

The church, an embassy from the future

1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50

A Sermon for the Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

In this season of Epiphany, we celebrate the coming of the light: "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5).

In Epiphany we look at Lutheran basics as to how the light comes to us. Today we're going to consider the "church" and what it's about.

Those who study church history know darkness and evil has shadowed the church from the beginning. It is said that God writes straight with crooked lines. This is true both in our lives and also for the church throughout history.

Lutherans speak of the true church as "hidden," but not invisible. It is hidden because you cannot point to any institutional church and announce there is the true church.

Luther famously said: "Where God builds a church, the devil builds a chapel."

His colleague Melanchthon wrote: "The church is hidden under a crowd of wicked men."¹ And: "Though wolves and ungodly teachers run rampant in the church, they are not, properly speaking, the kingdom of Christ."²

Luther's conflict with Rome drove him to rediscover the church scattered around the world. As he said, "Christ lives and rules in India and the Orient, as well as in Greece." The church is not bound to time, place, nor persons, thus not to Rome, Canterbury, Chicago, or St. Louis.

The marks of the church, properly speaking, are not its officials nor its headquarters. The church is an assembly of believers across time and place. Its marks are Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the Gospel, for where these are present, there are God's own people.

During the early days of WW II, there was a massive forced resettlement of Germans into the remote areas of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Siberia. Many of these people were Lutheran and other Protestants. They had lost their homes, their livelihoods, and many family members and friends.

They had lost most everything but not their Christian identity. They began coming together in small numbers for worship, prayer, and fellowship. They chose someone from among themselves, most of whom were laymen, to be preachers.

¹ Apology 7 and 8, *Book of Concord* Tappert 171.19; Kolb/Wengert 177.19.

² Apology 7 and 8, *BC* Tappert 172.22; Kolb/Wengert 177.22.

1 Peter 2:9 states: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

These people were exiles, not living like a royal priesthood. And yet out of the darkness, they were called to proclaim that he is the light and the life.

What their makeshift churches were about is what every church is about, and that is, not some minor, tragic incident that happened back in 30 A.D. in the city of Jerusalem.

Rather, what every church is about is that which changes everything. It's the biggest and most important event in all of whatever has happened.

It is bigger than Genesis, bigger than the Big Bang, bigger than when God created the world out of nothing. Not that event, but this, this one who died on that cross and rose again changed everything. His resurrection changed everything for all time.

That's why the church is, as Luther said, "a mouth house" and not "a book house." What the church has to offer is not ancient history. The Gospel is not what you find in the book about the past; rather, it is the voice of our living Lord, coming from the future to us. He who died and rose again is living now and comes to us in his Word and sacraments to claim us for his kingdom to come.

Gerhard Forde, eminent Lutheran leader (1927-2005), said that churches as embassies, embassies from the future: "In the public office [of ministry], the age to come, the kingdom of God, stakes out a claim, sets up an embassy, here in this age."³

You can keep this in mind when you're driving around and see a church: "Look! An embassy from the future."

And may the church buildings we see remind us of all the underground, makeshift churches in Siberia, China, Iran, the Congo, and wherever else Christians are huddled together to whisper to one another what they cannot openly proclaim.

Why is the cross and resurrection the most important event of all time? Three things:

First, death is defeated. As Paul writes: "The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Corinthians 15:26). This is hard for us because it's not a claim that we can test out, that is, subject to scientific proof or falsification.

³ Gerhard O. Forde, "Public Ministry and Its Limits," *dialog* 30 (1991) 104.

And it's not just us. We see in 1 Corinthians 15 that there were those who doubted the idea of a raised body. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:35: "But some will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?'"

Paul first answers with an analogy: "You foolish man! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain" (verses 36-7).

He goes on some more and then concludes: "So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown a physical body and raised a spiritual body" (verses 42-44).

Paul's analogy of a seed falters and fails because the plant which grows is as perishable as the seed from which it came. Is it just this analogy that fails, but another analogy, perhaps a caterpillar changing into a butterfly, would do the job?

No, not at all. All analogies fail. There is no analogy that works for the resurrection. It's not even a super miracle; it is something totally other. It is beyond any categories or concepts that we have.

And the resurrection appearances of Christ to Mary, the disciples, and others are not "proofs" in a modern, scientific sense.

At the same, these appearances do not mean that he only rose or lived "in their hearts," as is sometimes said at a funeral, as in: "Though ____ has died, he will live on in our hearts and memories."

No, the resurrection is about real reality. A real world to come. Paul writes: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:17). "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead . . ." (1 Corinthians 15:20).

The resurrection is all important. It is only the resurrection that snatches victory from defeat. It is only the resurrection that brings about something really new.

Second, sin is over, and forgiveness is in place. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we become the righteousness [the holiness] of God." The happy exchange. Our sin for his holiness. What is holiness? Like the resurrection itself, holiness is beyond us.

Third, the devil is defeated, and Christ is Lord of all. As it says in Luke 10:18: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." The victory is won.

This is all beyond us, beyond our thinking, beyond our wildest dreams.

Consider for a moment the astonishing sense of smell that dogs have. They can smell things we humans cannot. They can smell things that we are totally unaware of. Some dogs have a sense of smell that is 200,000 times stronger than the human sense of smell.

To be a Christian is like that in a way, it's to hear "a different drummer" (Thoreau, Walden), to hear that drumbeat about which Paul writes in Romans 8:32-39 (here 34-37):

"Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who intercedes for us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, 'For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.' No in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

The church is an embassy from the kingdom of God, an outpost here called to proclaim the lordship of Christ, his victory over sin and death, to baptize in his name, sing of his glory, distribute his body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, partaking in his Supper now, as a foretaste of the great feast to come.

It is all summed up at the end of this great resurrection chapter, 1 Corinthians 15:

"When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. 'O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Corinthians 15:54-56).

Amen