

The Lies of Lent – Lent 2019

## "Religion should be Entertaining"

Text: Matthew 27:3-5

<sup>ESV</sup>(**Ephesians 4:14-15**) *May we no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. <sup>15</sup> Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.* Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians: Many of you are, no doubt, familiar with portable air compressors. You've probably all seen them on the back of service trucks or in farm and ranch outbuildings. They aren't powered by electric motors but by gasoline engines. That's what makes them portable – the power to turn the compressor doesn't require a nearby electrical outlet. Some of you may have heard them operate. Unlike electric powered compressors, which simply cut off when they reach operating pressure, portable gasoline powered compressors just keep running. When they reach operating pressure, a clutch disengages the compressor pulley, but the engine just keeps running. If you've ever heard one, you know that it's pretty obvious when the pressure drops low enough to reengage the compressor clutch – when the engine is "under load." The RPM's increase and you can hear, almost *feel*, the engine bog down. In fact it almost comes as something of a relief when the machine reaches operating pressure again and the engine can "relax."

I say it comes "almost as a relief" because people can relate. Everyone knows how welcome it can be to take a break after working hard, and sometimes we extrapolate that human emotion to machines. After she was grown, one of our daughters told us that she used to feel sorry for our family pickup whenever we were driving up a steep hill, and always felt better when we finally got to the top.

It's just a fact that everyone loves to coast. Even those who love a good workout love arriving at the top of the long hill on a bike ride and taking a break as gravity does the work for them for a bit.

That's probably part of the reason that everyone loves to be entertained. Entertainment is fun – in large part because it's easy. It's coasting. You don't have to do much of anything. You don't even have to think all that hard. You get to just sit back and be, well, entertained.

It should be self-evident, however, that you don't need a break from doing nothing. You take a break from something strenuous, like working, or working out. Always coasting isn't a workout, just like always taking a break is just another name for lazy. Yet our society seems to be moving away from this simple, obvious truth. Many seem now to be of the opinion that everyone needs a break, even if they haven't actually been *doing* anything, and the preferred form of taking a break is to be entertained.

We ought to have known that the problem would find its way into religion. When did we lose sight of the fact that things like worship, prayer, and Bible study take both thought and effort? Somehow, somewhere along the line, the devil succeeded in convincing the majority of our present society that the practice of religion should not only require no effort, it should be – *must be* – entertaining. This is the "Lie of Lent" that we examine this morning, that "*Religion should be Entertaining.*"

The text that will guide and instruct us in this this morning is found in the 27<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Matthew's Gospel, verses 3-5:

<sup>ESV</sup>(**Luke 23:8-9**) *When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him. <sup>9</sup> So he questioned him at some length, but he made no answer.*

This is God's Word. Asking our God to instruct us through these his very words this morning, so we pray: ***Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth.*** Amen.

When you stop to really think about what Jesus actually came to earth to do for us, and compare that with what people, then and now, *expect* of him, the contrast is really quite remarkable – and deeply disturbing. Jesus came to earth to rescue us from the eternal torments of hell, and to provide us instead with the righteousness we need to enjoy the eternal bliss and perfection of heaven. That was his mission, his goal – ***"to give his life as a ransom."***

Yet those who refuse to listen to *his own explanation of his mission*, then and now, see him either as something of a genie in a bottle – someone that must grant them their earthly wishes – or as an entertainer. The former is how the crowds saw him – "Heal us!" "Feed us!" "Free us from the tyranny of Rome!" The latter is how Herod

clearly regarded him – "Do some magic tricks!" "Perform one of those miracles I have been hearing about." "Entertain me!"

Think for a moment about how crass and demeaning that is to Jesus, compared to what the Son of God actually came to earth to accomplish!

Herod and the crowds in Israel aren't alone. That's exactly what even a majority of churchgoers today have come to expect – to *demand*. Jesus, to them, is someone who must heal them, feed them, make them feel better about themselves, give his unconditional approval to their sinful lifestyles. Even more than that, every mention of Jesus must be entertaining – every study of his life and work, every reference to his teaching and doctrine, every mention of his expectations for his followers – all must entertain, or our present society has no time for it. Wherever the Word of God is offered, the sentiment that "*I don't get anything out of church*" is a condemnation of the person who says it. It is an indictment of his spiritual work ethic and his regard for the Word of God.

