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Matthew 11,2-10

Advent 3 — 11 December 2016

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Matthew, which was read earlier:

And Jesus said, ... “Blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me.”

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: In virtually all cultures across all ages, people tend to idolize other people. It doesn't matter what field of endeavor – politics, society, the military, sports, religion, you name it. Often people look up to those whom they've idolized as role models. But it often turns out that people tend to become disappointed in those whom they idolized, especially when their idols are shown to have feet of clay.

For example, Ulysses S. Grant was deservedly famous as a successful U.S. general who won the Civil War. People thought so highly of him that he was later elected president of the United States. Unfortunately, he was much less successful as president than he was as a general.

If we look at the world of sports, Tiger Woods is now attempting to make a come back in the game of golf. At one time, he was at the top of the golf and sports world. But we remember when he confessed to infidelities (note the plural!). People held Woods in high esteem both as

a golfer and as a role model. But that esteem was shattered. Now Wood struggles to make that come back.

Or we only have to think about the numerous tele-evangelists who have been brought down – whether through gross immorality such as Jimmy Swaggert; or being convicted fraud such as Jim and the late Tammy-Faye Bakker; or false prophets, such as the late Harold Camping from Alameda.

Whether it is in the fields of sports, politics, business, entertainment, or even religion, people who were held in high esteem have been shown to have feet of clay. The papers and TV give us examples too numerous to mention.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus says that the man is blessed who does not stumble over Jesus. What did Jesus mean? Jesus meant that he is blessed who does not lose faith in Him. How might this even be possible, to lose faith in Jesus? Well, this brings me to this morning's sermon theme, "**Don't Stumble Over Jesus.**" I'll develop this theme in three parts:

- 1) Wrong Ideas About Jesus;**
- 2) Correct Ideas About Jesus;** and,
- 3) Don't Stumble Over Jesus.**

1) Wrong Ideas About Jesus. John the Baptist was God's messenger who was given the assignment to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah. In fact, John even had baptized Jesus.

Now, about nine months after Jesus' Baptism, John is sitting in one of Herod's prisons because John had denounced Herod's immoral life style. It would appear that some of John's disciples have gone to follow Jesus, while others have stayed with John.

John's preaching was to drive people to repentance and John

showed them a picture of the coming Messiah as the One Who would bring the wrath to come. While that picture was correct, it was a picture of Jesus' coming in glory at the end of time.

Thus, the picture of Jesus which John's disciples saw did not correspond to John's portrayal of the Messiah.

The Jesus to Whom John sent his disciples was not some fire-breathing Messiah Who would rid the land of oppressors and oppression, both political and religious.

The Jesus to Whom John sent His disciples was not a Messianic King Who would ride on His white horse to usher in a religious-political Kingdom of God, which would be as real and tangible as that of either King Herod or of the Romans, and which it would replace.

The Jesus to Whom John sent his disciples was not One Who was going to come and burst the doors of Herod's prison and free John and smite his jailers and persecutors.

The Jesus to Whom John sent his disciples was not One Who was going to tear down the corrupt high priesthood nor topple the seats upon which the scribes and Pharisee sat.

Why did John's disciples say to Jesus, "Are You the Coming One, or should we look for someone else?"

When they came to Jesus, they had the wrong idea about Jesus. They had the wrong idea about Who the Messiah would be.

Even though they had read their Bibles, they had the wrong idea because they were not properly interpreting the Bible and what the Bible said about the Messiah. Jesus did not meet their expectations. They had their doubts. They felt let down. Can one even say, they felt betrayed and were stumbling over Jesus?

But Jesus opened the Scriptures to them to give them

2) Correct Ideas About Jesus. Thus Jesus told them,

Go and report to John the things which you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them.

All of what Jesus told them had been foretold of Jesus by God's Old Testament prophets, and the most specific references are all from the Book of the prophet Isaiah.

Indeed, one of the references is to the exact same passage that Jesus read to the synagogue in Nazareth. In Isaiah 61 we read:

But the Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me,
Because the LORD has anointed me —
To bring Good News to the afflicted;
He has sent Me to bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives,
And freedom to the prisoners.
To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD. (Isaiah 61,1-2; see also
Luke 4,18-19)

What did Jesus leave out from that reading? The next line which said:

And the Day of Vengeance of our God. (Isaiah 61,2)

That Day of Vengeance will come, but it is not what Jesus was about during His earthly ministry.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus is the One Who came in humility in the stable at Bethlehem.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus is the One Who came to bring the outcasts of God's people back to God.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus is the One Who came to reach out to those whom others would not touch or thought to be accursed by God.

