

First Sunday after the Epiphany: Luke 2:41–52

Martin Luther

Church Postil · Sermon 1 of 2

This sermon appeared first time under the title: “A Sermon on the Gospel of Luke, 2 chapter. On the Sunday after the day of the Three Holy Kings; in which is set forth how they fare who are true Christians; also how we are to seek Christ only in the Temple, that is, in the divine Scriptures. Doctor Martin Luther. Preached in Wittenberg, 1523.”

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Luke 2:41-52.

And his parents went every year to Jerusalem at the feast of the passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up alter the custom of the feast; and when they had fulfilled the days, as they were returning, the boy Jesus tarried behind in Jerusalem, and his parents knew it not; but supposing him to be in the company, they went a day's journey; and they sought for him among their kinsfolk and acquaintance: and when they found him not, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking for him. And it came to pass, after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both hearing them, and asking them questions: and all that heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. And when they saw him, they were astonished; and his mother said unto him, Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold, thy father and I sought thee sorrowing. And he said unto them, How is it that ye sought me? knew ye not that I must be in my Father's house? And they understood not the saying which he spake unto them. And he went down with them, and came to Nazareth; and he was subject unto them: and his mother kept all these sayings in her heart. And Jesus advanced in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

I. AN EXAMPLE OF THE CROSS. OR SANCTIFIED SUFFERING

1. This is a Gospel that presents to us an example of the holy cross, showing us through what experiences those have to pass who are Christians, and how they ought to bear

their sorrow. For he who desires to be a Christian must expect to help bear the cross. For God will place him between the spurs and thoroughly test him that he may be humble and no one will come

to Christ without suffering. Of this we have here an example, which we ought to imitate and shall now consider.

2. Although the holy mother Mary, who was highly blessed and upon whom many favors were bestowed, had undoubtedly the greatest delight in her child, yet the Lord so ruled that her joy was not without sorrow and like all others she did not attain complete blessedness until she entered heaven. For this reason she had to suffer so much sorrow, pain and anguish on earth. It was her first great sorrow that she had to give birth to her child in Bethlehem, in a strange town, where she found no room with her babe except in a stable. Then her second sad experience was that soon after the six weeks of her purification she was compelled to flee with her child into Egypt, a strange country, which was indeed a poor consolation. She undoubtedly experienced many more like trials, which have not been recorded.
3. One of them is related here, when her son caused her so much anxiety, by tarrying behind in the temple and letting her seek him so long, and she could not find him. This alarmed and grieved her so that she almost despaired, as her words indicate: "Behold, thy father and I, sought thee sorrowing." For we may well imagine that thoughts like these may have passed through her mind: "Behold this child is only mine, this I know very well, and I know that God has entrusted him to me and commanded me to take care of him; why is it then that he is taken from me? It is my fault, for I have not sufficiently taken care of him and guarded him. Perhaps God does not deem me worthy to watch over this child and will take him from me again." She was undoubtedly greatly frightened and her heart trembled and was filled with grief.
4. Here you see what she experienced. Although she is the mother of a child in whom she might have gloried before all mothers, and although her joy was immeasurably greater than any she had ever felt, yet you perceive how God deprives her of all happiness, in that she can no longer call herself the mother of Jesus. In her great dismay she probably wished, she had never known her child and was tempted to greater sins than any mother had ever committed.

