

✠ Isaiah 61:1-3, 10-11 ✠

IN NOMINE IESU

Dearly beloved in Christ, especially Nadine, Brenda, Brad, Bruce, your spouses, children and grandchild. The Christian Church gathers together week after week, around Word and Sacrament, in order to confess our sins and to receive absolution from Christ. We gather to hear the promise of salvation, and to receive the free gift of grace, eternal life, won for us by the redemptive work of Christ Jesus on the Cross. The occasion for our gathering Sunday after Sunday does not change. We gather because Christ has been appointed to proclaim good tidings to the afflicted.

Today is no different in purpose; it is only different in its unique personalization to you, the bereaved. You see, it is the job of the evangelist, week after week, to preach the Law – that is, that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. I will strive, God willing, Sunday after Sunday to show all who are listening that they are sinners, in need of forgiveness by God. I lay out the Law for you so that your heart will be convicted of your sin, and you will come running in repentance to the open arms of Christ who says, “Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” But today you do not need me to preach thusly. You do not need me to tell you that the world we live in is a fallen world; you are all too aware of this fact. You do not need me to tell you that we are mortal, sinful creatures. This, too, you are well aware of. You do not need me to tell you that the wages of sin is death; for before you, you see the physical reality – death – of the spiritual condition – sin. I have little need of preaching the Law to you today, for the Law has been made manifest in the death of our dear brother in Christ, Vernon.

Unfortunately I did not have the chance to meet Vernon, but I have met his family. I can say quite confidently that seeing their mannerism and charm and listening to them, that Vernon raised a strong family of God-fearing men and women. I can easily see that Vernon was a man who loved his Lord and Savior. When I visited you at your home, Nadine, I noticed that next to Vernon's recliner sat a well-worn book: the Holy Scriptures. It looked as though Vernon read it often. You told me how Vernon loved his family, and was especially proud and endeared to his great-granddaughter; how he care for you, provided for you, and watched over you. This was the love of God being made manifest in his child. This was the good fruit born of the good faith that Vernon believed that Jesus died and rose again for the forgiveness of sin.

You see Vernon was baptized. And in Baptism Christ promises us that He will never leave us nor forsake us. Those who are baptized are so baptized into Christ's death so that, as Christ was raised through the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. We see the fruit of this new life as we love God and neighbor. Vernon loved God; not despising preaching or His Word, but holding it sacred and gladly hearing and learning it. When he was able he attended the Divine Service here at Concordia, a building he helped to build; he listened to the voice of his Good Shepherd and feed on the Bread of Life and the Nectar of Salvation. And when he was no longer physically able to come here, he made sure his pastor came to his home to give to him the hope and assurance of eternal life. Yes, Vernon loved his Lord and Savior.

So also did he love his neighbor. Love that was not just displayed by outward works of charity such as building your home, coaching little league baseball for his sons, helping in the union of this church, but he took every opportunity to express this love by bringing his wife and children to

church so that his Savior might also be their Savior. He showed such love by having his children baptized and by bringing them up according to the faith. The love of God was displayed by praying for his family, for his children, their spouses and his grand and great-grandchildren. For Vernon knew that Jesus came to proclaim good tidings to the afflicted. Vernon knew that Jesus was sent by God, appointed by His heavenly Father, to heal the brokenhearted, proclaim freedom to the captives, and open the prison doors to those who are bound by sin.

Nadine, your heart is broken. As things are, the world sees nothing to hope in for you or for the others that love Vernon. It seems that you, according to what we see with these eyes, are held captive by death; knowing it intimately with Vernon's sudden passing, and the realization that brings of your own death. But this is because the world has no hope in the face of death. For death seems to hold us all captive: the one thing none of us desire; yet we all will taste. But Christ has come to heal you of your broken heart and to give you hope in the face of death – for by His stripes you are healed and by his death you are given life. Jesus has conquered death and the grave. He has redeemed us lost and condemned sinners, purchased and won us from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death. That we may by His own and live with Him before God in righteousness and purity forever. His life for ours. He is our substitute in death. This is the proclamation of good news! As He proclaimed it in this way: "This is my body given for you; this is my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins."

It is, in fact, in these words, "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins," that we find the promise of setting the captives free and opening death's doors to those who are bound by sin. For where there is the forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation. For the wages of sin may be death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

What we see now, the garments of mourning – a casket, a funeral pall, tears, and black dress – Jesus has replaced with garments of salvation and life. As it is written, "[The Lord] has clothed me with the garments of salvation; He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels." This is what St. Paul was talking about when he said, "For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality."

The Christian is saddened by death because it shows the depth of the corruption of God's creation, and the hopelessness of man to redeem himself, for no one can save himself from death's cold hand. We mourn in the face death because it is the most stark reminder of our fallen selves. But though the Christian may mourn death, the Christian does not fear death; no, in fact we embrace death. We embrace death because it is through death that we are clothed with the garments of eternal life.

Vernon was baptized when he was but babe in his mother's arms. Yet that baptism was efficacious all through his life; protecting him even in death. For Baptism is our dying to sin and being raised in Christ Jesus – a foreshadow of the resurrection of those who sleep in Christ. Vernon's physical body may have died only days ago, but he was dead to sin long before. And just as he was dead to sin long before his physical body met death, so also did Christ raise him from the dead long ago in His own resurrection. For we are baptized not only into Christ's death but also into His resurrection from the dead. It is as Baptism indicates: that the Old Adam in us is drowned and dies with all sin and evil desires, and that a new man daily emerges and arises to live before God in righteousness and purity forever. And the garments of salvation with which the Lord has clothed Vernon are also those with which He has clothed you and me. We have been baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, and so are comforted in our affliction. God has saved us by grace so that

even in the face of death, we stand in righteousness and shout praises to God before all the nations. Do not let the garments of mourning fool you. Though in this life we mourn the loss of a husband, a father, a brother, a friend we also rejoice in the promise of the resurrection for Vernon is not lost to Christ who is the Good Shepard, who loses none of His sheep. Our true garments are not garments of mourning, but they are garments of salvation and life.

So the Church gathers week after week here, around Word and Sacrament, where God graciously forgives all our sins and the sins of all believers. Where Christ comes to us and promises eternal life to all who believe on His name; proclaiming good tidings of great joy to the afflicted. We come to hear Christ's comforting words that for His sake our sins are forgiven, our deaths are swallowed up in His, and that on the Last Day He will raise Vernon and all who are asleep in Christ, and give eternal life to all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true!

In the name of the FATHER and of the ✠ SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT.

✠ Amen ✠