In binding up the sick, the lame, and the brokenhearted, He would begin to heal society, but from the inside out and from the bottom up.

But His greatest healing came when He went to the Cross, for there by His stripes we are healed from the affliction of sin, from the affliction of death, and from the affliction of the devil.

John had said of Jesus, "Behold, the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world." Jesus, the spotless Passover Lamb, had to be sacrificed. And so Jesus was sacrificed to pay for sin.

He did not come with the sword to slay, but with the Word of Forgiveness to heal and bind up and make whole.

The forgiveness for sin was won on the Cross and confirmed by His resurrection from the dead on the third day.

As He was raised from the dead never to die again, so His forgiveness is the power of life and salvation to all who trust that He died and rose for them.

Even though John's disciples could not yet grasp what it really meant that Jesus was the Lamb of God, Jesus had told them enough so that they might place their trust in Him.

Thus Jesus told them and tells us:

3) Don't Stumble Over Jesus. What is it to stumble over Jesus?

The Greek word which is used here is the basis for the English word “scandal” or “scandalize.”

Think back about those so-called heroes with feet of clay. When their feet of clay are exposed, then people who put their trust in those so-called heroes are scandalized and lose their trust of faith in them.

So it is with Jesus.

When people have a false understanding of Jesus, then Jesus becomes a source of offence instead of a fountain of grace and forgiveness.

Paul writes of his preaching:

But we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block, and to the Greeks foolishness. (1 Corinthians 1,23)

Jesus’ disciples could well identify with what Paul said. For before His betrayal, Jesus told them:

You will all fall away – that is, “stumble” – because of Me this night, for it is written, “I will strike down the Shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.” (Matthew 26,31)

But Jesus had given them and us His Word. As He said to them and us:

These things I have spoken to you that you may be kept from stumbling. (John 16,1)

It is as Luther said, that God has given us His Word, His teaching, His doctrine, to keep us from stumbling.

But it is not enough to say, “We believe the Bible.” John’s

disciples believed, but they believed incorrectly, and they may or may not have been disappointed — made to stumble over Jesus.

We also confess our faith, confess a correct understanding of what God has laid out for us in His Word. We confess the ancient Creeds. We confess with our Lutheran forebears the teaching contained in our Lutheran Confessions as correct exposition of the Scriptures. All of this is our bulwark against stumbling, at being disappointed or losing faith in Christ.

We prepare to worship the Son God become flesh in the womb of the Blessed Virgin. As we go to Bethlehem we see more than a baby — we see the Savior through Whom all things were created. Don't stumble on the road to Bethlehem.

We prepare to worship the God-Man Jesus take up His Cross for us and win for us the forgiveness of sins. Don't stumble on the road to Golgotha.

We prepare to worship the risen Jesus at the empty tomb, Who has won for us the forgiveness of sins and the life everlasting He enjoys. Don't stumble at the empty tomb.

We prepare to worship He Who sits at the right hand of God and will come again in glory with His angelic host to raise the quick and the dead. Don't stumble in waiting for Jesus' return.

We worship Him who has given us Holy Baptism so that we might have a washing and regeneration in the Holy Spirit and be saved. Don't stumble over Jesus by doubting that Baptism really saves.

We worship Him Who gives us His true Body and Blood in the earthly elements of bread and wine in Holy Communion, given and shed for us for the forgiveness of sins. Don't stumble over Jesus by doubting that this is really His true Body and Blood which really forgives sin.

We worship Him Who said that He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and no one gets to God but through Him. Don't stumble trying to get to God through anyone or anything but Jesus.

Conclusion: In our world there are things and people that can and will disappoint us. We may lose faith in a person when it turns out that they are not what they seemed. What about Jesus?

Jesus did not come as a new Moses to give us new laws. He did not come as an earthly king to rule with earthly power over and earthly kingdom.

Jesus came as our Savior to deliver us from sin, death, and the power of the devil.

Jesus prayed that we should not stumble over Him. That we should not lose faith in Him. That we should never stop trusting in Him, that He died and was raised to life for us and our forgiveness.

Jesus gave us God's Word, His Word, to keep us from stumbling, to keep us from being disappointed in Him. And we shall never be disappointed if we believe correctly in Who He is and why He came. In Him we have the forgiveness of sins which gives life and salvation. Amen.

Now, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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