

Ascension
Mark 16:14-20

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

I imagine the Christian parents and grandparents of the slain children in Texas crying out to God in their horrible pain and confusion.

Isn't God in control of everything?

God allows people to die, but why did He allow my little one to die?

God took him or her away after they barely got started in life!

Why, God, why?

The slaughter of 19 children and 3 adults at Robb Elementary School is truly evil.

We confess each Divine Service that we are poor miserable sinners. We know that we are capable of evil, but this horrendous evil that happened in Texas is something quite different. When something like this happens, we are tempted to wonder if God really cares about us.

The only thing we can do in such a circumstance is to look to the cross of Christ.

There we see God Himself suffering all of the evil in the world at once. On the cross Jesus says, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me." (Ps. 22:1)

Jesus knows first-hand the pain of the parents and grandparent effected by the shooting in Texas.

Instead of obliterating all the pain in the world by obliterating the cause of pain, men, He joins us in our pain so that we might find relief from that pain.

The only relief from your pain is Jesus on the cross. There you see your Lord and Savior suffering and bleeding for you. And for everyone, including those suffering in Texas. Jesus is the only one who can ease suffering.

We'll probably never know why that young man took guns and killed so many people. But even if we knew, it wouldn't ease the parent's suffering. Or anyone else's suffering. Only knowing Jesus will ease suffering.

Knowing that Jesus died for the sins of the entire world.

Knowing that Jesus is in control. Even if it doesn't seem like it.

Today, we remember the ascension of Jesus to the right hand of the Father.

Jesus ascended into heaven to return from where He came from, but with a human body. He returned so that He could continue His ruling work where He's everywhere and in control of all things. And He ruled so that sinners might find the peace of the cross through preaching and baptism and absolution and the Lord's supper.

Jesus does the same thing here at the end of Mark that He did at the end of Matthew. He established the church even though He said it slightly differently.

In Matthew, Jesus says: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." (28:19-20)

So, we see that Jesus establishes His church through His Word and Holy Baptism. We never separate baptism and teaching. The two go hand in hand.

In Mark, Jesus says it this way: “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” (16:15-16)

Proclaiming the Gospel is the same thing as teaching them to observe all I have commanded you. It’s a good reminder here that when Jesus says “to observe” in Matthew, it’s the Greek word, τηρέω, which means primarily to treasure Jesus’ Word by having it in your heart, mind, and lips. Of course, we strive to keep it, but we do not allow ourselves to be deceived that we can keep it perfectly before our Father in heaven. In early church times, you would “keep” the Word of God by hearing it proclaimed. So, Jesus really is saying the same thing with “proclaim” and “teach to observe.”

Mark also makes it clear that we never separate either baptism from faith or God’s Word from faith. They all go hand in hand. When God’s Word, Baptism, and faith are all present, you have a child of God. When one of those is missing, you do not have a child of God but an unbeliever. Of course, there are those rare situations where one is not able to get baptized like we suppose of the brigand on the cross next to Jesus, but that doesn’t prevent someone from being saved.

God’s Word, Baptism, and faith deliver to you the peace with God that Jesus won on the cross. This is one of the great clarifications that came out of the Reformation. God works through means. Jesus mandated preaching, baptism, absolution, and the Lord’s Supper so that His work on the cross about 2,000 years ago is delivered to you today. These means that God established are so comforting for us because God attaches His promises to them.

One error is to deny the means of Grace. Many Christians do this by denying God's presence and work in the Sacraments, especially the Lord's Supper. Big box churches are a plague in our country. Actually, they could technically be called a pandemic since they are worldwide. Big box churches don't put much faith in preaching Christ and Him crucified which is what Paul continually did. So, their so-called preaching is more akin to a Ted talk than an actual sermon filled with Christ and grace. Big box churches don't trust the Words of Institution, so you rarely ever see the Lord's Supper. And when you do, they usually depart from how Jesus told us to do it.

The opposite error is to separate faith and the Sacraments like the Roman Catholic church does. They are guilty today, just as they were in Luther's time, of doing the Sacraments by rote. The technical term is *ex opere operato* which means that the doing of the Sacraments apart from faith is efficacious. This is especially evident in their attendance and requirements for the Lord's Supper. They have many more Christmas and Easter Christians than we do, although, to be fair, we have some as well. Their requirements for the Lord's Supper are different than ours as well. The Roman Catholics insist you must go to the Lord's Supper once a year and you must go to confession, absolution, and penance before you can have the Lord's Supper. They turn Gospel into Law and do a lot of damage. You know that your worthiness for the Lord's Supper is faith.

We don't separate baptism and teaching. And we don't separate faith from either baptism or teaching. And we don't separate faith from the Holy Absolution or the Lord's Supper. You really are saved by faith alone but that doesn't mean God doesn't use means. What's really amazing is that faith itself is a gift.

Peter preached a wonderful sermon on Pentecost. The Jews were cut to the heart and asked what they must do for salvation. You know what Peter says:

“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself.” (Acts 2:39)

You hear that the Holy Spirit, who works faith in you, is a gift! You hear that it is for all people from infants to the elderly. You hear that it is the Lord our God who calls you to Himself. How can we not respond with praise and thanksgiving to such wonderful gifts, no matter what sorrow or tribulation we are going through.

You are a child of God through faith and His gifts of grace. God promises you that “all things work together for good, for those who are called.” (Romans 8:28) And you know that this doesn’t mean you won’t face hardship or sorrow or tragedy. God promises that if you bear His name, you will suffer persecution. God doesn’t remove you from this valley of the shadow of death but sustains you in the midst of it. And He makes another wonderful promise in Revelation:

“[Jesus] will wipe away every tear from [your] eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” (21:4)

We are in the midst of the former things now where evil is allowed to have its day. Sin, death, and the devil were defeated on the cross, but they rage for a little while. Evil had its way in Texas. But evil isn’t the last word. Jesus is. And Jesus is our confidence. Let me leave you with the words of the wonderful hymn, “Jesus Lives! The Vict’ry’s Won!” It’s hymn 490.

Jesus lives! The vict’ry’s won! Death no longer can appall me;
Jesus lives! Death’s reign is done! From the grave will Christ recall me.
Brighter scenes will then commence; This shall be my confidence.

Jesus lives! To Him the throne High above all things is given.
I shall go where He is gone, Live and reign with Him in heaven.
God is faithful; doubtings, hence! This shall be my confidence.

Jesus lives! For me He died, Hence will I, to Jesus living,
Pure in heart and act abide, Praise to Him and glory giving.
All I need God will dispense; This shall be my confidence.

Jesus lives! I know full well Nothing me from Him shall sever.
Neither death nor pow'rs of hell Part me now from Christ forever.
God will be my sure defense; This shall be my confidence.

Jesus lives! And now is death But the gate of life immortal;
This shall calm my trembling breath When I pass its gloomy portal.
Faith shall cry, as fails each sense: Jesus is my confidence!