



PRINCE OF PEACE

Eternal Father, Ruler of all nations, on this day when my country celebrates its birth, I thank You for all spiritual and temporal blessings enjoyed in our land. In Your mercy, You have sustained this nation in times of trouble and preserved its liberties. Teach me anew to treasure especially that dearly won freedom of conscience and worship that is the cornerstone of this country's principles. Let me not misuse this liberty nor forget that true freedom is freedom to serve. Give me willingness to share in the process of democratic rule, to respect my country's laws, and to work for the preservation of its institutions. Forgive our past sins committed as a nation in the name of misguided patriotism, self-interest, or political expediency. Confound all those who, for the sake of partisanship or other motives, would sacrifice the greater welfare. Grant wisdom to our leaders. Strengthen all those who strive to do Your will. Increase loyalty to You and to our beloved country. Protect me and my fellow citizens from all subversive or terrorist acts. Above all, dear God, speed the course of Your Gospel among us, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, hearts are turned to that freedom from sin and death that You alone graciously give through Jesus Christ. Amen.

-- Lutheran Book of Prayer. Copyright 2005. Concordia Publishing House.

THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

JULY 4, 2021 ✠ 8:00 AM AND 10:15 AM



PRINCE OF PEACE

LUTHERAN CHURCH AND SCHOOL

WWW.POPLC.ORG

801-261-3808

A SPECIAL WELCOME TO OUR GUESTS!

We're thrilled that you are here and we want you to feel at home.

- * Restrooms are near the door that you came in today.
- * The service is printed in this worship folder. Join in as your comfortable. Ask anyone if you're lost - they'll be glad to help!
- * We're glad you brought your kids! We know and Jesus knows that little kids have a hard time sitting quietly sometimes. They are still welcome here. Jesus said: Let the little children come to me! If your little one is restless, feel free to spend a minute in the entryway, you should still be able to hear through speakers.
- * If you could use some hearing assistance, please ask the usher in the entryway, we have headsets available.

Please introduce yourself to Pastor Peil or Pastor Meyer. They would love to meet you and serve you however he can!

Almighty Father;

Keep your eye on the land that we love.

Forgive its many sins.

Pull it back when it gets too near the cliff of disaster.

Send your Holy Spirit with power that America may remember your name, and honor it. Amen.

WELS NATIONAL CHAPLAINCY PRAYER

THE DIVINE SERVICE

∞ *The congregation speaks and sings the words in **BOLD type**.* ∞

OPENING HYMN | *This Is The Threefold Truth*

**This is the threefold truth on which our faith depends;
And with this joyful cry worship begins and ends:
Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!**

**Made sacred by long use, new-minted for our time,
Our liturgies sum up the hope we have in him:
Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!**

**On this we fix our minds as, kneeling side by side,
We take the bread and wine, take him, the Crucified:
Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!**

**By this we are upheld when doubt or grief assails
Our Christian faith and love, and only grace avails:
Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!**

**This is the threefold truth which, if we hold it fast,
Changes the world and us and brings us home at last:
Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!**

INVOCATION

Matthew 28:19

Please stand.

In the name of the Father and of the Son ✚ and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

Our help is in the name of the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth.

Psalms 124:8

Let us confess our sins to God and ask for his forgiveness.

**Almighty God, merciful Father,
I confess to you that I have not loved you with all my heart.
In what I have done and left undone
I have pursued my ways instead of your ways.
I have not loved others as you command.
For this I deserve your punishment now and forever.
I am sorry for my sins. I repent of them. I beg for your mercy.**

silence for personal reflection

Forgive us for the sake of Jesus Christ, who suffered and died for us.
Cleanse me from my sins. Release me from my guilt. Grant me your Holy Spirit to amend my sinful life.

Jesus says to his people, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven." (John 20:23) Do you believe this?

Yes, I believe.

God, who is rich in mercy, loved us even when we were dead in sin, and made us alive together with Christ. By grace you have been saved. *Ephesians 2:4,5*

In the name of ✝ Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins.

Amen.

LORD, HAVE MERCY

The simple prayer, "Lord, have mercy" has been the hope-filled cry of Christians for many centuries. We pray to Jesus, who is Lord and Christ, and ask for his help based on his mercy.