You and I are not immune from such temptation, such failure. We find it appallingly simple to just relax into the flow of the world's ideas about Jesus Christ and to unconsciously adopt Herod's demand to be entertained in connection with our Savior and our worship of him. At the very least we expect to be able to gain without effort.

Yet what in life that is truly worthwhile ever comes with no effort or struggle. We come into this world in the first place through the incredible effort and pain of our mothers. Our parents then spend the next two decades or so laboring to feed, clothe, and educate us. Nor does that education come without effort and struggle, both by the one teaching and by the one learning. And all of that just leads up to the point where we then enter the workforce and strive daily to provide for our own families.

How is it then that anyone could come to embrace the fantasy that our religion will be different – *must* be different? It's all a lie, and in particular it is a lie of Lent, because nowhere is this lie disproven more clearly than in the events of Lent.

Does anyone here imagine that the path to the cross, and that cross itself, was *easy* for Jesus? Although what Jesus did for us is always the beating heart of the Christian faith, during the season of Lent we focus in particular not only on what necessitated his sacrifice, but on what our salvation cost Jesus. Our salvation took effort, pain, and suffering. Many words could be used to describe what our Savior did for us, but one of them is *not* entertainment.

Yes, but didn't Jesus do all of those things, suffer all of those things, so that we wouldn't have to? True, Jesus made the payment we never could. He died physically so that we wouldn't have to die eternally. He suffered the torments of hell so that we would be spared. Yet that does not mean that the life and growth as a child of God would be either easy or entertaining. It was also Jesus that told us: ***In the world you will have tribulation.*** <sup>ESV</sup>(John 16:33) The Apostle Paul warned that ***through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.*** <sup>ESV</sup>(Acts 14:22) To us, as to the Church in Smyrna, we are told: ***Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.*** <sup>ESV</sup>(Revelation 2:10) Jude warned: ***I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.*** <sup>ESV</sup>(Jude 1:3)

Clearly Jesus alone paid our sin debt and washed us clean. But just as clearly did he warn us that continued discipleship would come at a cost. It will take effort. It will require struggle, discipline, and hardship. In fact it is hard to think of anything at all in connection with the Christian faith that could or should be considered "entertainment."

That's not to say that there is no joy in the Christian religion. Far from it. The Christian faith is from first to last a religion of purest joy, contentment, and harmony. Who but the child of God can greet each day with joy, despite the outward circumstances? Who else can have any confidence that we really will be okay in the end?

And yet, again, nothing good comes from nothing. Our religion, even our worship, must be the opposite of entertainment; it must involve work, effort, perseverance, discipline. Think through just our worship services on Sundays and Wednesdays. They are work, not entertainment.

The confession of sins takes work, effort, concentration. To rightly confess we are to think of real sins, and we are to focus on our own inability to make up for those sins. And then we are to hear and apply our Lord's words of absolution and comfort.

The sermon is designed to give breaks – islands as we call them – but only after effort, and that effort can only be supplied or provided by you. Each individual has to work at concentrating, focusing, and applying what he hears.

## Scripture Readings

It takes work to pray – to think, concentrate, recognize, visualize, *really grasp* – that you are talking not to the air but to the Almighty - the eternal Creator of heaven and earth. It takes conscious effort to remind yourself that we are to pray with confidence both that we are heard and that our God will answer in his own way and according to his divine wisdom.

It takes effort to sing God's praises – to not allow yourself to get carried away in or by the music, but to use that music not to be entertained or emoted, but to enhance your words of worship, praise, and confession.

The Liturgy takes work – at least if you hope to profit from it. Effort is required if we are to keep the liturgy from becoming empty words spoken mindlessly.

One final question needs to be asked and answered: *Why exactly is it such a terrible lie that religion must be entertaining? What does Satan hope to gain by its promotion?* The rather obvious answer is our destruction, but how?

The devil knows two things: First, that nothing comes from nothing. If he can get us to slouch into that passive "entertain me" mode whenever we hear, read, or study God's Word, he knows that we will gain nothing. We will starve as we sit at the divine buffet bar. Second, he knows that since true religion is never entertainment, all of those that come to believe that lie will eventually not only stop coming, they will stop believing. The faith that alone can save us will be strangled to death – choked out by the weeds of this life.

