

Many members. One body united in Christ.

Populus Zion

Romans 15:4-13

7 December, Anno Domini 2025

Beloved saints of God,

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

During the 17th and 18th centuries the movement known most commonly as “the Enlightenment” swept through America and Europe. Many refer to this time frame as the “Age of Reason”. It was defined by the belief that man, using his reason and the scientific method would be able to explain nearly everything. It followed on the heels of the Scientific Revolution and insisted that only that which could be empirically demonstrated should be accepted. It bred a rejection of authority which culminated in the bloody French Revolution.

While human reason, given by God, has its place in our life here on earth, if we do not recognize that it has been horrifically marred by sin, we will, as we have, allow it to lead us into all kinds of wickedness and unbelief. The so-called Enlightenment became a springboard for a rejection of the authority of the Word of God and ultimately a rejection of even the idea of there being a god at all since His existence can't be proved using the scientific method. Man was placed on God's throne as the source of all knowledge and truth. Thus the Enlightenment has drawn man's attention away from the divine and the eternal, rejecting them as nothing more than fables and fairy tales meant to keep people under the thumb of either political or religious authority. I would argue that we in the Church shouldn't even accept the name that this movement has been given because it assumes that its ideas are good and God-pleasing. Fundamentally we are not better for the ideas of that age. It was really a time of darkening that followed quickly after God had brought the pure Gospel back to light through the Reformation. The ideas of the Enlightenment were masterful tools used by the devil to drive man's hearts further away from Christ and the word of salvation.

Still today the poison of this dark period afflicts even the church and has caused many of God's children to grow dull to the Word of God, treating the things of God more like fairy tales and magic than gifts of life and salvation from the God of heaven and earth.

We see this most clearly when we demand that God's Word conform to our reason and dismiss out of hand anything that we deem unreasonable or irrational. We

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attempt to dismiss God's Word because it was written so long ago by men and so it can't really be trusted. Armed with that excuse we attempt to conform God's Word to our desired lifestyle rather than asking God to conform our hearts and minds and wills to His. But what Christ said stands "My words will never pass away." And on that Last Day, when heaven and earth and all man's wisdom pass away, Christ Word will either stand against us in judgment or joyously invite us to claim our place in eternal paradise.

What does all this have to do with what we have heard this day from God's Word? Today, again, our Lord has issued a very clear reminder that He is returning for judgment and any who are not prepared, who don't take with the utmost seriousness both the signs that are happening all around us and the great dangers that we constantly face, will find themselves filled with terror which Christ approaches on the clouds. The Word of God alone which reveals sin and the one way of salvation is our only preparation by which we can look forward to Christ's return. Thus every attack leveled against God's Word is an attack against your salvation. That is the great danger of the ideas of the Enlightenment. From within our own midst this thinking spawned what is now the ELCA, an organization that body and proudly, using God's holy name, denies the efficacy and infallibility of God's Word and praises all kinds of blasphemous false teaching and wickedness.

The reality is that every day is a day in which we and our families need to be actively preparing. Because it has been two thousand years since our Lord promised His return, it has grown easier for us to fall into the thinking of the unbelievers which St. Peter describes in his second epistle to the Church where he writes "scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.'" (2 Peter 3:3-4) This is thinking of those in our day who have drunk the Koolaid of the Enlightenment. "What a silly, childish idea that a deity from the sky is going to come back and cast a bunch of people into eternal torment because they didn't believe in Him. We all know that the world evolved from an explosion of gases billions of years ago. Why would God save people by dying for them and then use a little bit of water to make them Christians? And of course bread can't be Jesus' Flesh and wine can't be His Blood. That doesn't fit with our reason and understanding."

Children of God, we must examine our thinking and reasoning, knowing full well from God's Word that nothing about us, including our reason, has been spared the corruption of original sin. Adam and Eve thought their reason and understanding

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were greater than God's and that it was an unreasonable, maybe even evil, demand of God that they not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Their foolishness, rooted in the devil's invitation to question God's Word, cut them and all humanity off from God and cast us all instead under God's temporal and eternal wrath. It subjected us to death and made us slaves of the devil and our own foolishness which we imagine is actually wisdom.

How often do we treat prayer as an unnecessary annoyance or an embarrassing practice in public? We treat the Scriptures as just a book of information rather than the living Word of the living God by which He has promised to accomplish His work in us. We don't examine our lives in light of the Commandments because we don't actually want to know and cast out sin and we think of God as more like Santa Claus who doesn't really care about our sin. We spend countless hours and dollars on what we call our physical health or our children's academic and athletic success but scoff at the idea of spiritual exercises and disciplines like fasting, prayer, almsgiving, and others.

