glad you're here? Over the past few weeks, we've heard a three-part series on Paul's relationship with women in the early church. Our question was this, "Was Paul a misogynist?"

Did Paul believe that women are inferior to men? Or did, by contrast, ample evidence from the letters he wrote, as well as the book of Acts, suggest otherwise? By letting Paul, as well as the women he knew, speak for themselves as much as this is possible, I argued it did.

My contention is that Paul was an egalitarian, "The first person in history," writes the author, Thomas Cahill, "to exclude consciously all social grades, isms and biases from his thinking, believing that nothing, not earth, nor ethnicity, nor religion, nor economic status, nor class, nor *gender*, makes *anyone better than anyone else*."

Amen!

This morning, it would be easy to continue the series by focusing on Lydia, the woman we hear about in Acts 16, our First Reading for today. Even though the New Testament mentions her only once, this passage tells us more about her than virtually any other woman in the Christian scriptures. Luke, who wrote both the Gospel and the book of Acts, describes her as a "worshiper of God," which is to say she was pious, devout, possibly a Jewish sympathizer, and a woman of high standing. "Worshiper of God."

We also know from this passage that she was wealthy. On what basis do we know that? She was a dealer of purple cloth, and purple cloth at that time was extremely expensive, given the difficulty of the dyeing process for that color. So, she was not only a worshiper of God; she was wealthy, a dealer of purple cloth.

We also know from this passage that she was the head of her household. We learn that she and her household were baptized. This may mean that she was the head of household, either by herself, or her husband was simply not mentioned.

Finally, we have the sense here that she had an air of authority. We know from the text that she "prevailed," which is to say, she persuaded Paul and his companions, which very well could have included Luke, the author of Acts and the Gospel, to stay with her and her household.

But today I'm not going to talk about Lydia. Instead, I'm going to talk about the message Lydia heard from Paul and his companions that compelled her and her household, like little Julian today, to be baptized.

We have a name for this message she heard. We call it the Gospel. Now, the Gospel, as you know, lies at the heart of the Protestant Lutheran Reformation. Martin Luther called it the "chief article, or teaching, by which the church stands or falls." We can do nothing to earn God's love. Instead, God embraces us, accepts us, and loves us unconditionally, setting us free from the powers of sin and death, so that we can live lives for each other and for God, as God intended.

But what does this really mean? How do we define the gospel? To whom does it apply? And what difference does it make, or could it make in our everyday lives?

That's really the question most of us are asking. It's one thing to talk about the purity and clarity of doctrine, or church teaching. It's another thing to ask, "What difference does it make, or could it make, in our everyday lives?"

Now, given my academic background, it would be tempting for me to lecture you for hours on these questions and answer them for you, but I think it would be way more fun to put each of you to the test. In what follows, therefore, I am going to ask a series of questions about the meaning of the Gospel. If--I say, if--you answer all correctly, I have a prize, a reward for you, which I will reveal at the end.

Now, before we get started, I have two caveats. First, take a breath. I am not going to embarrass anyone by putting them on the spot, you'll see what I mean by the end of the message.

Second, I will be asking the questions I ask in view of how Martin Luther and the subsequent Lutheran tradition answers them. I know that to each question there is a range of possible answers, but my focus will be on how Luther and the Lutheran church have answered them historically.

Why? Well, for one thing, Luther, as you know, was a renowned Biblical scholar. He translated the entire New Testament from Greek into German in a manner of 11 weeks, and still called himself a lazy monk.

Secondly, we're in a Lutheran church. This is the tradition we've inherited. Many of us have chosen to embrace it consciously, albeit critically. So, are you set? Are you prepared? I hope I do this right then: "Let's get ready to rumble!"

Okay, my first question, and you're welcome to take out a pencil in the pew if you would like, to answer it for yourself: What does the word "gospel" mean?

"Good news"

Don, excellent: It means good news. Martin Luther, broadly speaking, says as follows: "For *gospel* is a Greek word."

