

“All Is Not As It Seems”  
2 Corinthians 4:13 – 5:1

June 10, 2018

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

If your vision is so poor that it requires you to wear glasses or contact lenses all the time in order to see, then you know how differently it feels to look at something with your glasses on or contact lenses in than it feels to look at something with your glasses off or contact lenses in. Looking at the world without your contact lenses or glasses on can be a confusing, frightening, even dangerous experience. Everything looks like a huge indistinguishable blob. You may be confused because you don't know what it is. You may be afraid because it appears to be something that can harm you. You may even be in danger because of your inability to see.

However, once you look at the same situation with glasses on our contacts in, everything changes. What appeared to be a small animal of some sorts turns out to be a footstool. What frightened you as a possible bad guy who wanted to hurt you turns out to be a coat rack. And that basketball or football which the children or grandchildren left lying in the living room which you did not see and could have injured you by tripping over it no longer can hurt you because you see it clearly through the lenses of glasses or contact lenses.

The exact same scenario seen by two people can have entirely different results depending upon how they see the situation and through what lenses.. I think we would all agree that, for your own safety and your own enjoyment of things, the best idea is to see things in this world through the proper lenses. This is true, not only for physical sight, but spiritual sight as well. One's perception of reality is determined through what lens reality is viewed.

Many people have a very negative view of reality. There are the natural disasters which never seemed to end. We see on the news about tornadoes, floods, hurricanes, fires, and now even volcano eruptions. We hear about the self-inflicted problems of society. Every day there seems to be a new shooting to report from a local high school, a small-town church, a nightclub, a public thoroughfare, and many other locations. These shootings kill and injure many but have almost become “old news”. We experience the selfish and loveless treatment by others which have also become commonplace in our schools, our sporting events, our places of business, and our places of fun. Many people look at this world and have become discouraged. They conclude that it is going to hell in a hand basket.

Christians are not immune from these societal and natural examples of harm and destruction. We experience these things along with our fellow citizens. Many Christians may think that Jesus' victory over sin, death, and the grave must mean that our lives will improve here and now. Some preachers and some church groups openly proclaim this doctrine and practice. If you just believe strong enough and pray hard enough, your life will be improved. We, in the Lutheran Church, may not officially proclaim this, but I am sure that many of our members may think it.

Yet being a Christian in this world does not seem to grant any immediate or apparent advantage over being a non-Christian. We talk a lot about victory over sin and death and the glory of life after death in heaven, especially around Easter time, but

nothing seems to change. Possessions are wiped away through natural disasters. Children are still killing other children at an alarming rate at the “school shooting of the week”. People still suffer from poverty, sickness, loneliness, and pain as life goes on.

Let’s be honest. These present realities of evil, suffering, and death can really wear down a Christian’s faith. Some, even those with very strong faith can abandon their faith altogether because of these present realities. How are we to view the present realities of this age? The fact that we know the origin of the present problems – sin – and its effect upon the natural world, other people, and even ourselves doesn’t really help us in dealing with these matters. How do we survive without becoming discouraged and losing heart?

We must remember that the present realities are not the only realities. There are future realities for Christians in the world to come. In that day, there will be none of the evil that we experience now: suffering, pain, conflict, natural disasters, political/military evil, and so many other things which make our lives miserable. Instead, there will be all of the good which God intended for us to experience in the beginning. We will have perfect relationships with Him, free from conflict and sin. We will experience peace – shalom – which is more than an absence of conflict but is a positive feeling of well-being. We will enjoy perfect health, complete satisfaction, perpetual good weather, the absence of military or political conflict, and a life that lasts forever, not as it exists now, but as God originally intended for it to be before the Fall into sin.

The question we as Christians, must face is this: how do these future realities help us to face the present realities of this age? It all depends through which lens you view the situation. As Christians, we must remember that we always live in two realities at the same time – the world which exists now and the world which is to come. Both are real. Both are ours. It’s not that there is one reality for the world and one reality for Christianity; where that one is now and the other only exists in the future. Although we know by experience that the first reality is real, the second reality is equally real even though we have yet to experience it. How do we live without being crushed and overcome by the realities of this evil world while, at the same time, not doubting or even disbelieving that there will be a better life for us in the future?

Paul bases his hope upon two certain promises of God. First, God promised to raise Jesus Christ from the dead. The wonderful reality of Easter is that God kept His promise and raised Jesus from death to life and from the grave to heaven again. This is the good news we proclaim. This is the power which is at work in us now – the power to raise the dead people to life again.

