

“When God Comes to Play”¹

“But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”

“See to it, therefore, that you meditate on and read such passages. Do not grow tired of them, for one day the hour will come when you will know that you did well to study them and that no one can do full justice to the full treatment of such passages.” (LW 29:80)

Introduction

In this past Wednesday’s chapel, Pastor Tim asked the children how they would console someone who needed reassurance or support. Reflecting their worldview, the kids offered things like, “I’d give him a present ... a hug ... a stuffed animal.” My personal favorite, and the one that ties beautifully into the sermon this morning, was when one child said, to console someone “I’d schedule a play date.” ☺

That’s exactly what our heavenly Father did when, *“in the fullness of time [He] sent forth his Son, born of woman ... under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”* (Galatians 4:4-5) Yes, this is what we have in our Lord, “A ‘lover of humanity’ ... a person who runs after people and wants to be around them ... in such a way as to help them, so that they might enjoy benefit from him.” (LW 58:200)

God entering our world, meeting us when and where we needed to be met the most, and loving us back to Himself in His Son. Is that not a joyful proposition? Is this not a “play date” of all play dates – the day He says to you and to me, “You are mine?”

Let us rejoice in this, and in what our Lord still brings to us by way of His gifts – water and the Word ... gifts of grace and faith that He graciously leaves at our doorstep, *“so that being justified by this grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”*

That is who and what we are *when God comes to play.*

Amen.

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When King Solomon spoke of Jesus in the Old Testament, equating Him with “the Wisdom of God” (Proverbs 8:31), Martin Luther envisioned God setting about to “play in His inhabited world.” He imagines the Father – reflecting on His Son being borne into the world - saying:

¹ Title inspired by Luther’s St. Stephen’s Day sermon on this text (LW 58:199-205), “*Deus Ludens: God at Play in Luther’s Theology*,” Christopher Boyd Brown (CTQ, 81:153-170), and a 1st grader in chapel! ☺

““This is the character of My kingdom: I like to play upon the earth. I have My joy in human beings, so that when I am with them I am happy to be around them. I like to have them around Me ...”” (LW 58:200)

How profound the thought! Where, too often, folks (and perhaps even we ourselves at times) have a vision of God as being distant, vengeful, or ready to pounce at the moment of our sin. But then, there are the even more profound moments from God’s Word that tell another story – one of God’s grace, mercy and peace.

Our text this morning is one of those Words. Yes, “here there are no lightning, thunder <as on [Mount] Sinai>, not a sky filled with fire” (Luther), or a Law that stands ready to accuse. Rather, we see the kindness of God, coming to us in His Son, delivering His gifts of grace ... just as we have just witnessed (in Roy Eugene’s Baptism) as well as in our own!

How desperately we need such an assuring Word – not only to save us from death and hell, but to encourage and console us when our consciences are laid low by sin and shame, or when we at times come to doubt that God truly loves us as much as He says He does.

Δ [SLIDE #2] This is (first) a foundational Word – “*a trustworthy saying*” – for faith (v. 8a //1 Timothy 1:15, 3:1, 4:9; 2 Timothy 2:11-13) ... and a life of faith lived out in Him.

⁸*The saying is trustworthy* (“this is most certainly true”²) ...

“If some grow sick of [the Good News], let them. We who desire salvation enjoy listening to it and having it repeated every day, lest we lose faith in time of trial.” (LW 29:87)

That God’s promise of salvation in Christ is something upon which we can build our lives ... as is He who personally delivered that promise to us when He entered this world as a baby, suffered, died and rose again for us.

To be sure, our emotions, and our own imaginations ... they’re all over the place. One day thinking God is smiling on us, and another feeling He’s lost our address or is angry w/us. But this is not the God who *comes to play* with us, but One who gets Himself dirty w/the worst of who we are, and then sets forth to scrub us clean w/His Word of forgiveness.

Trust this! Trust Him! There is nothing else surer – more certain – in this world! This ...

Δ [SLIDE #3] Pure unadulterated (the Father, Son + Holy Spirit all in) Gospel (NB: “Who is doing the verbs?”)

³*For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.*

² *The Small Catechism*

⁴***But*** (always an important word in the Bible, signaling that a change, or new direction is coming) ***when*** (not if) ***the goodness*** (“sweetness of life” ... “generosity”³) ***and loving kindness*** (philanthropy) ***of God our Savior appeared*** (was made manifest), ⁵***he saved us***,⁴ ***not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy***,⁵ ***by the washing of regeneration*** (God’s “do-over” ... His “genesis again” ... by His baptismal flood⁶) ***and renewal***⁷ ***of the Holy Spirit***, ⁶***whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior***, ⁷***so that being justified*** (“just as if I had not sinned”) ***by his*** (that borne and crucified one’s⁸) ***grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life***.

