

COMMEMORATION OF MARTIN LUTHER (DEATH)

FEBRUARY 18

Observed February 19, 2017

by James Baneck, President, North Dakota District, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERMON

INTO YOUR HAND I COMMIT MY SPIRIT

Martin Luther died around 3 a.m. on February 18, 1546. That night, Luther prayed Psalm 31:5 four times: “Into Your hand I commit my spirit; You have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.” The piece of paper found in Luther’s pocket that night read: “This is true. We are all beggars.” Luther believed that God calls all sinners to repent, to forsake their wicked ways, and to return to the Lord. As a beggar before God, Luther confessed that he was a poor, miserable sinner in the arms of a compassionate God who pardons abundantly (Isaiah 55:1–11). Luther believed that he was saved solely by the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ. Luther believed that “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:5–17). This Christ-centered faith and life gets to the heart of Luther’s understanding of justification and salvation through Christ alone. As Luther waited to enter the Church Triumphant, he believed that, from the time of his Baptism, he had been a living branch grafted into the true Vine, Jesus Christ, and had life eternal (John 15:1–11).

SERMON PREPARATION NOTES

SERMON TITLE

“Into Your Hand I Commit My Spirit.”

TEXT

Psalm 31:5

CENTRAL THEME

The central theme of this sermon is stated in its concluding paragraph. Four times on the night of his death, Martin Luther is known to have spoken Psalm 31:5, “Into Your hand I commit my spirit; You have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.” The intent of the sermon is for the hearer to journey toward death with Luther, drawing the hearer into reflection on his own faith, life, death, and eternity.

The preacher will note that, as Luther recited Psalm 31:5 four times on the night of his death, so these same words are woven into this sermon four times as well.

PERICOPE

Psalm 25:1–14 (15–22); Isaiah 55:6–11; Romans 10:5–17; John 15:1–11

A commemoration sermon carries with it certain challenges. The biblical pericopes obviously do not speak directly to Luther's death *per se*. However, these biblical texts have been carefully assigned to speak to a specific sixteenth-century event. Very much like writing a funeral or wedding sermon, these texts are used to frame and build this sermon.

HISTORICAL ACCOUNT

The historical events surrounding Luther's death have been used as a skeleton in developing this sermon. As this sermon is written to commemorate Luther's death, it is valuable for the hearer to be familiar with the historical context, actual details, and conversations surrounding the reformer's death.

In addition, as death is a reality in the faith and life of all people, it is important to include the hearer in the real-life situation of Luther's death. It is valuable to bring the hearer into the historical moment, recounting Luther's physical ailments, his emotions and struggle between life and death, and the Christ-centered faith he confesses.

Every sermon should first and foremost concern itself with preaching Christ crucified, with a great awareness of Law and Gospel, and connecting the biblical text with the faith and life of the hearer. In addition, preaching on the commemoration of Luther's death, in a notable anniversary year of Lutheranism, the sermon may also be used to teach this particular aspect of significant Reformation history.

MAJOR THEMES—THREE SECTIONS

While the skeleton of the sermon is built historically, the three main readings appointed for this commemoration give the historical account theological meaning.

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 55:6–11. The first section of the sermon is introduced by the piece of paper found in Luther's pocket at the time of his death. Luther's statement of faith that we are all beggars ties in with the theme of repentance. The Old Testament Reading is used in the sermon to preach on man's total depravity and his need to repent before God, not only at his death but also each day of his life.

In Isaiah 55, God is calling Israel to repentance. This is at the time when Babylon is soon to overtake Jerusalem and exile God's people, which becomes a reality around 587 BC. Through the prophet Isaiah, God accuses Israel of having turned away from Him, and the prophet is now calling her to "return to the LORD." He is pleading with Israel to "seek the LORD while He may be found," for He is very ready to have compassion on her and to pardon her.

This sermon weds words from Luther's Isaiah lectures with the themes of "beggar" and "repentance." In his own words, Luther not only describes himself as a beggar before God but also as a sinner in need of God's forgiveness. Luther describes himself as "still feeble."

Connecting the hearer to Luther's own confession as a sinful beggar pleading dependence upon God's mercy can be powerful for the hearer in the pew. As Luther was repentant before God, so the hearer is also called to repentance in the preaching of this sermon.

Epistle Reading: Romans 10:5–17. The second section of the sermon begins with Luther waking up in pain and telling his colleague and friend, Justus Jonas, that he will remain in

Eisleben. Luther is aware that he is going to die. Knowing that death was coming soon, Luther recited God's Word concerning salvation in Jesus Christ. These words from the apostle Paul shaped Luther's understanding of justification.