Greek, incidentally, was probably one of four languages that Jesus could speak. It was the language of commerce and trade in the ancient world, and we know that Jesus was a tradesperson, so he would have spoken Greek. We know from the Gospel of Luke that he would have spoken and read Hebrew. We know from his last words on the cross, according to Mark and Matthew, he would have spoken Aramaic, a relative Semitic language to Hebrew, and we know, finally, from George Bush in 1996 that he spoke English because, as George Bush said, "If English was good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for our kids, too." We know, actually, in truth, that he may have spoken Latin, because of this conversation with the Latin governor of his province, Pontius Pilate.

In any case, for Luther, the gospel is a Greek word, and it means a good message, good tidings, as Don said, rightly; good news, a good report, which one sings and tells with gladness.

More specifically, Luther defines the gospel as the message of how faith in Christ overcomes or conquers sin, which is separation from God, and death, which is ultimate separation from God, and hell, and gives life righteousness and salvation. Luther calls that "the happy exchange."

So to summarize, the gospel, broadly speaking, is, as Don said, good news. More specifically, it's good news about Christ, the rescue, rescuer who has saved us from the powers of sin and death. So good news, good news about Christ.

Second question; are you ready?

What's the relationship of the gospel to the Word of God?

Ingrid?

The Word of God is the message of good news we find in the Bible.

That's fantastic! The Word of God is the message of good news we find in the Bible. Well done. Once again, Martin Luther says, and this comes from one of his most famous essays, "The Freedom of a Christian." He writes, "You may ask, (and we are), What then, is the Word of God? I answer, the Apostle explains this in Romans 1: the Word of God is the gospel of God concerning his son, who was made flesh, suffered and rose from the dead and was glorified through the Spirit who makes us holy."

This is why Luther calls the Bible, more than once, "the cradle of the Christ child." It is that which points us to Christ who, according to John, is "the Word made flesh."

I love this quotation from Paul Tillich, one of my favorite Lutheran theologians: "Luther said, but he knew better, that the Bible is the Word of God. However, when he really wanted to express what he meant, he said that in the Bible, there is the word of God, the message of Christ, His work of atonement, the forgiveness of sins and the offer of salvation. He makes it very clear that it is the message of the gospel which is in the Bible, and thus the Bible contains the word of God."

Very well done, Ingrid.

Third question; are you ready?

So, where do we encounter the gospel, understood as the word of God, in today's readings?

Susan?

Revelation 2:3-5

Excellent, that is right on the money. We read in our Second Lesson, "Nothing accursed will be found there anymore." This is good news for the people reading it.

And by the way, thank you Susan, for saying "Revelation" and not "Revelations." It's one of the many things that makes me so upset. The other thing is when people misuse the word "literally," by saying things like "It was *literally* raining cats and dogs;" that would be rather disgusting, if true...

"Nothing accursed will be found there," the author writes, "but the throne of God and the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him..." Here's the good news: "They will see his face and his name will be on their foreheads."

Why is that good news? Or, the word within the words, because the mark of the beast was the other possibility, and that was the mark of the emperor, the mark without which people could not participate in commerce or trade. So, to say, instead of the Emperor's number, the name of *God* will be on their foreheads, this is a promise of mercy, grace. It is good news. You belong to God. And then it continues, "...and there will be no more night." Why is "no more night" good news? Because night, at least here, symbolizes fear. "For they will need no light or lamp or sun, for the Lord will be their light." And that's really the kernel of the good news here, the word of God in this passage.

"And they will reign forever and ever." What an incredible promise to an oppressed people living at the end of the First Century, who were marginalized by the Empire, but nevertheless claimed ultimately by a loving and gracious God, who, by God's invincible love, ultimately would be, and will be, victorious.

Let's try this once more. Where else do we encounter the gospel, understood as the Word of God in today's readings?

Carol Ann?