5. In the same manner the Lord our God can take from us our joy and comfort, if he so desires, and cause us the greatest sorrow with the very things that are our greatest joy, and, on the other hand, give us the greatest delight in the things that terrify us most. For it was the greatest joy of Mary that she was the mother of this child, but now he has become the cause of her greatest sorrow. Thus we are afraid of nothing more than of sin and death, yet God can comfort us so that we may boast, as St. Paul says in Romans 7, that sin served to the end that we became justified and that we longed for death and desire to die.
6. The great sorrow of the mother of Christ, who was deprived of her child, came upon her in order that even her trust in God might be taken from her. For she had reason to fear that God was angry with her and would no longer have her to be the mother of his Son. Nobody will understand what she suffered who has not passed through similar experiences. Therefore we should apply this example to ourselves, for it was not recorded for her sake, but for our benefit. She is now at the end of her sorrows; therefore we should profit by her example and be prepared to bear our sorrow if a similar affliction befall us.
7. When God vouchsafes to us a strong faith and a firm trust in him, so that we are assured he is our gracious God and we can depend upon him, then we are in paradise. But when God permits our hearts to be discouraged and we believe that he takes from us Christ our Lord; when our conscience feels that we have lost him and amidst trembling and despair our confidence is gone, then we are truly in misery and distress. For even if we are not conscious of any special sin, yet in such a condition we tremble and doubt whether God still cares for us; just as Mary here doubts and knows not whether God still deems her worthy to be the mother of his Son. Our heart thinks in the time of trial thus: God has indeed given me a strong faith, but perhaps he will take it from me and will no longer want me as his child. Only strong minds can endure such temptations and there are not many people whom God tests to this degree. Yet we must be prepared, so that we may not despair if such trials should come upon us.
8. We find many examples of this in the Scriptures, as for instance in Joshua 7:6-7. God had given to Joshua great and strong promises, telling him that he would exterminate the heathen and charging him to attack his enemies courageously and vigorously, which he also did. But what happened? When his faith was strong he, sent three thousand men

against a city to take it. They were proud, seeing that it was a small city with only a few people to defend it. When the men of Israel approached, the enemy sallied forth from the city and defeated the people. Then Joshua fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of Jehovah until the evening, lifting up his voice and lamenting before God, saying: "Alas, O Lord Jehovah, wherefore hast thou at all brought this people over the Jordan, to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to cause us to perish?" His faith had become weak and he was utterly discouraged, so that God himself had to raise him up again. Thus God deals with his great saints, whom he sometimes deprives of Christ, that is, of their faith and confidence.

9. But God does all this out of his superabundant grace and goodness in order that we might perceive on every hand how kindly and lovingly the Father deals with us and tries us, so that our faith may be developed and become continually stronger and stronger. And he does this especially so as to guard his children against a twofold danger which might otherwise threaten them. In the first place, being strong in their own mind and arrogant, they might ultimately depend upon themselves and believe they are able to accomplish everything in their own strength. For this reason God sometimes permits their faith to grow weak and to be prostrated, so that they might see who they are and be forced to confess: Even if I would believe, I cannot. Thus the omnipotent God humbles his saints and keeps them in their true knowledge. For nature and reason will always boast of the gifts of God and depend upon them. Therefore God must lead us to a recognition of the fact that it is he who puts faith in our heart and that we cannot produce it ourselves. Thus the fear of God and trust in him must not be separated from one another, for we need them both, in order that we may not become presumptuous and overconfident, depending upon ourselves. This is one of the reasons why God leads his saints through such great trials.

10. Another reason is, that he wants to give us an example. For if in the Scriptures we had no examples of saints who passed through the same experiences, we should be unable to bear our trials and would imagine that we alone are thus afflicted, that God never dealt with any one in

this manner; therefore my suffering must be a sign of God's displeasure with me. But when we see that the Virgin Mary and other saints have also suffered, we are thereby comforted and

need not despair, for their example shows that we should calmly and patiently wait until God comes and strengthens us.

11. We find many examples of similar trials in the Scriptures, and here we might refer to the words of David in Psalm 31:22: “As for me, I said in my haste, I am cut off from before thine eyes,” just as we sometimes think that God does not want us. Such trials are unendurable and severe beyond measure, wherefore the saints passing through them lament greatly, for if God would not deliver them they would be in hell. Compared with these trials other temptations and sorrows are trivial, as for instance when our possessions and honors are taken from us, or when the innocent babes were murdered and Jesus was forced to flee into Egypt. The prophet speaks of this in Psalm 94:17: “Unless Jehovah had been my help, my soul had soon dwelt in silence.” So great is the terror and anguish of such visitations. But God permitted them that we might lay hold of these examples, be comforted and saved from despair. At the end of our lives we must also pass through like trials. Therefore we must be armed and prepared for them.

