

Learning Experiences

It's often said that experience is the best teacher. I believe it's true too. Experience *is* the best teacher. All the "book-learning" in the world cannot compare to actual real-life, on-the-job experience. You can watch a video, but the lesson won't "stick" like it will if you actually get in and get your hands dirty. Ask any plumber, electrician, nurse, doctor, cop, or farmer. Don't get me wrong. Book-learning and video watching can do an excellent job preparing you for "real life," ***but there is no substitute for real-life experience.*** Of course, there's also the ugly side of this reality. Book-learning is clean. It's sheltered. It's safe. Experience is "real life." Experience means getting in and getting dirty; taking your lumps. There are consequences in real life. Things get broke; people get hurt in real life. There is a big difference between reading about someone getting electrocuted and you yourself actually getting electrocuted. Maybe this is why experience is such a great teacher. We tend to take it so much more seriously. There's a lot more at stake. You learn rather quickly when a mistake could mean death.

I'll admit: These past few months have been a real learning experience for me, especially as I consider the lessons appointed for today. Let me explain. It's not like the texts set before us today have only been understood from a ***sterile classroom perspective.*** It's not like these texts have only been "classroom theory." "*Man, I wonder what it's like to deal with false prophets who give false comfort and assurance. I wonder what it's like to deal with wolves in sheep's clothing and diseased fruit trees that bear bad fruit or no fruit at all.*" Yeah... that's not the case. It's not the case for me. It's not the case for anyone here today.

The sad fact of the matter is that we all have plenty of life experience in the very areas these texts speak to. The whole reason God's anger was kindled against the false prophets in Jeremiah's time was because they were giving ***false comfort and assurance in His name.*** They were telling their Israelite brothers and sisters the lies they wanted to hear, and then telling them that those lies were God's Truth. They weren't doing this out of a great sense of ***evil hatred for God.*** They weren't commanding the people to reject Yahweh and instead worship Baal or Allah or any other false god. Nope. They loved Yahweh. They just didn't want to ***offend*** anyone. They didn't want anyone to be ***upset or unhappy.*** They wanted to be liked and praised by their fellow man. So rather than let God do the talking and call sin what it actually is—SIN—these guys were giving their own ***commentary and opinion.*** Rather than call the sinner to repentance, they were telling the sinner, "*Don't worry. All is well. Everyone is doing it nowadays. No disaster will come upon you. It's different in your case. God understands. Follow your heart. As long as you're happy, that's all God really cares about.*" Unless you've been

living under a rock for the past fifty-plus years, you have *plenty of life experience* to know that all of this is still a **huge** problem.

The same can be said for the false comfort/assurance of works-righteousness. Again, we have a ton of life experience that makes us very familiar with the false voice/gospel that gives people the *false comfort* that they can right their wrongs and they can achieve atonement (at-one-ment) with God by virtue of *enough hard work and clean living*. This is what made the Pharisees in Jesus' time so ravenous and deadly, like hungry wolves. Truth be told, this false gospel, which caters to man's *pride*, has been around since the fall into sin. Man **loves** it. Why would the devil change up something that has been working so well? It's like Satan doesn't even have to try. We **love** to hear that we can win God over with enough money, enough good intentions and good deeds and personal sacrifices. This was the comforting lie in Jeremiah's time. This was the false comfort in Jesus' time (e.g., the Pharisees), and it remains the best-selling lie in our time...even amongst good old Lutherans.

You know as well as I do, based on your own experiences, that this is what often passes for your average funeral sermon today, regardless of what denomination you claim as your own. The message, time and time again, is a message of works. We “celebrate the life” of the deceased, seeking peace in the remembrance of how good they were. I've heard with my own ears a “pastor” give the false comfort from the pulpit that “heaven is now a better place” because the deceased was now there. *That's how good of person he was! He actually made heaven better!* **No** mention of Christ or His sacrifice. **No** mention of salvation through faith alone in God's grace alone, which God shows to us poor, miserable, undeserving sinners only because of the all-redeeming work and person of Christ alone. Nope. The message of “comfort” was all about the guy in the box and how good of guy he was. The grieving people were sent away with the “peace and assurance” that heaven is now brighter and better because the guy in the coffin was now gracing it with his presence.