I have to tell you, I am giddy just reading this text. It is sermon enough! I’m done. I’ll sit down now, and let this gracious Word have its desired effect.⁹

OK ... maybe not. ☺ But how consoling such a Word of grace this is ... that:

- [SLIDE #4] He saved *me*! He really wants to be in a relationship with *me*. He is truly kindly disposed towards *me* ... to us all!
- The wonder of His grace becomes more beautiful as it is contrasted with our sin/brokenness – when sin has worked its worst in us. One of the colleagues, with whom I recently shared this Word, said: “I’m v. 3 which is why I need v. 4.”
- It is for this is that Baptism was instituted by God – the assurances of which we “hardly find anywhere else in the New Testament,” Luther once said. (LW 29:81)
- Yes, what happens when *God comes to play*? Grace happens. Faith happens. Forgiveness happens. Salvation happens. Life itself happens! As God comes to us by way of water and His Word!

Where, as grace still works in our lives, one other thing happens:

³ //Psalm 25:7, 106:1. “Inscriptions show that in the Hellenistic age it was the most prized of the stock virtues acclaimed in rulers.” (Rienecker/Rogers, *Linguistic Key the Greek New Testament*, 656)

⁴ At such a gift, “I ought to feel nothing in my heart except the sense of the mercy of God, and when our heart is filled with that awareness and feeling of mercy, that is enough for it to fight against sin, hell, the wrath of God, the warning of the Flood [i.e. *anfechtungen*], Satan, and the power of sin.” (LW 29:81)

⁵ “This word describes God’s faithful help in keeping with his promises, as in the Magnificat (Luke 1:54) and Benedictus (Luke 1:72, 78).” (Koch, *CPR*, 16:1, 24)

⁶ Koch, *CPR*, 16:1, 24-5; Word used in a messianic-eschatological sense by Jesus (Matthew 19:28; see also 2 Corinthians 5:17); think of it like your “Groundhog Day”! ☺

⁷ “For as when a house is in a ruinous state no one places props under it nor makes any addition to the old building, but pulls it down to its foundations and rebuilds it anew. So in our case, God has not repaired us but made us anew.” (Chrysostom, *Homilies on Titus*, 5)

⁸ “Pertaining to an entity mentioned or understood and viewed as relatively remote in the discourse setting, *that person, that thing* ...” (*BDAG*, 3rd Ed., 301)

⁹ Note this “unified statement of salvation in Christ, representing the Christian’s experience: God’s initiative in sending Christ; His merciful rescue of us; Baptism for rebirth and cleansing; the indwelling Spirit, who makes us rich in Christ; justification and acceptance into God’s family; and the hope of eternity with our heavenly Father.” (*TLSB*, 2992)

Δ [SLIDE #5] Such mercy and grace now becomes fertile ground for the Christian life.¹⁰

⁸The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works.

V. 8 of Titus reminds me of my Confirmation verse (Ephesians 2:8-9):

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

Where I have since come also to appreciate the verse following those – v. 10:

“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

This is what the Good News of God’s grace in Christ brings us to: that our works in no way contribute to our salvation. Yes, you are hearing it correctly, you cannot work yourself into God’s good graces. *But* He can, and surely does, work Himself into our messy and mucked up lives by sending His one and only Son into this world, and pouring out the Holy Spirit in such abundance enabling us to receive Him.

Wherein, what becomes of our works? They become the fruit of our faith. Where the hope *before* the ages that was once made manifest in Christ ... now comes to manifest itself in us, as we now live *out* of our faith, ever growing up in Jesus, always in the shadow of His cross of forgiveness – glorifying Him, and blessing others. Works that in no way cause our faith, but now run current and freely flow from that faith – God at play through us!

Conclusion

[A story of Jesus meeting a woman in need (Luke 7:11-17)]

He has done no less for each of us. You, Roy, me ... all of us. Wherein, now our eyes are open anew to what God’s grace can do, *and* what it *still* does.

Where, our eyes see a sinner and a splash of water. But the Word of the Lord speaks a life-giving water full of grace, a water of rebirth and renewal. A Word that speaks real forgiveness, Christ’s forgiveness. Bread that is the body of Jesus, conceived, born of Mary, and given into death on the cross. Wine that is His blood, poured out for you – redeemed and forgiven. Yes, here the dead *are* raised. Here, you *are* favored by God in Jesus. Here, the Lord is with *you* ... nothing is impossible with God. (Adapted from Cwirla, *CPR*, 13:1, 24)

[SLIDE #6] All brought about and delivered to us *when God comes to play. Amen.*

¹⁰ “A theme of which [Paul] never tired.” (Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 204)