The minister sings:

Lord Jesus, You raise us to new life: Kyrie
eleison, eleison, Kyrie.

All sing (repeating what minister sang):

Kyrie eleison, eleison, Kyrie.

The minister sings:

Lord Jesus, You forgive us our sins: Christe
eleison, eleison, Christe.

All sing:

Christe eleison, eleison, Christe.

The minister sings:

Lord Jesus, You feed us with Your body and blood: Kyrie eleison, eleison, Kyrie.

All sing:

Kyrie eleison, eleison, Kyrie.

GLORY TO GOD

Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.

Psalm 95:1

Cantor sings: Glory to God in the highest! Glory to God, glory to God! Glory to God in the highest! Peace to His people on earth!

Cantor sings: Lord God, Heavenly King, Almighty God and Father, we worship You, we give You thanks, we praise You for Your glory.

All sing:

Glory to God in the high - est!

Glo-ry to God, glo-ry to God! Glo-ry to God

in the high - est! Peace to his peo - ple on earth!

The musical notation consists of three staves of music in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The first staff contains the melody for 'Glory to God in the high - est!'. The second staff contains the melody for 'Glo-ry to God, glo-ry to God! Glo-ry to God'. The third staff contains the melody for 'in the high - est! Peace to his peo - ple on earth!'. The lyrics are written below the notes.

Cantor sings: Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father, Lord God, Lamb of God, You take away the sin of the world: have mercy on us; You are seated at the right hand of the Father: receive our prayer.

All sing: **Glory to God in the highest! Glory to God, glory to God! Glory to God, in the highest! Peace to His people on earth!**

Cantor sings: You alone are the Holy One, You alone are the Lord, You alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father.

All sing:

Glo-ry to God in the high - est!

Glo-ry to God, glo-ry to God! Glo-ry to God

in the high - est! Peace to his peo - ple on earth!

Peace on earth!

Music: *Mass, Jesus, the Compassion of God*, David Haas; © 1991, 1999, GIA Publications, Inc. All rights reserved.

THE WORD OF GOD

PRAYER OF THE DAY

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Let us pray.

O God, Your almighty power is made known chiefly in showing mercy. Grant us the fullness of Your grace that we may be called to repentance and made partakers of Your heavenly treasures; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

Be seated.

FIRST READING | *Ezekiel 2:1-7*

Ezekiel's experience is not an exception, but the norm - Jesus and His prophets and apostles all faced hatred and hostility. But they continue to speak for God, as we must, because whether people like the message or not, it is the only message that saves!

He said to me, "Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you." As he spoke, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard him speaking to me. He said: "Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their fathers have been in revolt against me to this very day. The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says.' And whether they listen or fail to listen-- for they are a rebellious house-- they will know that a prophet has been among them. And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them or their words. Do not be afraid, though briars and thorns are all around you and you live among scorpions. Do not be afraid of what they say or terrified by them, though they are a rebellious house. You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

PSALM 27 | *The Lord Is My Light*

The soloist sings the refrain. The congregation repeats the refrain. The soloist sings the verses and the congregation joins in the refrains.

Refrain

The Lord is my light and my sal - va - tion. The Lord is the
strong-hold of my life. Since the Lord is my light, my
strength and my all, Whom then shall I fear?

There is one thing I ask of the Lord: To dwell in his house forever,
To gaze on the beauty of the Lord All the days of my life.

Refrain

Do not hide your face, O Lord. Ev'ry day I will seek your face.
Though my father and mother may forsake me, The Lord will receive me.

Refrain

Teach me, Lord, and keep me on your paths; Guide me, Lord, along a level
way. I will gaze on the goodness of the Lord In the land of all the living.

Refrain

SECOND READING | 2 Timothy 2:1-13

Remember Jesus, says St. Paul to Timothy and those who endure hardship for the sake of speaking for God. He never asks us to go where He has not gone. He goes ahead through trial for us and abides with us in every trial. He remains faithful to us.

You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others. Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer. Similarly, anyone who competes as an athlete does not receive the victor's crown except by competing according to the rules. The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops. Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.

Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.

Here is a trustworthy saying:

If we died with him, we will also live with him;

if we endure, we will also reign with him.