II. AN EXAMPLE OF COMFORT UNDER THE CROSS

12. Such is the narrative and example of the great sorrow as it is portrayed in this Gospel, but we are also shown where comfort may be found. The parents of Jesus lost him, going a day’s journey and seeking for him among their kinsfolk and acquaintance, but found him not. They return to Jerusalem and after a search of three days he is found by them in the temple. Here God has pointed out how we can find consolation and strength in all our sorrows, and especially in these great trials, and how we can find Christ the Lord, namely by seeking him in the temple. Jesus said to his parents: “Knew ye not that I must be in my Father’s house?”
13. The words of Luke “and they understood not the saying which he spake unto them” are especially to be noted here. With these words he silenced the idle talk of those who exalted and praised the Virgin Mary too highly, asserting that she knew everything and could not err. For you see here how the Lord permits her to seek her child for a long time in vain, till she finds him in the temple after three days. In addition to this, Jesus seems to reprimand her when he says: “How is it that ye sought me? knew ye not that I must be in my Father’s house?” She understood not the saying which he spake to her. Consequently all the idle talk to which we have referred is nothing but falsehood, and the Virgin Mary does not need this fabricated and mendacious praise. God concealed much from her and

led her through many trials, so that she might remain humble and not think herself better than others.

14. But the consolation of which I have spoken is that Christ is only found in the temple, that is to say in the house of God. But what is the house of God? Is it not the whole creation? It is indeed true that God is everywhere, but he is especially present in the Holy Scriptures, in his Word, more than anywhere else. We learn therefore here that nobody can presume to derive any comfort from anything but the Word of God; you will find the Son only in the temple.

Now look at the mother of Jesus who does not yet understand this and does not know that she must seek for him in the temple. When she sought for him among their kinsfolk and acquaintance, and not at the right place, she did not find him.

15. Therefore I have often said and say again, that in the Christian church nothing should be preached but the pure Word of God. With this the Gospel agrees when it says that they did not find the Lord among their kinsfolk and acquaintance. It is therefore wrong to say that we must believe what the councils have decreed, or what Jerome, Augustine and other holy fathers have written. We must point out the place where Christ may be found, which he himself points out when he says that he must be in his Father's house, which means that he can only be found in the Word of God. We should therefore not believe that our conscience may trust in the teachings of the holy fathers or derive comfort from them. Now if they say to you: Should we not believe the holy fathers? you may reply: Christ is not found among the kinsfolk and acquaintance. It would indeed be well if Christians generally were to heed this example from the Gospel and use it as a maxim against every doctrine that does not agree with the Word of God.

16. But in order to emphasize this more and to make it clearer, let us see what other doctrines have been proclaimed that do not agree with the Word of God. Up to this time we have had three different systems of doctrine. The first and coarsest is that of St. Thomas (if indeed he be a saint). This was taken from the system of pagan science and art which was written by that great light of nature, Aristotle. Now they say that his philosophy is like a bright, shining plate, and the Word of Christ is like the sun. And as the sun shines upon the plate, causing it to gleam and glitter all the brighter, so the divine light shines upon the light of nature and illumines it. With this beautiful simile they have introduced pagan doctrines into the Christian church, which have been taught

and cultivated by the great universities and in which teachers and preachers have been instructed. The devil has taught them to speak in this way. Thus the Word of God is trodden under foot, for when it is given full play, it subverts all these satanic doctrines.

17. In the second place, they have taught and prescribed human laws, called the institutions and precepts of the holy Christian church. Thereby these fools have thought to lead men to heaven and to be able to comfort and pacify our conscience. These human laws prevail to such a degree that like a great deluge they cover the whole world and have submerged everything else, so that it is almost impossible that any one may be saved from going down to hell. For they clamor unceasingly as though they were insane: This has been decreed by the holy councils and that has been commanded by the church; we have observed this a long time, shall we not believe it now?
18. Therefore we should reply to this from the Gospel, as I said: Even if Mary, the Holy Virgin, had done this, it would not be surprising if she had erred. She was the mother of God, and yet she did not know where to find Christ; she sought him among her kinsfolk and acquaintance and failed to find him. Now if she did not succeed in finding Christ among her kinsfolk, but had finally to come to the temple, how shall we expect to find him outside of the Word of God in human doctrines, in the decrees of the councils or the teachings of the

scholastics? Bishops and councils have undoubtedly not possessed the gift of the Holy Spirit in as large a measure as Mary. If she erred, why should not they also be mistaken who fancy to find Christ elsewhere but in his Father's house, that is in the Word of God?