The Word of God, Holy Scripture, is given to us precisely because the reason and thoughts of man are corrupt and not to be trusted. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5) because "there is a way that seems right to a man but its end is the way of death." (Proverbs 14:12) God prepared and has preserved the Bible for our instruction and encouragement. Every thought and teaching is to be taken captive to Christ and measured against what He has said. The Bible is a priceless gift given to you and confirmed by the Blood of God's own Son. Without it we are at the mercy of the devil's lies and our own sinful reason. With it, we can withstand a full on assault of every last legion of hell.

We are in a fierce battle for our souls. It will end but we do not know the day or the hour. We would be foolish to simply assume that we are not in constant danger of being led away from the one way of salvation which God has provided, namely the forgiveness of our sins through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. And God, in His mercy and wisdom, offers the gift of this salvation through the preaching of His Word and applies it to each sinner in the washing of Holy Baptism. We can ask "Why this way," all we want but it doesn't matter. God has spoken very clearly "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved." (Mark 16:16) And He has promised to preserve and strengthen this faith as we hear His

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Word and as we read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest it. And, what is more, He has instituted and commanded us Christians to receive often the Holy Supper of His Body and Blood under bread and wine by which He continues to nourish us with the forgiveness of our sins. And, in His abundant mercy, He has established and given to His Church on earth the Office of the Keys, the authority to forgive the sins of repentant sinners but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent. And he calls men to fill and exercise that office in the midst of the Church so that we poor sinners can hear a living voice proclaim to us by God's own authority that our sins are freely and fully forgiven for the sake of Christ. And all of these things your Lord gives to you for the singular purpose of keeping you in the one, true faith until the day of His return. Receive them as often as God makes them available to you. Make full use of them. Don't let your reason convince you that you are sufficiently strong and can go without them. The less you feel your need for them, the greater your need for them is because you are falling under the devil's sway.

Yes, God has promised to preserve His children in the midst of this fallen and wicked world. But that preservation is not magical. He does it only by the means which He Himself has instituted and given to us. By these alone are Christians born and by these alone are Christians preserved. That means that you who have been called by the Gospel and enlightened with Christ's gifts will be kept with Jesus Christ in the same way - only as you avail yourself of God's Word and the holy sacraments. God's promise of salvation is not at all a call for you to be idle or inactive. Exactly the opposite. It is a call to vigorously engage all of the means of grace, day in and day out. True faith must and wants to read and study the Bible every day because it firmly believes in the power of God's Word to save and teach and give life. True faith must and wants to call out to God at all times and in all needs because it believes that God truly hears and answers and helps and that all good comes only from God. True faith must and wants to help friend and foe alike because it has tasted the help and mercy of God and like God desires that all men be saved and preserved from everlasting death. True faith must and wants to be gathered to God with the body of Christ at least every Lord's Day because God has promised to speak and breath out His life-giving Spirit and to us the true food of Christ's Body and Blood to forgive our sins and raise us to new life. True faith longs to hear the absolution of Christ from the pastor as from God Himself because it hates what it sees in the flesh and longs to be free of it. It believes Christ's promise that whoever's sins the pastor forgives by Christ's authority, is truly forgiven before God in heaven.

These are not simply good ideas for Christians if they manage to find some time in

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their busy schedule. Whatever God gives, He gives because we need. Without each of these things, faith WILL starve to death and the day of the Lord will be a day of terror for us. Everything God gives and commands is necessary and good for our salvation. The devil and this world and your own flesh are constantly seeking to deceive you about what is important and necessary. Of course they want you to be so busy that you don't have time to read the Bible at home with your family, to pray, to attend the Divine Service, to help your neighbor in need. Of course they want you spending your money on things that please the flesh and entertain it and dull your senses so that you don't think about the judgment of God. Of course they don't want you to talk about Christ with people at work or at the grocery store or at the playground and warn them of His return so that they too can be saved.

We must recognize these things and resist them. We must push back against them rather than imaging that we can tame the. We must be always mindful that nothing in the world will endure. We must vigorously do the hard work of guarding ourselves and our children so that we are not found at our Lord's return with full bellies and empty souls. We must be as serious and persistent about filling ourselves and children with the things of salvation as the devil and the world are every day about taking those things away and filling us with death.

People of God, each and every one of us must be on guard against the demonic ideas that flowed out of the Enlightenment and flourish among us still today and not allow ourselves to be deceived by them. They are a direct assault on the Word of God for the purpose of raising doubts and even unbelief in what God has said in Holy Scripture so that when Christ does return, we find ourselves cast out of God's presence to suffer the just punishment of our sin. Christ is coming. Devote yourselves to being prepared for His return. Truly, nothing else matters. Be filled with His Word, call upon Him at all times, receive the means of grace, tend to the duties of your vocations. Set aside all things that do not help you remain prepared for that glorious day when our Lord Jesus Christ returns in all His glory to cast the devil and all the wicked into eternal judgment and take His dear children into the unending bliss of His perfect presence. God grant this for the sake of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all human understanding keep your

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hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord until the day of His glorious return.