The assigned Epistle Reading for this commemoration is saturated with themes of righteousness/justification (δικαιοσύνη, vv. 5, 6, 10) and salvation (σωτηρία, v. 10). Luther began his lectures on the Book of Romans in 1515. No doubt, those lectures shaped and influenced his formulation of the Ninety-Five Theses. In his death, Luther firmly confessed his salvation in Jesus Christ alone. Luther knew his salvation was not based on his good works, on any works of penance, on any amount of prayers spoken, on any indulgences purchased, or on any Masses bought. Luther was convinced by Holy Scripture that whoever believes in Jesus Christ *alone* will be eternally saved.

In his Romans lectures, Luther expands on the biblical motifs of justification and salvation. Already in quotations cited in this sermon from his Romans lectures, one can see Luther discovering Scripture's rich Christology. Eleven years prior to his death, Luther's Christology further expanded, as seen in his 1535 lectures on Galatians. This sermon incorporates rich salvific quotes from Luther's Galatians lectures in regard to Luther's Christology and in relation to his understanding of justification, atonement, and salvation through Christ alone. Luther's prayer of Psalm 31:5 four times on the night of his death gives witness to his faith in a Jesus who becomes Luther's sin so that Luther, in blessed exchange, receives the full righteousness of Christ. It's no wonder, then, that Luther can confidently commit his spirit to the eternal Judge—because the eternal Judge has purchased the beggar Luther with His own blood, death, and resurrection.

Again, it is important to connect the biblical text and the sermon preached to the faith and life of the hearer. This sermon includes *for you* language in each of its three sections. This is not only a sermon about Luther's death and resurrection; this is a sermon about the death and resurrection of every believer in Jesus Christ.

Gospel Reading: John 15:1–11. The third section of this sermon begins with Luther reciting Psalm 31:5 three times. Immediately following this intended or unintended Trinitarian confession, Justus Jonas asked Luther a question. Rev. Dr. Jonas was assuming the role of pastor out of godly concern for Luther's soul. Jonas asked Luther if he was ready to die trusting in his Lord Jesus Christ and in the doctrine Luther taught in Christ's name. Consider the immensity of this question! Luther eventually became separated from the Roman Church; he prepared and participated in many high-powered debates; he affected and influenced all Christianity not only in his day but also for centuries to come. Who is this man to change the course of world history? Who is this man to affect the faith and life of millions? Who is this man to be the father of a confessional Church, seminaries, publishing houses, and more? Could Luther trust in this Jesus Christ as he had learned to know Him from Holy Scripture? As he faces the eternal Judge of his soul, could Luther in good conscience be confident of the doctrine he confessed in Jesus Christ? And the answer is "Ja." Indeed, this poor beggar put his trust, life, death, and eternal soul in the bloody arms of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel Reading in the sermon frames the faith and life of the Christian. John 15 is known to be one of Luther's favorite portions of Scripture. Luther writes extensively on John 15 in his 1537 sermons on the Gospel of St. John. Everything that the Christian is comes from being a branch grafted into the divine Vine. The Vine is Christ, the Life-giver. The branch lives, thrives, is nourished, and bears fruit because of its life-source, the Vine, Jesus Christ. The branches receive everything the Vine gives through the preached Word, Holy Baptism, and the Lord's Supper. The Christian's ongoing daily life, and weekly and yearly rhythm, has everything to do with being in the Vine.

The Christian's earthly identity and life is defined by Christ living in and through him. The Christian life, in his daily vocation, is a Galatians 2 reality; it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us. Luther proclaims powerful and comforting Gospel in his John 15 sermon, especially as He confesses Jesus as the victor over sin, death, and the devil. The Christian who is grafted in the Vine is grafted into everlasting salvation and eternal victory.

LAW AND GOSPEL

Law and Gospel preaching is absolutely necessary when proclaiming the Word of God. In 1525, Luther preached the sermon "How Christians Should Regard Moses." Every preacher should read the paragraph concerning Law and Gospel preaching which begins: "Now the first sermon, and doctrine, is the *law* of God. The second is the *gospel* . . ."¹

In this sermon on the commemoration of Martin Luther's death, Law and Gospel is preached in each of the three sections. This is due to the fact that it is arranged chronologically.

In the first section, the Law is preached by convicting the hearer that he is a beggar before God and is like grass that will wither and die. The sinner is called to repentance. The Gospel is proclaimed by announcing God's compassion and pardon on the repentant beggar.