19. If therefore you find one who adheres to these two different systems of doctrine, believing them to be right and trusting in them, ask him whether he is quite confident that they will comfort his soul in the hour of death or under the judgment and the wrath of God, whether he will be able to say then with a conscience undaunted: This has been declared and decreed by the pope and the bishops in their councils, I depend upon that and am quite certain I shall not fail? He will soon be obliged to say: How can I be so certain of this? Thus, when it comes to the point and you are in the presence of death, your conscience will say: It is indeed true, the councils have decreed this, but what if they were mistaken, and who knows whether they were right? Then when you are in such doubts, you cannot hold out, and Satan will assail you and hurl you to the ground, so that you lie there helpless.

20. In the third place, besides these two theories they have also pointed us to the Holy Scriptures and said, that above every other doctrine the laws and decrees of the pope in matters of faith must be observed. But here they except the teachings of some of the holy fathers, who have interpreted the Scriptures, and whom they have exalted so highly that they place them on the same level with the pope of Rome, or a little above him, asserting even that they could not err, and clamoring: How could it be possible for the holy fathers not to understand the Scriptures? But let these fools say what they wish, always remind them of the words of Christ: “Knew ye not that I must be in my Father’s house?” We must above all things have the Word of God and cling to it, for Christ will be there and in no where else. Therefore it is in vain that you seek him elsewhere. For how can you convince me that Christ must be found in the writings of the holy fathers?

21. This Gospel is therefore a severe thrust at every doctrine and every comfort of any kind that is not derived from the Word of God. You may therefore say: It matters not how highly you exalt reason and the light of nature, I reserve the right of not putting my trust in it. The councils have issued decrees and the pope or the holy fathers have taught what they wish, but that does not concern me; I will not depend upon them. We will soon agree if they decide and propose what they please, but grant me the liberty to say: If it pleases me, I shall observe it, but not as something that is especially meritorious. They will however not grant us this right; for they are not satisfied to let us use our own discretion in these things, but demand in addition that we base our trust and comfort on them, teaching that if we trust in them, it is as much as if we place our confidence in Christ and the Holy Spirit. We can not tolerate their delusions according to which they think that they are doing a good work who keep their laws, and again, that it is a sin not to keep them. For they declare that the precepts and doctrines of the pope and the church come from the Holy Spirit and are the Word of God, for which reason we ought to believe and observe them. But this is an obvious and shameless lie; for how can they prove it?

22. But, they say, the Christian church is always led by the Holy Spirit, who will not permit the church to err or go wrong. To this we answer with what we said before: However good the

church may be, it has never possessed the Spirit in as large a measure as Mary, who although she was led by the Spirit, erred nevertheless, so that we might learn from her experience. If she

herself is uncertain, how can you make me certain? Whither should we then go? We must also come into the temple, that is to say we must cling to the Word of God, which is secure and will not fail us and where we will certainly find Christ. I must therefore always be with the Word, if I cleave to it. If the Word of God goes conquering through death and remains alive, I must also pass through death to life, and nothing can hinder or destroy me, neither sin nor death, nor the devil. The comfort and boldness I derive from the Word of God cannot be engendered by any other doctrine, for none can be compared with it.

23. Therefore it is necessary that we understand this clearly and not place our confidence in human doctrines and the teachings of the holy fathers. God has demonstrated this by many other examples in order to teach us not in the least to depend upon men, as the saints also may sometimes make mistakes. We read for instance in Acts 15:5f that not more than eighteen years after the ascension of Christ the apostles and the majority of the Christians held a conference. The question was raised whether the Gentiles should be compelled to submit to circumcision. There stood up the leaders of the sect of the Pharisees who believed and said: It is necessary to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses. There was a great commotion and all seemed to hold the same opinion. Only Peter, Paul, Barnabas and James were opposed to this view, and Peter especially rose up and said unto them: God has given the Holy Spirit unto the Gentiles who have heard the Gospel from me, even as he did unto us; and he made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. Now if they received the Holy Spirit and were not circumcised, why would you force them and put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in like manner as they.

24. You notice that many Christians were at this council who were true believers, at a time when the church was in its youthful vigor and almost perfect, and yet God permits them all to err with the exception of three or four men. If these few men had not protested, erroneous doctrines would have been taught and a law not in accordance with the Gospel of Christ been established. Yet we are such blind fools as to say continually: The councils and the church have commanded this or that, and as they cannot be in error, their decrees must be observed.