If we disown him, he will also disown us;

if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God!

Please stand.

THE HOLY GOSPEL | *Mark 6:1-6*

The Gospel of St. Mark, chapter 6.

Glory be to You, O Lord.

This lesson is the basis of the sermon this morning.

Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. "Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles! Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.

Jesus said to them, "Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor." He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Praise be to You, O Christ!

Be seated.

HYMN OF THE DAY | *God Has Spoken By His Prophets*

This hymn is printed on the next page



1 God has spo - ken by his proph-ets, Spo - ken his un -
 2 God has spo - ken by Christ Je - sus, Christ, the ev - er -
 3 God is speak - ing by his Spir - it, Speak - ing to the



chang - ing Word, Each from age to age pro - claim - ing
 last - ing Son, Bright - ness of the Fa - ther's glo - ry,
 hearts of all, In the age - less Word ex - pound - ing



God the one, the right-eous Lord. In the world's de - spair and
 With the Fa - ther ev - er one, Spo - ken by the Word in -
 His own mes - sage for us all. Through the rise and fall of

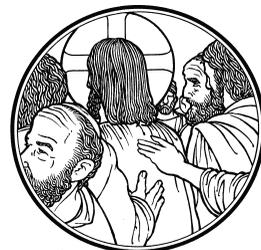


tur - moil One firm an - chor holds us fast: God is
 car - nate, God from God, be - fore time was, Light from
 na - tions One sure faith is stand - ing fast. God a -



king, his throne e - ter - nal, God the first and God the last.
 Light, to earth de - scend - ing— He re - veals our God to us.
 bides, his Word un - chang - ing, God the first and God the last.

SERMON Mark 6:1-6 Jesus is scandalous



NICENE CREED

**We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.**

*Romans 10:10; Dt 6:4
Matthew 6:9; Ex 6:3
Genesis 1:1; John 1:1
Colossians 1:16*

**We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one being with the Father.**

*Romans 10:9
Matthew 16:16
John 3:16
John 1:1,8,12,17,22
Colossians 2:9
John 1:2
John 10:30*

Through him all things were made.

Hebrews 1:2; John 1:3

**For us and for our salvation,
he came down from heaven,**

1 Tim 2:4; Rom 3:23

**was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary,
and became fully human.**

John 6:41; Luke 15:20

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate.

Luke 1:34-35

He suffered death and was buried.

John 1:14

On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures.

Mk 15:25; Jn 19:16-18

He ascended into heaven

Jn 19:1-3; Lk 23:53

and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

1 Cor 15:4; Lk 24:6

He will come again in glory

Acts 1:9

to judge the living and the dead,

Acts 7:55

and his kingdom will have no end.

Matthew 26:64

We believe in the Holy Spirit,

Acts 10:42; My 3:12

the Lord, the giver of life,

2 Peter 1:11

who proceeds from the Father and the Son,

Jn 14:26; Acts 2:38

who in unity with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,

Genesis 1:2; John 3:6

who has spoken through the prophets.

John 15:26

We believe in one holy Christian and apostolic Church.

Mt 3:16-17; Lk

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

Ez 11:5; 2 Pt 1:20-21

We look for the resurrection of the dead

1 Peter 2:5; Eph 2:19-22

and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Ephesians 4:5; Acts 2:38

1 Co 15:35-49; 1 Thes 4

Psalms 106:48

OFFERING | *Moved by God's love in Christ, we return to God our first and best gifts, purely out of thanks to Him.*

*To donate online, text **princeofpeace** (no spaces) to **(833) 693-7056**. You'll receive a link in response. Follow the link to the Prince of Peace secure giving page.*

Please stand.

PRAYER OF THE CHURCH AND THE LORD'S PRAYER

Almighty God, we acknowledge with thanks that all we have and enjoy is a gift from Your gracious hand. You have enriched us with the bounties of farm and factory, the beauty of forest and mountain, and the marvels of medicine and science.

Help us to never take for granted the freedom that we have to worship You in truth, and to proclaim Your name to the world without fear of persecution.

Dear Lord, You are the giver of every good and perfect gift. Forgive us for taking our daily bread for granted. Lead us to seek the needs of others, and through our words and actions let Your love shine forth,

that many more may know Your love for us in Christ Jesus.