John 14:26-27

This is incredible. This is amazing. Look at how well-informed we are as a congregation. This text reads, "But the advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you." In other words, "I will not abandon you," Jesus says to His disciples.

That's good news. He says the same thing to us through these words: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you." That is good news. That is the promise of the gospel. "I do not give to you as the world gives." And then the clincher, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

So in the midst of uncertainty and fear, Jesus promises peace and presence. That is good news. That, for Luther, is the Word of God in the text "meant to be sung and told gladly."

Fourth question: To whom does the Good News or Gospel apply?

Cindi?

Everyone.

It applies to everyone. Yes, once more, that is correct.

Now, on what basis might we make that claim? If you take a look at Acts 9:15 from our First Reading, you'll notice once more, that when Lydia is baptized, it's not just her, it's her and her entire household. We see evidence of this in First Corinthians, where Paul baptizes Stephanus and his household, as well as one other time in the book of Acts.

Why is this important? It implies that people of all ages, including children and infants, are welcomed by God and loved by God irrespective of their response. Little Julian's baptism today reminds us that God's grace through Christ extends even to helpless children, not simply adults who can accept Jesus as their Lord and personal Savior. That might be a confirmation of the grace they've already experienced. But in the Lutheran and Roman Catholic traditions, we practice infant baptism, which has its basis in Scripture, given the household baptisms that would have included children or infants. We practice infant baptism because of our dual mutual conviction that God embraces us. First, baptism is a sign that we are loved, even before we can respond, there is nothing more unconditional than that. We are loved from the beginning.

Our fifth and final question: How should we respond?

With gratitude.

Ingrid, boy, she is right on the money this morning, I just have to say: Gratitude. That is correct.

Psalms 118, "This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it."

e.e. cummings, the poet I mentioned during our Easter service, says: "I thank you, God for this most amazing day."

I, who have died, am alive again today.

We serve others out of gratitude for what God has done for us, unconditionally, as symbolized in baptism through Christ. This means, to sum up the entirety of the Christian life in two single words, we have grace and gratitude. That's everything.

A famous theologian by the name of Karl Barth, at the end of his life, after writing 14 volumes of Christian dogmatic theology, was asked, "How would you sum it all up?" He said, "Jesus loves me. This I know, for the Bible tells me so."

If I were asked the same question, and I have a long way to go before I get to the 14th of my church dogmatics, I would say: grace and gratitude.

Do you know the last words of Bill Kavanaugh before he died? Bill Kavanaugh, for those of you who don't know, was, along with Joan and family, a member of our congregation for many years. After receiving the Eucharist and a blessing, he said, "Good."

Good. There is no more profound way to express gratitude than "good."

Now I'd like to offer you, as a congregation, a word of congratulations. You, the congregation, got a perfect score on our quiz today, thanks to the representatives we have called upon.

So, what's your prize? Many of you are asking, what's in it for me?

Here it is: Every promise you've heard this morning applies to you.

Can I get an Amen? Every promise you've heard this morning applies to you. One more Amen.

You experience fear and anxiety. I certainly do, whether it's runaway AI, global conflicts, the issue of democracy here at home, or the threat of global warming, I am constantly in fear, and when I read the news, I live in anxiety. The Gospel is that Jesus promises peace, and courage as a result of that peace.

Do you worry about your future, your children's future, or your grandchildren's future? God, in Revelation, our second reading for today, promises that all of our futures lie in God's hands. Do you worry about the less fortunate, the migrant, the refugee, the marginalized, the poor or the lonely? Revelation, once more, promises their restoration and fulfillment too, in part, by enabling us to serve and speak out on their behalf.

So do you want to know what the real scandal is this morning? You didn't have to get any of my questions right for all this to be true. *God loves you anyway*. God's love, God's grace is reckless, abundant and limitless. That is our God. The kingdom of God, as one famous preacher said years ago, is a party, and you are invited. So let us be glad and rejoice, for this is the day The Lord has made.

And all God's people said, "Amen."