But... we already know all this. We have TONS of *real life, down-and-dirty experience* in these areas of false prophets, false gospel comfort, and wolves in sheep's clothing. So what do I mean, then, when I say that these past few months have been a *tremendous learning experience*? Well... I suppose I could go into a long litany of examples of just how prevalent false prophets and their seductive message of false comfort are in our culture today. I guess I've always known this, but until you actually *experience* fellow Christians locking the doors of their own congregations and **fleeing** from the presence of God and His means of grace out of fear of germs and sickness, *encouraging/demanding* others to do the same, all the while *comforting* themselves with their own “gospel opinion” that staying away and reading a Portals of Prayer and watching Facebook videos while sipping coffee in their spare time is *every bit as good* as actually being in the

Divine service and actually receiving His life-saving gifts from His own hands, you just don't really understand how *deceitful and cunning and sly* the devil really is. "*Flee from Me all ye who are anxious and worried and heavy-laden....*" Yeah... that's not how that goes, is it. *And yet... that's how it's gone these past few months.* And people are comfortable with it. You're not gonna tell them otherwise. It's been *eye-opening and heart-breaking*, to say the least.

But... this is where experience has been my *greatest* teacher. I've always known and believed and confessed the Truth that is the Divine really and truly serving me with His gifts of mercy, grace, and peace. I was conceived into the Lutheran church. This is all I've ever really known; i.e., how this—Word and Sacrament—is what Jesus meant when He promised, "*I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Fear not, for it is I—I am!*" I've known all this, and my seminary schooling only served to *enhance* my knowledge and understanding, along with twelve-plus years on the job. And yet... it's taken these last few months for me to truly *understand and appreciate and hold fast* to this blessed, Divine reality. When all the talk of closing the doors of the church and not celebrating Holy Communion (at least not in the way our Lord commands) began to circulate and become reality, the promise of our Lord's *real and true presence* began to take on a whole new significance for me. "*This IS My Body. This IS My Blood. As often as you do this, remember what I have said.*" *Wow!* It is only through the working of the Holy Spirit that a person will be able truly recognize and hold fast to this Christ-centered reality. You can't *make* people see this or desire this. *Only God can work such a miracle.* I confess: It's sad that it took a pandemic to get me to this point, but it did. I thank God for His merciful, gracious patience.

Look around. The whole world seems like it's coming apart at the seams. And yet... here is my/your victorious God and Lord—my/your Immanuel—just as He has promised. Here is the [singular] true Gospel comfort! Nothing else compares. Nothing even comes close. Here is Christ, my Rock and my Anchor in the midst of the storm. *Where else would I want to be?!* The fact that you're here today shows that this has been your experience too. I give thanks to God for this, and I pray that you only continue to grow *stronger* in this blessed faith.

And this is how this blessed growth will take place: By pointing to Christ and proclaiming Christ. "*We preach crucified!*" Folks: Here is Christ. Here is the *sweetest and most truly nourishing* comfort and peace you will ever know, both in this life and in the life to come. The Gospel Truth is that your sins have been *paid for in full* with the blood of Christ Jesus. Yes, you will still have crosses to bear. You will still *suffer* while you make your way through this shadowy valley of death that we so foolishly dare to call "life." *Nobody is immune from suffering.* That's the plain and ugly truth of living in a fallen and sinful world. You're going to take your lumps. Through it all, though, take

comfort in the fact that you have been baptized into Him and His death and resurrection. Whether you live or die and everything in between, you belong to Him. The very gates of hell cannot take this blessed reality away from you. The very worst thing that can happen to you is that you fall asleep in the faith and wake up at the heavenly side of your Lord's feast table. *"Oh no! Not that!"*

Hear the voice of your Good Shepherd: *"It is finished!"* The Gospel Truth [singular] is that this same victorious Christ is *still* keeping His Word and Promise to be with you **always**, absolving you with His unconditional peace that surpasses all understanding. ***It's not my peace I give you, but it is the peace of the Good Shepherd, spoken in His stead and by His command.*** *"I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, they follow me."* Hear the voice of your Good Shepherd as He holds out to you His victorious Body and Blood for your life, your peace, your comfort, and your blessed assurance: *"Take and eat. Take and drink. This is My Body/Blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of all your sin."* If you're hearing anything else, **beware!** Flee from such lies, for that is not the voice of your Good Shepherd.

If you've heard nothing else today, hear this: You are forgiven, in Christ and because of Christ. Here is Christ, even in the midst of the storms. Here is the Lord of Life, even in the midst of all the anger and anxiety and death and despair. Remain vigilant. Remain on guard. Remain in Him... and rejoice, for you belong to Him.

And now may this same peace and joy guard and keep your hearts and minds in Him, now and into all eternity. **AMEN.**