Lord God, ruler of all, You command us to pray for our leaders and others in authority. Bless our president, the members of Congress, and all officials who serve on our behalf. Give them the gifts required for leadership and wisdom to carry out their tasks.

Teach us to honor our civil authorities as Your representatives.

Finally, dear Lord, may our love and thankfulness for our nation never overshadow the fact that our citizenship is in heaven, as we eagerly await our Lord Jesus' return.

Strengthen and keep us, O Lord, until You bring us safely home to heaven.

We pray for...

Persecuted Christians in Bangladesh;

Thanksgiving for continued recovery: Mike Green and Jeremy McDonald

Comfort, health and recovery for: Autumn and Meadow Baxter (Krystal Beard's daughter and unborn granddaughter); Holly Kirth; Sam; Aubree Kump (Eric and Cathy Hamilton's granddaughter);

Peace in last days: Shirley McIntosh (Troy McIntosh's mother)

Into Your hands, O Lord, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in Your mercy; through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

THE SACRAMENT

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them up to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is good and right so to do.

It is truly good and right that we should at all times and in all places give You thanks, O Lord, holy Father, almighty and everlasting God, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who promised that wherever two or three come together in His name, there He is with them to shepherd His flock till He comes again in glory.

Therefore, with all the saints on earth and hosts of heaven, we praise Your holy name and join their glorious song.

The congregation is invited to join the cantor who leads us in singing:

The image shows two staves of musical notation in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The first staff begins with the word 'All' above it. The notes are: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), B4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), F#4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (half). The lyrics below are: 'Ho - ly, ho - ly, ho - ly Lord, God of pow - er and might.' The second staff begins with the notes: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), B4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), F#4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (half). The lyrics below are: 'Heav - en and earth are full of your glo -'.

ry. Ho - san - na, Ho - san - na,

Ho - san - na in the high - est!

Bless - ed is he who comes in the name of the

Lord. Ho - san - na, Ho - san - na,

Ho - san - na in the high - est!

THE WORDS OF OUR LORD JESUS

Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night he was betrayed, took bread; and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying: "Take and eat. This is my ☩ body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

Then he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it all of you; this is my ☩ blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."

The peace of the Lord be with you always.

Amen.

Cantor sings "Lamb of God", the congregation sings "You take away the sin of the world" and "grant us peace" as noted:

Cantor *All*

Lamb of God, you take a - way the

repeat as needed

sins of the world, have mer - cy on us.

Cantor *All*

Lamb of God, you take a - way the

repeat as needed

sins of the world, have mer - cy on us.

Cantor *All*

Lamb of God, you take a - way the sins of the

world, grant us peace.

Be seated.

DISTRIBUTION OF HOLY COMMUNION

Prince of Peace practices closed communion, because the Bible teaches it and because we love you. That means we ask that only members of Prince of Peace or other congregations in our fellowship take the Lord's Supper this morning. This is not a judgment of anyone's faith, it is simply our desire to uphold what God says in 1 Corinthians 10 and 11 about who should receive Holy Communion and how.

Children and those who are not communicant members of our church may come forward for a blessing. Those who do are asked to cross their arms on their chest to indicate this.

Please speak to Pastor Peil about communing with us in the future if you're not part of our congregation! Thank you for your understanding.

DISTRIBUTION HYMN | *Lord Jesus Christ, the Church's Head*

**Lord Jesus Christ, the Church's head,
You are her one foundation.
In you she trusts, before you bows,
And waits for your salvation.
Built on this rock secure, Your Church shall endure
Though all the world decay And all things pass away.
Oh, hear, oh, hear us, Jesus!**

**O Lord, let this your little flock,
Your name alone confessing,
Continue in your loving care,
True unity possessing.
Your sacraments, O Lord, And your saving Word
To us e'er pure retain. Grant that they may remain
Our only strength and comfort.**

**Help us to serve you evermore
With hearts both pure and lowly.
And may your Word, that light divine,
Shine on in splendor holy
That we repentance show, In faith ever grow.
The pow'r of sin destroy And evils that annoy.
Oh, make us faithful Christians.**

**And for your gospel let us dare
To sacrifice all treasure;
Teach us to bear your blessed cross,
To find in you all pleasure.
Oh, grant us steadfastness In joy and distress.
Lord, for your mercy's sake, Let us by grace partake
Of endless joy and glory.**

After the distribution, the pastor speaks this blessing:

The true body and blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ strengthen and keep you to life everlasting. Amen.

