PENTECOST 15, B – September 5, 2021

SCRIPTURES – Isaiah 35:4-7; James 2:1-10, 14-18; Mark 7:31-37; Ps. 28

The Lord is the strength of his people; he is the saving refuge of his anointed. Ps. 28:8

Well, finally… Nicky; Christian; Lucia; Josiah; Bryce: you’re being confirmed today. This has been a long – a *very* long – time coming!! Let’s see… it was over 3½ years ago that the five of you finished your early Communion instruction and began receiving Holy Communion. It was last winter when you finished your full instruction in the Small Catechism and were ready to be Confirmed. But, with Covid messing up so many things… and then trying to coordinate everyone’s schedules… well, we’ve had to be patient, but here we are: finally!

Perhaps we can learn something from this waiting. Patience, you see, is not just a virtue. It’s also an essential part of our Christian faith. Ours is a patient, and yet also constantly active, faith; for, the God whom we trust is Himself patient, and yet also constantly active.

Our faith begins with God’s activity. The Bible, from its first words, reveals God to be mighty and active. He is not only constantly doing: creating, directing, and ordering. He is also energetic in mind and heart: thinking… planning… desiring… If you have not thought about God in this way, then consider what Isaiah says (35:4): ***“Behold, your God will come with vengeance…”*** Vengeance is the intense emotions of anger and sorrow giving rise to action. Vengeance arises when one you love deeply is threatened or hurt. Throughout the Bible we are told that God is a powerful being: powerful in His activity because He is powerful in His love. From His love He powerfully brought forth all that exists, simply by speaking it into existence. And this wasn’t just at the beginning. **God is**. He is, then, powerfully active to this day. *“We are wonderfully made by God’s hands. God has loved us and cared for us since the beginning of our lives.”* Lucia, you said this in your essay. You wrote what you have learned: from your confirmation instruction; from Sunday School; and, above all, from your parents and family. God comes with vengeance to save each of us, for He loves us intensely!

And yet, this intense and loving activity of God for us is mostly hidden, isn’t it? It is hidden behind God’s patient inactivity and allowing of suffering. He hides His loving activity behind seemingly powerless masks: such as the words of the Bible, which were written for us; the bread and wine of Holy Communion; and, the water of Baptism. And, many times, God’s masks are people.

* Jesus, above all. He is not merely a mask behind whom God hides and through whom He works. Jesus is God Himself, clothed in human flesh! He is God among us and for us.
* Isaiah, who spoke for God. The men who brought the deaf man with the speech impediment to Jesus. Me, and your Sunday School teachers, and especially your parents and grandparents, as we teach you about God.

It is amazing that God uses us to do His almighty, saving work!

It can also be troubling, and might even seem rather foolish of God. For, we people are very sinful; even the best of us! Christian, you said in your essay: *“I know I am a sinner. While I try my best to follow the Ten Commandments, I know I fall short. I have thought things I shouldn’t, done things I shouldn’t, and I’ve left many things undone.”* Gee, I thought you were a pretty good young man! Are you depressed? Do you need counseling? Well, that wasn’t all you said. You went on: *“Through the Divine Service we confess our sins against God, and then pastor forgives all of our sins in the name of God. This is amazing because it cleanses us from all of our sins. There could not be a better way to start church.”* Well said, child of God! Everyone who believes this is God’s good child.

It is important to remember that we – that all people – are sinful. For, you see, for the five of you, believing and living as Christians has not been too difficult. This is because you are young. But, as you get older your faith will not be so easy. More and more you will find people challenging you, and perhaps even belittling you, for believing what you believe today. Some will be people you look up to, such as teachers and professors. They will claim to you that the Bible is wrong; or, is just made-up stories; or, is words and ideas from a pretty old book that need to be updated. You’ll be made to feel wrong, and even foolish and unloving, if you hold to them. We live in a hard world… a world that has been hardened against God by sin. And, our own sinful desire to be accepted or avoid hardships tempts us to give in to such sins by being silent and not standing up for what God says.

This is why it is so important for you to continue to be here in God’s house: that you might continue to hear and learn God’s words and receive His forgiveness. Josiah, I couldn’t put this any better than you: *“God expects a lot more from us after being baptized. He expects us to continue learning about our faith, to pray, to help others, and to live Godly lives… Kind of like baseball. For me to be good at baseball, I need to practice – I need to spend time doing it… God wants and expects us to do the same. To practice and learn more and more about our faith. To read the Bible. To learn all the things that Jesus said and did and why what he said is important. We need to keep our faith at the very top of our lives at all times.”* Our faith is not to be hidden, but active! This is God’s will for us. Jesus didn’t restore the hearing and the voice of the deaf man so that he could be silent and not use his voice to praise God! And James said: ***“faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead… I will show you my faith by my works.”***

God expects this of every one of us here, for when we were baptized into Christ, we were healed by God and made His children. And when you come forward to receive Holy Communion you again receive the healing of God’s forgiveness and His strength – and not from me. Nicky said well in his essay: *“Here in the Sacrament you receive from the lips of Christ forgiveness of sin. It contains and brings with it God’s grace and the Spirit with all His gifts, protection, shelter, and power against death and the devil and all misfortune.”* How we need this continually! In the gifts that God gives us here in His house our Lord, although yet hidden to us, is truly our strength and our saving refuge.

I haven’t forgotten about you, Bryce. You summed up our hidden and patient, and yet active, faith well when you wrote: *“God sent his Son to save the world so that anyone who believes in him will have eternal life. We are supposed to live good lives according to the rules and the Ten Commandments. But they don't save me or make me God's child. I am saved by grace alone through faith in our Lord and Jesus Christ and his death on the cross.”* So are we all!

This is from an 11-year-old. He was 7½ when he first came forward to receive Holy Communion with us. The other four were just a bit older. I know this was a radical change for us. *“Will they go to Confirmation and get Confirmed if they receive Communion so early?”* was a question I was asked more than once. Well, here they are! And not because of me… or their parents and grandparents… or even themselves. Oh, we all have played an important part, including you. But, it is our patient and active God and Savior who has brought them here. It is His work of salvation that they, and we, confess. ***“He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak!”*** Yes, He has… and He still does. All thanks to God: the strength of his people and the saving refuge of his anointed! Amen.