As a continuation of the Law from the first section, the Law fills the room with looming death. Death is a consequence of sin. God promises to kill the sinner. In this section, the sinner is called upon to reflect his confidence and boldness before God in his own hour of death. The rhetorical reality is that the sinner has no inherent confidence or boldness before the triune God. In the throes of death, however, this second section saturates the repentant sinner in the mercy and grace of God through Jesus Christ. The Gospel is articulated through Luther's writings based on Holy Scripture. These writings include Luther's Romans lectures, the Smalcald Articles, and Luther's Galatians lectures. Christ's blessed exchange with sinners can bring no greater comfort in the hour of death. Here is the sweetest Gospel.

In the third section, the sermon reveals that Dr. Jonas asked Luther an amazing pastoral question. This question forced Luther to look at the end of his life in terms of Law *and* Gospel. Imagine if, in his hour of death, Luther recanted all that he had taught in Christ's name. If Luther recanted, it would mean that Luther had put his eternal salvation in his own hands, his own works, and his own good. Luther, however, did *not* put his soul into his own hands, but in the hands of Him who bled that bled and died, even Jesus Christ, his gracious and only Savior. The

¹ AE 35:162, emphasis added.

Law is also applied to the hearer by announcing the hopelessness of the hearer who refuses to be connected to the Vine, Jesus Christ. The Gospel is proclaimed by articulating that Jesus Christ is the true Vine through whom every sinner receives sustenance, nourishment, forgiveness of sins, and eternal salvation.

RESOURCES

Many of *Luther's Works* are cited in this sermon and sermon notes. It is strongly suggested that the sections of *Luther's Works* cited be read in their entirety for a greater understanding of Luther's thoughts and theology.

In addition to Luther, further recommended readings include *Christ Have Mercy* by Matthew C. Harrison, especially chapter 8, "Christ Cares for the Needy, Body and Soul" (St. Louis: Concordia, 2008); and *Luther the Reformer* by James M. Kittelson, especially chapter 18, "We Are All Beggars" (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986).

SERMON

INTO YOUR HAND I COMMIT MY SPIRIT

INTRODUCTION

Martin Luther is now 62 years old. This man, who achieved so much, is now growing tired and weak. In November 1545, Luther finished his lectures on Genesis and said, “I can do no more, for I am too weak.”

Then there was an ongoing squabble among the three brothers who were leaders (or counts) in the city of Mansfeld²—it all had to do with property and money and power. On January 23, 1546, Luther set out for Mansfeld (just northwest of Eisleben³) to mediate this family feud. It was a cold German winter, and crossing the swollen icy Salle River was difficult. On his way to Mansfeld, Luther suddenly became weak. And yet, by mid-February, Luther had helped the counts come to an agreement, and peace was restored, but Luther felt weaker still.

On Monday, February 15, Luther preached at St. Andrew’s in Eisleben. Luther ended his sermon rather abruptly, as he announced to the congregation, “This and much more might be said concerning this Gospel, but I am too weak and we shall let it go at that.”⁴

Luther was taken to a home across the street where he rested for the next two days. Around 8 p.m. on Wednesday, February 17, Luther went to the window and spoke his usual evening prayers. Around 10 p.m., February 17, 1546, Luther went to bed and prayed Psalm 31:5, “Into Your hand I commit my spirit; You have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.”

1. WHEN LUTHER DIED, A SCRAP OF PAPER WAS FOUND IN HIS POCKET . . .

In his own handwriting, Luther wrote, “Let nobody suppose that he has tasted the Holy Scriptures sufficiently until he has ruled over the churches with the prophets for a hundred years.”⁵ What he writes next gives us a profound insight into Luther’s faith and life. He wrote, “*Wir sind alle Pettler. Hoc est verum.*” These Latin and German words read, “We are beggars. This is true.” Luther believed that without Jesus Christ, he was nothing. He knew he had nothing to offer God—neither physically nor spiritually.

Especially Luther knew that, as a poor, miserable sinner before God, he was a poor, miserable *beggar*. From his lectures on Isaiah 55:7, Luther writes, “The godly . . . always feel their own imperfection, and they always long for the grace of God. We sigh and pray for the remission of sins. . . . We sin much, and therefore we need much forgiveness.”⁶ Again, on Isaiah 55:8, Luther confesses, “And I, Martin Luther, know that I am still feeble.”⁷

² Luther’s family moved to Mansfeld when he was 1. Luther left Mansfeld at the age of 14 when he went to the Latin school in Magdeburg. Luther was dealing with friends and relatives when mediating this squabble.

³ Luther was born in Eisleben to Hans and Margaret Luther on November 10, 1483.

⁴ AE 51:392.

⁵ AE 54:476.

⁶ AE 17:255.

⁷ AE 17:256.