PRAYER AND BLESSING

O God the Father, source of all goodness, in Your loving kindness You sent Your Son to share our humanity. We thank You that through Him You have given us peace and pardon in this sacrament. We also pray that You will not forsake us but will rule our hearts and minds by Your Holy Spirit so that we willingly serve You day after day, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you.

The Lord look on you with favor and (+) give you peace.

Amen.

CLOSING HYMN | *God Bless Our Native Land*

**God bless our native land!
Firm may she ever stand
Through storm and night!
When the wild tempests rave,
Ruler of wind and wave,
Do thou our country save
By thy great might.**

**For her our prayers shall rise
To God above the skies;
On him we wait.
Thou who art ever nigh,
Guarding with watchful eye,
To thee aloud we cry,
God save the state!**



Thank you to Amy Sehloff and Christopher Watanabe for adorning our worship with music this morning.

DATA WITH RESPECT TO CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION IN THE TOP 50 COUNTRIES WHERE IT'S HARDEST TO FOLLOW CHRIST:

260 MILLION: IN THE TOP 50 WORLD WATCH LIST COUNTRIES ALONE, 260 MILLION CHRISTIANS IN THE WORLD EXPERIENCE HIGH LEVELS OF PERSECUTION FOR THEIR CHOICE TO FOLLOW CHRIST.

1 IN 9: CHRISTIANS WORLDWIDE EXPERIENCE HIGH LEVELS OF PERSECUTION.

6%: THE RISE IN THE NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS IN THE TOP 50 COUNTRIES ON THE 2020 WORLD WATCH LIST (WWL) WHO EXPERIENCE HIGH LEVELS OF PERSECUTION. (FROM THE 2019 REPORTING PERIOD TO 2020'S)

2,983 CHRISTIANS KILLED FOR FAITH-RELATED REASONS IN THE TOP 50 WWL COUNTRIES.

3,711 CHRISTIANS DETAINED WITHOUT TRIAL, ARRESTED, SENTENCED AND IMPRISONED IN THE TOP 50 WWL COUNTRIES.

9,488 CHURCHES OR CHRISTIAN BUILDINGS ATTACKED IN THE TOP 50 WWL COUNTRIES.

6 OUT OF 7: IN SEVEN OF THE COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD WATCH LIST'S TOP 10, THE PRIMARY CAUSE OF PERSECUTION IS ISLAMIC OPPRESSION.

11 COUNTRIES SCORING IN THE "EXTREME" LEVEL FOR THEIR PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS. SIX YEARS AGO, NORTH KOREA WAS THE ONLY ONE.

19 CONSECUTIVE YEARS NORTH KOREA HAS RANKED NO. 1 AS THE WORLD'S MOST DANGEROUS PLACE FOR CHRISTIANS.

DATA FROM forthematrysts.com

IT'S 5:44, AND THE CHURCH IS ON FIRE

FROM PROF. KEN SUNDET JONES: CAN WE SAVE THE CHURCH FROM DECLINE?

In *The Premonition*, a new book about American public health officials in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, Michael Lewis contends that decision-makers consistently disregarded indicators that warned of the situation being vastly more urgent than they imagined. He says that, in the face of exponential growth, their data was weeks out of date. The picture was never as

rosy as they'd hoped. And their decisions were far behind the curve.

In describing officials' inability to grasp the on-the-ground reality of the increasingly dire health crisis, Lewis cites one of my favorite books: Norman Maclean's *Young Men and Fire*. In it, the author of *A River Runs Through It* traced the path of fifteen smokejumpers in 1949 who faced an exploding forest fire in

Montana's Mann Gulch above the Missouri River. By the end of the fire-fighting day, the steep slope had burned to its crest, and all but three of the crew lay dead.