Second, Paul goes on to say that, if God is able to raise Christ from the dead, He has the same power to raise us from the dead and to bring us with all Christians into His presence. In other words, since we know God raised Jesus from the dead, we also know that God will raise us from the dead and bring us to be with Jesus in the reality where there is no more sin, no more suffering, no more pain, and certainly no more death.

Therefore, Paul says to his readers and he says to us, we do not lose heart. Is that because we deny the reality of pain and suffering in this world? Do we become like Ned Flanders the next-door neighbor of Homer Simpson and believe that everything is

hunky-dory, even when it's not? No, not at all. We see reality all right, but we see it through the right lens. Paul exhorts us to take a look at what we are taking a look at. Through what lens do we "see" reality and by which live out our lives?

As with physical sight, trying to see without glasses when you are horribly near sighted, trying to see and understand our present reality or believe and have hope in a future reality through the blindness that sin causes without spiritual glasses is what discourages us and causes us to feel hopeless. Without the right spiritual glasses or without any spiritual glasses at all, things seem blurry with regard to understanding, confusing with regard to purpose, and frightening with regard to possible effect on us. Many live their lives metaphorically squinting all the time, trying to see and make sense of this world's reality. The "god of this world", the devil, would like nothing more than for us to continue trying to see reality through the fog of our sin. We focus on the here and now and physical reality and miss out on much more.

By Jesus' death on the cross, our sin has been taken away and we are right with God. By Jesus' resurrection from death to life, we are assured of the new reality which is to come. By the work of the Holy Spirit, He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. By calling us to faith and gathering us together, He enlightens us. He doesn't open our eyes, as much as He gives us the proper glasses by which we see reality and live in reality.

Through the lenses of the Holy Spirit, we see the reality of this world clearly. Yet all of the suffering, pain, persecution, and other tribulation which seem to be so terrible to the spiritually unaided eye, Paul calls "slight momentary affliction." Experience cannot show us this but seeing through the glasses which the Holy Spirit provides, we understand this. As bad as it seems now, this affliction is preparing us for a glory that is beyond our ability to comprehend.

All of the things which exist, good or bad, are transient. Through the glasses provided by the Holy Spirit, we see that these things last only a short time. Not only is the suffering temporary, but the enjoyment which we work so hard to accumulate by the things of this world lasts only a short time, too. But the things which we cannot see physically – forgiveness, God's favor, new life now, and eternal life after we die – we only can see spiritually by faith through the power of the Holy Spirit are eternal.

The joy which we experience and the hope by which we live our lives happens, not because we live in a different reality than unbelievers, but because we see reality in a different way through the lens of the Holy Spirit. We see the temporary nature of this world's problems and the transient nature of this world's joy. So, we do not become discouraged at the suffering nor do we stake our happiness upon the things of this world.

Through the lens of the Holy Spirit, we see and rejoice in the reality of that for which Christ died to earn; rose from the dead to guarantee; and will return on the Last Day to give; and which we experience a foretaste of in the Word and Sacraments to sustain us in the present time. We see true and lasting life.

Yet, it is difficult. We are stuck between two realities. Some theologians have called this an "now but not yet" reality. We experience reality now as God intended it as

we gather to hear His Word and to receive His Holy Sacraments. As the liturgy often calls them, “a foretaste of the feast to come”. We will experience reality as God fully intended it when we die or when the Lord returns. This is difficult for us to accept as we are suffering various difficulties, especially being persecuted for the sake of Christ for we live in an instant gratification culture.

But it is a glorious reality which is beyond all comprehension and which causes us not to lose heart. Our outer self with all of its aches, pains, sufferings, and other troubles is wasting away. Paul says let it go. Why? Our inner being is being renewed and strengthened, even in the midst of suffering, and therefore will last forever.

As many of you know, I have a slight affinity for a baseball team from Chicago known as the Cubs. Last week, light hitting Jason Heyward hit a grand slam home run in the bottom of the 9<sup>th</sup> to win the game. After hearing this, I went to the Internet to watch the entire ninth-inning on replay. The fans were getting tense and worried. I could feel the same tension and worry coming over me until I stopped and remembered: “I already know the outcome of the.” Seeing this ending through the lens of instant replay meant that victory was assured and all was right, even though the images on the screen were to the contrary.

In the same way, as we view life to the lens of our own experience, we may feel the tenseness and worry of other people through the present situation. Although we may not be seen life through the lens of instant replay, we are seeing it to something equally sure the lens of a faith given by the Holy Spirit. We know how the game of life ends and the future reality awaiting us through faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore, no matter how bad the present reality seems, all things are not as they seem. We feel optimistic about the future. We feel positive about the present, knowing that everything here is temporary and transient. We are appreciative of our past, but not prisoners of it. We see our present reality. We see our future reality. And we thank God that we see them both clearly. Amen