25. Later on we read that even the most prominent leaders, both Peter and Barnabas, fell into error and all the other Jews with them. Then Paul alone rose up and rebuked Peter

publicly, as he himself writes in Galatians 2:11. Now if these holy councils and holy men erred, why should we put our trust in our own councils? For they cannot for an instant be compared with the councils held by the apostles.

26. Why does God permit these things to occur? He does it that we may not depend upon or derive comfort from the words and doctrines of men, however holy they may be, but place our confidence only in the Word of God. If then even an apostle came or an angel from heaven, as St. Paul says in Galatians 1:8-9, who would preach another Gospel, we should openly declare it is not the Word of God and refuse to listen to it. Do not forget that the child can be found in

no other place but the temple, or the house of God. Mary indeed sought him among the kinsfolk, who are the great, learned and pious people, but she did not find him among them.

27. There are many similar examples and types elsewhere in the Gospel which point out the same truth, namely, that nothing should be taught but the Word of God and no other doctrine should be accepted, because Christ can be found only in the Scriptures. Thus we read in the Gospel for Christmas, Luke 2:12, where the angel, who announced the birth of Christ, said to the shepherds: "And this is the sign unto you: Ye shall find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger." Why does he not direct them to Mary and Joseph, but only points them to the swaddling clothes and the manger? The reason is that God will not point us to any saint, not even to the holy mother herself, for they may all err. Therefore a special place must be pointed out where Christ is, namely the manger, where he surely may be found, even if Joseph and Mary were not present. This signifies that Christ is completely wrapped in the Scriptures, just as the body is wrapped in the clothes. The manger is the preaching of the Gospel, where he is lying and where he is apprehended, and from which we take our food. Now it would indeed appear that the child should lie where Joseph and Mary are, these great and holy people. Yet the angel points only to the manger, which he will not have overlooked or dishonored. It is an insignificant and simple expression, but Christ is found in it.

28. The same truth is also pointed out in other narratives, as for instance in that of holy Simeon, who had received a promise from God that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord Christ. He came in the Spirit into the temple, found the child and received him into his arms. But here it is only emphasized that he finds Christ in the temple. From all this we learn that God would warn us against human doctrines,

however excellent they may be, advising us not to depend upon them, but cleave to the only true guide, the Word of God. Lay aside everything else. Their declarations and decrees may indeed be good and right, but our heart cannot trust in them.

29. This then is the comfort we derive from this Gospel in our great trials, of which we have spoken above. We know that consolation may be found only in the Scriptures, the Word of God. For this reason God caused this to be recorded, so that we might learn these lessons, as St. Paul writes to the Romans: "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that through patience and through comfort of the Scriptures we might have hope." Romans 15:4. Here he says that the Scriptures are comforting, that they impart patience and comfort. Consequently there can be nothing else that comforts the soul, not even in the most trifling temptations. For everything else with which man comforts himself, however great it may be, is altogether uncertain, and the heart inquires constantly: Who knows whether it is right? if I only were sure about it! etc. But when the heart clings to the Word of God, it may say without any wavering: This is the Word of God, which can not lie nor err, of this I am certain. And this is our greatest struggle that we keep and hold firmly to the Word; for if that is taken from the heart, man is lost.

30. Let us then be prepared for their representations and expostulations to the effect that the Christian church can not err, so that we may know how to meet them, and say: Here is not the word of man, but the Word of God. We read in this Gospel that his mother, Mary, was filled

with the Holy Spirit, and yet she erred. Likewise we read in the Acts that there was a Christian council of such who believed and who had the Spirit, and yet they stumbled and would have established an unchristian law, if others had not protested. We should therefore not believe any council or, saint, if they come without the Word of God. This is then the sum total of this Gospel, and if anything else is to be said on it, we will let those explain it who have leisure; but he who studies it faithfully, will easily understand it.

31. Some have broken their heads over the meaning of the words of Luke where he says that Christ advanced in wisdom and grace, for they assume that as true God he possessed all wisdom and grace from the time of his conception. But here they have shamefully altered the text with their commentaries. Therefore refrain from such idle talk and let the words stand just as they are without any commentary. We must understand them simply as

saying that he grew continually and waxed strong in the Spirit, just as any other man, as we have explained it more fully in the Gospel for the Sunday after Christmas.

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY.

SECOND SERMON - LUKE 2:41-52.

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