As Luther went to bed that night feeling ill, and perhaps even suspecting that death was near, he admitted and confessed to God that he was a sinner, and as a believer in Jesus Christ, he was a *repentant* sinner at that, one who could only beg for God’s mercy. Luther was prepared for death—for he was a beggar before God and Christ was His merciful Savior.

And *you* are a beggar too! Before God, you bring nothing to the table—not now, not at your death. Isaiah announces, “All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass” (40:6–7). And so now, and at the time of *your* death, God calls *you* to repent, even as He says, “Seek the LORD while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near . . . return to the LORD, that He may have compassion on [you]” (Isaiah 55:6–7).

Luther went to bed that night in the sure confidence of Jesus Christ. As a beggar before God, Luther closed his eyes in peace, knowing Isaiah’s words: “Let [the wicked] return to the LORD, that He may have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon” (55:7). Luther fell asleep for a few hours, content in being a beggar in God’s hands, for He knew His God has mercy on the repentant, that He is full of compassion and ready to pardon! And *you, too*, O repentant beggar, can rest in Christ, for He has compassion on you; He will abundantly pardon you, and in Him, you have peace.

2. AT 1 A.M., LUTHER SUDDENLY WOKE UP AND CRIED OUT, “O LORD GOD, I’M IN SO MUCH PAIN! OH, DEAR DOCTOR JONAS, IT APPEARS AS THOUGH I SHALL REMAIN HERE!”⁸

That night, Luther recalled God’s Word of grace in this hour of death. The Holy Spirit delivered these words to Luther’s mind, as he learned them by heart throughout the years. These are words of God’s comfort, peace, and grace!

In his dying hour, Luther utters John 3:16, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” Luther recites Psalm 68:20, “Our God is a God of salvation, and to GOD, the Lord, belong deliverances from death.” Luther prays Luke 2:29, “Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word.” And then Luther repeats three more times Psalm 31:5, “Into Your hand I commit my spirit; You have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.”

What would give Luther such confidence in his hour of death? How could Luther be so bold with His judgment so near? How could Luther be so certain that he could commit his spirit to the eternal Judge? What gives *you* confidence and boldness in *your* hour of death before the eternal Judge? For Luther, it was all about Jesus—it is because he believed that he was saved by grace through faith in Christ Jesus alone—as he was convinced through the Word of God!

Luther began his lectures on the Book of Romans in 1515.⁹ The heart of these lectures may be summarized by Romans 10:10, “For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” In this portion of his lectures, Luther teaches this: “The

⁸ See Hermann Sasse, “Luther’s Legacy to Christianity,” in *The Lonely Way*, trans. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia, 2002), 2:171–77.

⁹ This was two years before the Ninety-Five Theses of October 31, 1517. Luther’s study on Romans helped form his thoughts leading up the Ninety-Five Theses.

apostle . . . brings out the real kernel, teaching us with a strong argument that the entire Scripture deals only with Christ everywhere.”¹⁰

Or perhaps Luther’s confidence is best stated in the First Article of his 1530 Smalcald Articles, “The first and chief article is this: Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, died for our sins and was raised for our justification (Romans 4:24–25). He alone is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29), and God has laid upon Him the iniquities of us all (Isaiah 53:6). . . . Upon this article everything that we teach and practice depends. . . . Therefore, we must be certain and not doubt this doctrine.”¹¹

Perhaps, the night of his death, Luther recalled his lectures on Galatians: “[Christ] became a curse for us. . . . [Christ] has and bears all the sins of all men in His body—not in the sense that He has committed them but in the sense that He took these sins, committed by us, upon His own body, in order to make satisfaction for them with His own blood.”¹² “Our sin must be Christ’s own sin, or we shall perish eternally.”¹³ “And this is our highest comfort, to clothe and wrap Christ this way in my sins, your sins, and the sins of the entire world, and in this way to behold Him bearing all our sins.”¹⁴ “By this fortunate exchange with us [Jesus] took upon Himself our sinful person and granted us His innocent and victorious Person.”¹⁵ “This attachment to Him causes me to be liberated from the terror of the Law and of sin, pulled out of my own skin, and transferred into Christ and into His kingdom which is a kingdom of grace, righteousness, peace, joy, life, salvation, and eternal glory. Since I am in Him, no evil can harm me.”¹⁶

Dear Christian, this is *your* Jesus; this is *your* God in *your* time of pain and distress, and even in *your* hour of death. Jesus Christ has redeemed you with His own blood, death, and resurrection. He paid the price for all the sins you have ever committed—the sins of your youth, the sins of your flesh, and the sins in your heart and mind. His blood, death, and resurrection continually wash over you in your Baptism, as you are marked and sealed with Christ for the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life.

