

WHY CHURCH?

Alleluia! Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Alleluia!

For Lutherans, these words have a particular resonance. Ever since the green hymnal otherwise known as Lutheran Book of Worship came out in 1978, they've been used to greet the gospel with song. When the blue hymnal otherwise known as With One Voice came out in 1995, this could have changed, but it did not. Generally speaking, it was the hymns, not the liturgies of the blue hymnal which took hold in the life of your average congregation. And then again in 2006 along came our current cranberry-colored hymnal otherwise known as Evangelical Lutheran Worship. Again, the words Lutherans had been singing pretty much every weekend since 1978 could have gone extinct, but they did not. Some congregations, like the one Pastor Jonathan serves out in Benscreek, never got our current hymnal; sticking with the green hymnal of 1978. Others continued to take advantage of how the new, cranberry-colored hymnal includes the liturgies Lutherans have been singing for over forty years now. Given this history, it's just a fact that if you've been Lutheran for a while, the words "Alleluia! Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Alleluia!" should resound with you.

If this resonance exists, it's a good thing. Our reading from John reminds us the words Lutherans have been singing to greet the gospel for over forty years now go back to the Bible itself. This is the case with all the songs in the traditional, Lutheran liturgy. They all repeat or paraphrase the Bible and this is no accident. In accord with what's said in the New Testament letters of St. Paul, Lutherans believe faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit often produced through hearing the word of God. And so, in Lutheran circles, church comes with a lot of scripture. Sometimes it's read. Sometimes it's confessed. Sometimes it's prayed. Sometimes it's preached. Sometimes it's sung or chanted. And all of this helps to explain why we need church. We need, our neighbors need, the world needs, something that calls away from doubt and disbelief and towards faith instead. Church does this by gathering us around the word of God in all of its rich variety so the Holy Spirit might use the word of God to awaken and sustain faith in our lives.

If we put this in the language of our reading from Ephesians, what church does is help us quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. After all, our reading from Ephesians says this is done through faith, and again, it's at church where through exposure to the word of God the Holy Spirit creates and/or sustains such

faith. With this in mind, we might say we need church to help us through the trials and temptations of life. I, for one, know church has done this for me.

During this weekend in 1994, I was sitting in a church pew in Brookfield, Wisconsin; a suburb of Milwaukee. I can remember it as if it were yesterday. As the weekend had approached, I had been slandered and defamed; with somebody making me out to be someone I was not and never had been. Ever been there? I once heard a Lutheran bishop from Africa make light of the slander and defamation we can experience by saying a dog will only bark at a moving car, whereas the same dog will soil the tires of a parked car. I definitely think there's a point to his folksy analogy, but it still hurts and stings to be slandered and defamed.

Back in 1994, I was first learning what the book of James will tell us in a couple of weeks. I was learning the tongue can be a beast that defies domestication like no other creature known to humankind. I was learning the tongue can be a terrorist that does its best to light fires all around. But our reading from Ephesians is right. Church and the faith it encourages and enables can repel the fiery arrows of the evil one; can stand up to the wiles of the devil; can withstand all that's availed against us on the most evil of days. Back in 1994, when I heard our reading from Ephesians talk about putting on the whole armor of God, I was transfixed. I sat straight up in my seat. The Holy Spirit was talking to me quite directly; saying, "You got this. Don't let some slander and defamation bring you down or throw you off your game. Shake it off and move on. It's better to barked at than it is to have your tires soiled." Still able to remember it as if it were yesterday all these years later, church helped me on the day and weekend I've described. It's helped many more times since and I hope it has for you as well. It's one of the reasons why we and our neighbors and our world need church. Church calls us to faith so we might overcome the trials and temptations of life; so we might quench all the fiery arrows of the evil one.

But, but, but, as church calls us and our neighbors and our world to faith, we also need church for another reason and that's to call us beyond ourselves and our old, tired, and grave-bound ways. Just go back to the words: Alleluia! Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Alleluia! In addition to being the stuff the Holy Spirit uses to awaken and sustain faith. these are words which make it clear that Jesus has competition. There are ways we can go in life other than Jesus' way. But as St. Peter first acknowledged long ago in our reading from John, all these other ways, all these ways that take us away from Jesus, travel towards death and the ephemeral rather than towards life and

eternity. To get back in the direction of life and eternity, to get back in the direction of Jesus, we need church to call us beyond ourselves and our old, tired, and death-bound ways. Yes, we need church so that we might live out the meaning of the alleluias which precede and follow our singing about Jesus having the words of eternal life. For brothers and sisters, "alleluia" means not "praise ye the competition," but "praise ye the Lord." After the gift of faith, this is the other reason we need church. We need church to call us beyond ourselves and all of our old, tired, and death-bound ways so that we might actually get around to praising the Lord Jesus Christ. I suppose this is why I spent this past Friday morning with a group of cancer patients.

That I would do this could be construed as quite surprising. Number one, in the midst of what's been a very busy summer here at Mount Calvary Lutheran Church, going to the hospital on Friday morning was something extra; one more thing I didn't have to do, as I did have to do many others. Number two, and perhaps more importantly, back on my birthday in 2011 I spent hours sitting in Boston's Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. My heart was torn apart by the sight of very sick person after very sick person and then, to top the day off, I got to hear a compassionate and capable doctor tell my kid sister Amy that she had a non-curative form of cancer. It rates as one of the worst days of my life, if not the worst. And this isn't to mention all the bad memories I have of accompanying too many beloved congregants as they've fought their own battles with cancer, sometimes successfully; more often unsuccessfully. Given this history, why in the world would I volunteer to go and spend more time, time I didn't have to give, with cancer and those it terrorizes? With all I had already been through, why in the world did I agree when a social worker I've known for a long time called and asked me to spend some time with a dozen or so of her current cancer patients?

It's because through church, we're called beyond ourselves and our fears and our hurt feelings and all of our other old, tired, death bound ways to the praise of our Lord Jesus Christ. It's because through church, faith grows into faithfulness; in the process turning back the devil's efforts to thwart God's effort to turn us into those who like Jesus before us use our wounds and our scars for the good of others. Again, we need church so that faith might be awakened and we in the process might be called beyond ourselves and our sinful inclinations to the praise of our Lord Jesus Christ. How's this happened for you? Blessing you with faith in the process, how has church called you beyond yourself and toward that which trends in the direction of life rather than death? Amen!