Reject the lie. Recognize and embrace the fact that, though we are saved by God's grace through faith alone in Jesus Christ, that does not mean that we are to be passive in our Christian walk and growth. Ask instead that God the Holy Spirit would allow you to recognize and accept the immutable fact that no one has ever been entertained into heaven. Amen.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Isaiah 12:1-6** You will say in that day: "I will give thanks to you, O LORD, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, that you might comfort me. <sup>2</sup> "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation." <sup>3</sup> ¶ With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. <sup>4</sup> And you will say in that day: "Give thanks to the LORD, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim that his name is exalted. <sup>5</sup> "Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be made known in all the earth. <sup>6</sup> Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel."

<sup>ESV</sup> **Luke 15:2, 11-17, 20-24** And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." <sup>3</sup> ¶ So he told them this parable: "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup> Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. <sup>14</sup> And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup> "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! <sup>20</sup> And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' <sup>22</sup> But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. <sup>23</sup> And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

# ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

2510 E. Divide Ave. Bismarck, ND 58501

Parsonage and Office: (701) 223-4885 Cell: (701) 425-5483

Website: [www.bismarcklutheran.org](http://www.bismarcklutheran.org)

Mark Johnson, President Angela Pfennig, Organist

Michael Roehl, Pastor

**The Fourth Sunday in Lent – March 31, 2019**

## The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

## The Opening Hymn – 158 (Red Hymnal)

"Glory Be to Jesus"

## The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

## The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

**The First Lesson:** (Isaiah 12:1-6) Lent is that season of the church year where we focus in particular on our sinfulness and marvel at the fact that God punished his own Son in our place. God visited upon his Son the penalty for what you and I had done wrong. May God the Holy Spirit give each of us the kind of heart that appreciates and thrills to such news. Our Old Testament lesson pointed God's people forward to the events we now celebrate as complete and certain.

## The Psalm of the Day – Psalm 51 (Page 31)

**The Second Lesson:** (Luke 15:2, 11-17, 20-24) Our Gospel reading is the well-known parable of the Prodigal Son. Though it is certainly comforting to know that we have a God who considers our sin-debt to have been paid in full by His Son, and who is always ready and willing to call back to his side those who have wandered, we pray this morning that he would prevent us from ever leaving his side in the first place.

## The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15. (Brown Hymnal)

## The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 151 (Stanzas 1-3, 7) (Red Hymnal)

"Christ the Life of All the Living"

## The Sermon – Text: Luke 23:8-9 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

**"The Lies of Lent: Religion should be Entertaining"**

## The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

## The Post Sermon Hymn - 159 (Red Hymnal)

"Go to Dark Gethsemane"

## The Offering followed by the Prayers

## The Benediction

## The Closing Hymn -52 (Red Hymnal)

"Almighty Father, Bless the Word"

## Silent Prayer

**Welcome!** - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

**Attendance** – Sunday (33) Average (35) Wednesday (20)

## This Week at St. Paul:

<b>Today</b>	<b>-9:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	<b>-10:00 a.m.</b>	– Worship Service
	<b>-11:00 a.m.</b>	– Fellowship and coffee hour
<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>-5:45 p.m.</b>	– Confirmation Class
	<b>-7:00 p.m.</b>	– Midweek Lenten Service
<b>Friday</b>	<b>-6:00 p.m.</b>	– Time Out
<b>Next Sunday</b>	<b>-9:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	<b>-10:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday Worship Service
	<b>-11:00 a.m.</b>	– Fellowship and coffee hour

**CLC News** – Teacher Paul Tiefel is considering the call to St. John's of Clarkston, WA. Teacher Andrew Roehl has returned the call to St. John's of Okabena. Pastor George Dummann is considering the call to Bethel of Morris, MN. Faith of Markesan has called Teacher Neil Bernthal. Immanuel of Winter Haven has called Teacher Seth Schaller. Prince of Peace of Loveland has called Pastor David Schaller. Prof. Paul Sullivan has announced his retirement following the 2019-20 school year. Pastor Tang, the President of our affiliate church body in Myanmar, is recovering from a serious accident. Anyone desiring to help with his medical expenses can do so by designating an offering to "Kinship" in our regular offering.

**Time Out** – Our Time Out for April is scheduled for this Friday at 6:00pm.

We have not yet settled on a location for the adults. All adults (and parents of children that plan to attend) are asked to meet briefly during the fellowship hour this morning.

**Midweek Lenten Services** – Please remember our Lenten services on Wednesdays at 7pm and make plans to attend as you are able.

**Visitors' Day** – Immanuel High School's Annual Visitors' Day is scheduled for April 26. The annual event is intended to familiarize young people and their parents with our Synod's high school, and is open to 7<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> grade students. See Pastor Roehl for more information.