Midweek Lenten Vespers
Wednesday, Mar 13, 2024

QUESNEL

“The Promise to Abraham and His Offspring” (Romans 4:13-25)

There is a monster on the loose. Tonight I want to warn you about this monster. It is dangerous. It could kill you. No, it is not big and hairy. It does not have sharp claws and teeth. But it is a monster nonetheless, a deadly one. And it especially likes to attack Christians.

The monster I’m talking about is the monster of uncertainty. That’s a term that Luther came up with, “the monster of uncertainty,” for he himself had been subject to its attacks for many years. But our text tonight, from Romans 4, helped to ward off that beast, for Luther, and it will do the same for us too. For the thing that will drive off the beast and cause it to flee is what we find here in this passage, namely, “The Promise to Abraham and His Offspring.”

We’ll be focusing especially on these verses from our text: “For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed. . . .”

But this “monster of uncertainty. . . .” Luther experienced it. His years as a monk, the teachings he received from the medieval Roman Catholic Church, his arduous attempts at living a life that would merit righteousness, trying to love God enough and to be rid of sin–the monster of uncertainty was Luther’s daily companion. It haunted him day and night. Have I done enough? Why can’t I love God with all my heart, a God whose high standards I can never seem to meet and who will judge me severely, damn me, if I don’t? Luther was plagued by the monster of uncertainty. And if he, the hardest-working monk in show business, couldn’t make it, who could?

Later on, Luther looked back on what he had experienced during that time. He talks about “the dangerous doctrine” of the Roman theologians. He writes: They “taught and believed that no one can know for certain whether he is in a state of grace, even if he does good works according to his ability and lives a blameless life. This statement, widely accepted and believed, was a principle and practically an article of faith throughout the papacy. With this wicked idea of theirs they utterly ruined the doctrine of faith, overthrew faith, disturbed consciences, abolished Christ from the church. . . . If everything else were sound there, still this monster of uncertainty is worse than all the other monsters.”

You see, there’s a natural human tendency to want to attribute our right standing with God to something we do, to our works, to how good we are, at least in comparison to others. But when we do that, we open ourselves up to the attacks of this monster of uncertainty. This attempt at self-justification undermines faith and takes our eyes off Christ and off God’s promise, which is the only sure foundation there is. And when the church itself promoted this uncertainty, that you could never be sure you had done enough–that was monstrous.

But God delivered Luther from that demon of doubt by opening his eyes to the sure promise of grace and salvation in Christ. Luther continues: “Let us thank God, therefore, that we have been delivered from this monster of uncertainty. . . . And this is our foundation: The gospel commands us to look, not at our own good deeds or perfection, but at God as he promises, and at Christ himself, the Mediator. . . . And this is the reason our theology is certain: It snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside of ourselves, so that we do not depend on our strength, conscience, experience, person, or works but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God which cannot deceive.”

You see, this is what our text tonight is saying. If it depends on you, you’ll never be sure you’ve done enough. But if it depends on God’s word of promise, of that you can be sure, and God wants you to be sure. And so Paul says, “That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed.”

Tonight I’m showing you how this principle of righteousness through faith in God’s promise, which is absolutely certain and reliable, versus a supposed righteousness of the law, based on your works, of which you can never be certain–how this crucial distinction, laid down by St. Paul in Romans, permeated the thinking of Luther and the Lutheran confessors and gave them great joy and confidence, because they knew that this doctrine alone gave all glory to Christ and true comfort to terrified consciences. It is the only teaching that can do that.

And so Luther wrote, in the Heidelberg Disputation, Thesis 26, this wonderful insight: “The law says ‘Do this,’ and it is never done. Grace says, ‘Believe this,’ and everything is already done.” My friends, this is as good a commentary on our text as you will ever find.

“The law says ‘Do this.’” Yes, that’s what the law will tell you. Do this. Don’t do that. Keep the commandment pure and undefiled. The law is good. It tells us exactly what we are supposed to be doing and thinking and saying, at all times. Do this, keep the law, perfectly, and you will live. So you try. But it’s never good enough. The law is never done, fully, as it ought to be done. And so here comes that monster of uncertainty rearing its ugly head.

But grace says, “Believe this.” This is something different. Now it’s not a matter of our doing the law, but rather of receiving God’s promise. And that’s a sure deal. In fact, it’s already a done deal. Grace says, ‘Believe this,’ and everything is already done.”

In fact, take the case of Abraham. The Lord told Abraham, “I have made you the father of many nations.” And the Lord told this to Abraham even before his child was born! It was already a done deal, from God’s perspective! As good as done.

And so it is for us. God has given us his promise, the promise that we are righteous, that we will inherit eternal life, that he will pronounce us righteous before his judgment seat, that he will raise our dead bodies new and glorious and give us joyful life forever. It’s as good as done, it’s guaranteed, it’s a sure thing. And that’s because all of this is based on what Christ has already done for us by his cross and resurrection. “Grace says, ‘Believe this,’ and everything is already done.”

Or, as Jesus said, “It is finished.” For the content of God’s promise of grace consists in what Christ has already done, the righteousness he won for us. Jesus died for our sins, and God raised him from the dead, saying yes to what Christ had done, that it was more than enough to pay for all our sins and win the victory over death. And so our faith in this, God’s completed work, is counted unto us as righteousness. As Paul writes, “It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.”

When I’ve been talking to you about faith during this series on Romans, justification by faith, there is one point I’ve been emphasizing over and over again. And it is this: Faith has its value solely by virtue of its object. It’s not because we have done something grand by our act of believing. No, faith has saving value because of what it believes in, namely, God’s promise of mercy and grace in Christ Jesus our Lord. That’s why faith saves, it justifies–because of what God has packed into his promise. And so our Lutheran Confessions state: “Whenever we speak about faith, we want an object of faith to be understood, namely, the promised mercy. For faith justifies and saves, not because it is a worthy work in itself, but only because it receives the promised mercy.”

Faith is simply the receiving of a gift you did not earn. Faith looks away from itself and instead looks toward God and what he is giving us. Likewise, then, the Confessions say, commenting on our text for tonight: “Forgiveness of sins is something promised for Christ’s sake. It cannot be received except through faith alone. For a promise cannot be received except by faith alone. Romans 4:16 says, ‘That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed.’ It is as though he says, ‘If the matter were to depend on our merits, the promise would be uncertain and useless. For we never could determine when we would have enough merit.’”

One more testimony from the Confessions, where again Romans 4 is quoted: “At the top of his voice, Paul cries out that sins are freely forgiven for Christ’s sake. ‘It depends on faith,’ he says, ‘in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed.’ If the promise were to depend upon our works, it would not be sure. If forgiveness of sins were to be given because of our works, when would we know that we had received it? When would a terrified conscience find a work that it would consider good enough to reconcile God’s anger?”

How can I be sure? That’s the question for tonight. Can I be sure that I will be declared righteous when I appear before God’s judgment seat? Yes, by all means! God wants you to be sure you are right with him! But how so? It won’t be because you have done all the law well enough to merit your own righteousness. No way! That could never be. Rather, your righteousness rests upon God’s completed work in Christ, which he has packed into the promise of his gospel word. Now there is something you can be sure of! God’s work. God’s word. It’s a done deal.

And so we say good riddance to that beast that’s been dogging our tail: Be gone, O monster of uncertainty!