The blood of Jesus Christ surges into your mouth, soul, and life in His own body and blood in His sacred Meal. His holy flesh and blood forgives you all your sins, tears down the wall that separates you from God, and places eternal paradise into your flesh and soul. This truth . . . this comfort . . . this gift of salvation . . . this Jesus!—is yours now and when you close your eyes in earthly death.

3. THE NIGHT LUTHER DIED, HE PRAYED PSALM 31:5 FOUR TIMES, “INTO YOUR HAND I COMMIT MY SPIRIT; YOU HAVE REDEEMED ME, O LORD, FAITHFUL GOD.”

Justus Jonas knew Luther’s final moments had come. He asked his friend, “Reverend Father, will you remain steadfast in Christ and the doctrine which you have preached?” Luther replied,

¹⁰ AE 25:405.

¹¹ *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, Second edition (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), 263.

¹² AE 26:277.

¹³ AE 26:278.

¹⁴ AE 26:279.

¹⁵ AE 26:284.

¹⁶ AE 26:167.

“Ja!”¹⁷ After countless lectures, hundreds of sermons, and thousands of pages of writing, the final word to come out of Luther was “Ja.” “Yes.” Luther—this poor beggar—was ready to die, trusting in His dear Savior. Luther died about three in the morning of a heart attack. God delivered him out of this veil of tears. Luther’s earthly journey was over.

One of Luther’s favorite portions of Scripture was John 15, which Luther understands as describing the Christian’s life in Christ. Luther believed that Christ lives in and through the Christian. Concerning John 15, Luther writes, “[Jesus] was sent into the world by the Father to redeem us from our sin by His suffering and death, and to reconcile us to the Father, that all who believe in Him might not be damned and lost but have remission of sin and eternal life for His sake.”¹⁸

Hear what Luther preaches on this marvelous union with Christ: “Man is first declared clean by God’s Word for Christ’s sake, in whom he believes. For by such faith in the Word he is grafted into the Vine that is Christ and is clothed in His purity, which is imputed to him as his own and is as perfect and complete in him as it is in Christ.”¹⁹

This, dear Christians, is indeed what takes place in *your* Baptism, and as you hear the preached Word, and as you eat and drink Christ’s body and blood. This is the Christian life—being grafted into the life-giving Vine and bearing much fruit.

And yet, in his sermon on John 15, Luther laments by saying, “But as it happens, most people live under the illusion that it is unnecessary to be and remain in Christ.”²⁰ So many fool themselves, thinking they can be Christian while living detached from the Vine. They are not hearing God’s preached Word. They are not receiving the blessed Sacrament. Cut off from the Vine, there is no life—only death.

Attached to the Vine, however, is abundant and eternal life. When we are attached to the Vine, *even in death*, Christ turns it into our good. Luther announces, “Death and grave, be life!”²¹ Luther continues, “[God] . . . has a stronger and more forceful language and voice than the world and the devil. He will outshout them and compel them to let us be with Christ and remain His true and fruitful Vine branches.”²² And so, during our earthly life, Luther says, “We must see to it that we are always found in Christ, that is, that we hold to His Word and let nothing tear us away from it.”²³

CONCLUSION

That morning, Luther’s body was taken to St. Andrew’s Church. Justus Jonas preached that very morning. Pastor Coelius preached the next morning.

Luther’s body was then draped with a white pall, and then with fifty horsemen, the 70-mile journey to Wittenberg began. The crowd grew to the thousands, and steeple bells rang from the

¹⁷ See Sasse, “Luther’s Legacy to Christianity,” 2:172.

¹⁸ AE 24:211.

¹⁹ AE 24:212.

²⁰ AE 24:213.

²¹ AE 24:198.

²² AE 24:200.

²³ AE 24:230.

churches. Luther's body arrived in Wittenberg. He was taken to the Castle Church, where twenty-nine years earlier he had nailed the Ninety-Five Theses. Luther was later buried there below the pulpit.

Luther's pastor, Rev. Bugenhagen, preached the funeral sermon. Bugenhagen expressed thanksgiving to God for Luther's many gifts to the Church, for Luther's valiant defense of the Gospel, and for the way in which Luther unlocked the Scriptures concerning Christ. Most of all, Bugenhagen preached about Christ and how He has conquered death. Bugenhagen proclaimed that, through Christ, the death of the body was merely the beginning of life eternal through Jesus Christ, who became the sacrifice for all [sinful beggars].

Dear Christian friends, whether it be today or in our time of death—with Luther, we boldly confess our faith in Jesus Christ, “Into Your hand I commit my spirit; You have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.” Amen.

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