

THE GOSPEL IN MY LIFE

1 The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, 2 it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God. 3 Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; 4 say to those with fearful hearts, “Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.”

5 Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. 6 Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. 7 The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

8 And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way. The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it. 9 No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there 10 and those the LORD has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

The prophet describes sin by describing some of its effects: Desert. Parched land. Wilderness (which in the land of Judah was often a waterless wasteland like our nearby Badlands). Burning sand. Thirsty ground. The haunts where wild animals, jackals, lie waiting for prey.

He also describes the way that the results of sin appear in our lives-- not necessarily on account of any particular sin in any of us, but because there is sin in the world: People become or are sometimes born blind, deaf, lame, mute. And then there is sorrow, and sighing, which would not be in our lives if it were not for ins.

Then again, he describes our actual sins, open sin and error that really can be found on account of the sinfulness of the individual, of each one of us: To be unclean. To be wicked. To be a wicked fool. Each of us looks into the law of God and we come up with a dozen more titles of sin to add to our account. God says: “Be holy,” but we’re so far from being holy that we cower before his Almighty Power. We even forget sometimes that we are forgiven Christians, and we despair.

It is in that despair that people try to come up with **their own ways** of working out their sin. Some try to be better people by resolve, as if their resolve will last more than an hour. Or they try to talk themselves out of their guilt by comparing themselves to a worse sinner, since everybody can always think of a worse sinner. Or they try to make up for sin with good deeds. But none of this get us to “Be holy.” It only amounts to “I’ll try to be a little better,” but never “holy.” Only God’s solution for sin has any effect, and it wipes all sin away forever. This is the holiness given to us as a gift by Christ; it is his holiness, given as his flesh was killed on the cross to pay for our errors and sins and rebellion. He did what was necessary in our place.

Don’t let that go to waste. I mean, don’t just receive and put it in your pocket and forget about it, like a receipt or a dime that ends up going through the laundry, forgotten about so completely that you wonder how it ever got there in the first place. No-- take the forgiveness given to you and thank God with your life. Because this is the place of good deeds, of good works and good words and yes, even good intentions. God sees and hears and knows about all of these things, and when they are done or even intended to be done by a Christian, covered in the righteousness of Christ, then they please him, and they delight him.

It is often through these very deeds and words and merely good intentions that God chooses to accomplish what he would do through his omnipotent power, but which he so often is pleased to bring about through us.

This is how the parched land becomes glad-- when the parched land is the sad or lonely heart of a friend, and your good gesture, your smile, your offer of kindness goes so much further than you will ever know. **They yearn for Jesus, even if they don’t know that, and you can show them Jesus.**

This is how the **crocus** suddenly blooms as if rejoicing or shouting for joy. A crocus is a kind of flower that doesn’t have any stem to speak of, above ground. It closes up its blossoms at night or even when it’s overcast, so that when the sun comes out, suddenly there are flowers everywhere, where you weren’t expecting them at all, where there was just grass a few minutes before. A people who are oppressed, or depressed, or are far from home, are like the crocus in the dark. They will never bloom without the sunshine of Christ, which should accompany your hello, your smile, your kind word, and then they will erupt into joy that you just didn’t see coming. The compassion of Christ teaches us compassion.

How our heavenly Father loves to bring about marvelous changes and joy in the world through the lowliest means-- often, simply you or me being loving neighbors, and no more than that. But the lowliest of all is the means by which God removed the waterless wasteland

of sin and hell, through the cross. The cross points out the path that Isaiah describes: “The Way of Holiness.”

Is the Way of Holiness another way of talking about heaven? Or is it a path here in this lifetime? It is not an actual paved road through the countryside, as if there is a blacktopped bike trail leading from the doors of St. Paul’s and St. John’s up the hill through the MLC grounds and then away east over the River to Watertown and Mequon and the beautiful green tree-covered campus of Wisconsin Lutheran College and then eventually through Saginaw and on to the Mount of Olives.

No, nor is it another way of describing heaven for us, although heaven is its goal. No, it is the only way to heaven. Therefore it is a path that a Christian walks, a lifetime journey, through Christ, through the Cross. It is what Jesus means when he says, “I am the Way.”

The unclean will not journey on it, why not? Because they reject Jesus and look for other pathways to Paradise. **Wicked fools will not go about on it** because they constantly think that they have found something better, and they are certain in their hearts that there is no heaven at all, and if there were, it wouldn’t be our through the blood of a man who died as an obscure criminal back in Roman times.

No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast. That is not to say that there will never be danger in the world, but the world is not the path, although the path is in the world. But in the text of the Scriptures, in the Word of Christ, there is no danger. In the message of the cross, there is no flaw, no riddle, no punchline. There is only the truth, there is only peace for the forgiven sinner.

Only the redeemed will walk there and those the LORD has rescued will return. Return from where? From the prison of death, from the sentence of hell, from the smoking cauldrons and the flaming lake of fire that awaits the devil and his servants. We are led away from all of his bile and accusations, and even though he may keep spitting insults and threats at us, **everlasting joy will crown our heads.** And finally, along with all our sorrows, all our grief, all the emptiness, loneliness, guilt, shame, doubt and fears, something will overtake us: **Gladness and joy will overtake us**, like a fresh cool breeze after a stifling hot month, and **all our sorrow and sighing will flee**, will run away, never to return. And we will be with the Lord forever in Paradise

Amen.