Looking back four decades later, Maclean established a timeline for the tragedy that shows the smokejumpers consistently thought the fire situation was less extreme than it actually was. They believed they had more time to do their work and reach safety. At 5:30, for instance, the smokejumpers made decisions based on what the situation had been ten minutes earlier. The fire had crowned in the treetops and was moving faster than they could run uphill with heavy packs and hot smoke filling their lungs.

By 5:44 the crew foreman, Wag Dodge, saw that the fire had become inescapable and did what most would have regarded as a fool's response. He knelt in the dry grass, struck a match, and lit the hillside in front of him – his only path of safety. With fire behind him and now in front of him as well, he yelled to his crew to step into the newly burnt grass.

Within the newly kindled escape fire Dodge was safe, but no one joined him. Two of his crewmates made it over the hog back ridge. The other twelve perished. Their watches had stopped at precisely 5:45 p.m., the moment when life was no longer possible. Today, white crosses mark the spots where their bodies were found. Maclean called those places "stations of the cross."

However aptly the Mann Gulch fire functions as an allegory for the pandemic (we'll leave that assessment to future historians), it's a workable parable for the North American church facing decline. For decades we've

assumed we have more time to deal with the forces arrayed against the institutional church. The last thirty years have been spent operating as if it were 1955, with the culture and the church pulling in the same mutually-supporting direction. The ELCA, my denominational home, has released a projection that says that, if current trends hold, what was once a million-strong organization at its inception in 1988 will soon dwindle to just 67,000 members. The ultimate blow-up may not have hit, but 5:44 p.m. is at hand.

It forces us to wonder if an escape fire is a possibility. But needing to ask the question reveals something about our decline (and not just in my denomination). It shows how eagerly we've come to rely on our actions, plans, programs, and management to secure the church's continuity. If we simply wonder what we ought to do, we remain mired in the illusion that the law can preserve us from danger and provide a comfortable future.

That approach has fueled the conflagration. It's just more kindling and dry grass – a nicety or even handy or pretty in good times, I suppose, but exponentially more dangerous when the flames are lit. Where has our adoration of the demands of morality or justice or prosperity or growth-for-growth's-sake gotten us? The critique sent to the seven churches in Revelation ought to feel familiar.

Those for whom Christ bled and died have often weakened the proclamation of the gospel to allow for comfort and ease, not to mention the self-serving game of church shopping. The demands to "straighten up and fly right" (or left, depending on the

political bent of the demander) leave people who are already exhausted giving up. And the false perfection on display by moral and spiritual do-gooders leaves real sinners in despair.

But the gospel is created for the uncomfortable and diseased, for the bent who've veered away, and for those very sinners. It's built for people racing up a 75° slope in knee-high grass with a wall of flame a hundred yards behind, knowing the safety of the ridgeline is unattainable. In short, it is for those who are dead in sin and can't concoct the abundant life they're so desperate for.

There is no action of our own that can save the day and the church from decline. Denominations are not synonymous with the gospel and are not a route to safety.

Wag Dodge couldn't save his crew, but he could strike a match. In the same way, the church and its public proclaimers carry the spark to light an escape fire that does indeed make for a safe return home at the end of the day.

The escape fire is Jesus himself whom the world regards as equally as dangerous as the encroaching inferno. It's utter foolishness. Yet he bids the heavy laden, those carrying useless pick axes and canteens and wearing

far-from-flame-retardant clothes, to come to him so he can give them life. The theology of the cross calls us to discover the church among sinners, light in the face of darkness, and the resurrection in our death.

None of the smokejumpers who died on the slope of Mann Gulch stepped into Wag Dodge's flames. It was ridiculous to think a tiny fire would be the antidote to greater fire, yet Christ's death is the end of death. The fire of Pentecost is the preaching of the gospel in its truth and purity. It is Jesus: the way, the truth, and the life. It offers the sole escape.

The church, then, needs no saving. What needs preserving is the faith of those who strike the flint, that is, the proclamation itself. The Holy Spirit is well able to call people with matches in their hands to pull their crews in. In your desperate climb, look around for the sparks, for other sinners who know Christ. When you do, you'll see that, while hope for the institution may be dwindling, the true church will nevertheless endure and grow.

Throughout the two thousand years of the church's history, it has always been and ever will be 5:44 p.m. Time to drop the packs and run, walk, and crawl to the fire of life.

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