

Psalm 119:105
150th anniversary
Jerico Lutheran Church
25 June 2017¹

IN JESUS’ NAME

Psalm 119:105
Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

The view from here is great! You are a sight for sore eyes. We’ve all grown just a little older over the years. I’m no longer the school boy hiding under one of the back pews because Pastor Tweit heard us kids running in the church. You’re no longer the group of fathers who needed to make a concerted effort to bring your families to church by hooking-up the buggies, putting blankets over your children and driving the horses to church. You’re no longer the same ladies’ who hand varnished all of wood on the basement walls.

But, actually, you are looking pretty good for your age. You are 150 years old. But how do you feel? Do you feel old? Do have aches and pains? Do you feel weak? Many things have changed in 150 years.

I. *God’s Word was everything to them*

150 years ago this was a young and energetic congregation. This was open land that was just being settled. Ten Norwegian families had just arrived and began to build their log cabins. This Norwegian settlement has the distinction of being settled from the west. These immigrant first had settled in Wisconsin but had moved to south-eastern South Dakota. This was in 1863 during the Civil War. They did not feel safe there and fled to the east. As Pastor H. M. Tjernagel wrote: *“The old covered wagon, sunbaked and rickety, was hurriedly loaded, the oxen hooked on and the flight, at a snails pace, was on.”* In their retreat they had to cross the length of Iowa, which was then practically uninhabited since Iowa had been a state for less than twenty years [1846]. They settled along the Crane Creek because here they found a large tract of land that was unoccupied because of the light soil. Soon they were joined by other emigrants from Norway. In fact, this settlement grew quite rapidly and became the largest settlement of emigrants from Jostedal, Norway in the United States.

These fathers and mothers had left their families and friends. They had left their houses and worldly possessions to come to Iowa. All that they had was packed into one or two wooden painted trunks. In those trunks they had a few clothes and maybe some kind of food that would not spoil. But they also packed the Bible, the catechism, and a hymnbook. As one early immigrant said, *“It is all that I have.”* **God’s Word was everything to them.**

The struggle between fear and the faith that lived in their hearts must have been so great that they might have thought it would tear them apart. They came here as struggling and frustrated people. They saw their own shortcomings and sins. No doubt they shared the conviction of Martin Luther who, on his deathbed, uttered *“We are beggars all.”* We do not deserve God’s grace or favor. We deserve only death and punishment.

Just like the Old Testament psalmist, they felt as if they were walking in a land of darkness; and they turned to God’s Word. The psalmist says **[God’s Word] is a lamp to my feet.** At the time when the psalmist wrote the words our text, if the people wanted to walk in the darkness of the night, they carried a lantern with them so that they would not fall into a ditch or stumble on a tree stump. The lantern gave a light for their feet. The psalmist then makes this parallel: he says that God’s Word (the Bible) is the **lamp** that lights our way. This is so that we do not fall into *“misbelief, despair and other shameful sin and vice [but] though we be thus tempted, that we may still in the end overcome and retain the victory”* [Martin Luther’s explanation of the Sixth Petition]. These Norwegian Lutheran pioneers contacted Pastor Ulrick Vilhelm Koren who helped them establish a congregation.² They began to construct a church building where God’s Word would shine upon their feet and guide them.

But, as Martin Luther once said, *“Whenever God builds a church, the devil builds a chapel right next door.”* Those words mean that wherever God proclaims free forgiveness for the sake of Jesus Christ, Satan teaches that we are in some way responsible for our own salvation. This congregation’s first pastor, Pastor Vilhem Koren, wrote these words:

“... those who will hear God’s Word rightly must not tolerate false doctrine, because it tells either that God has said something which He has not said or it denies that God has said something which He has said. We can also ... in everything which concerns our salvation, judge the doctrine according to the Word of God which we have in our ‘Small Catechism’ ...

“If God has given us His Word, then we have no right to hear one part and let the other part lie; neither will we hear only the Gospel, or only the Law; nor will we change them and mix Law and Gospel, for then it will no longer be God’s Word.

“Further, if God has given us His Word, then it follows that it is not different for different times. God does not say something new to us which He did not say to our forefathers. We need it the same now as they needed it in the apostles’ time. The Holy Spirit is not a wavering spirit.

“If God has given us His Word, then He does so in order that we shall hear it and learn it ...” [U. V. Koren, *Truth Unchanged, Unchanging*, page 114-15].

¹ This sermon was preached on June 25—the 487th anniversary date of the reading of the Augsburg Confession.

² This congregation has the unique distinction of being the only congregation in the state of Iowa which was not established prior to Koren’s arrival or by the division of larger congregations, but rather by Koren’s own missionary work.

God's Word was everything to these people. It was a lamp to their feet.

II. *God's Word is everything to us*

One hundred and fifty years later, we have grown older (but not necessarily wiser). We too are sinners who are in need of the gospel. God's Word is still **a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.**

Do you feel old?

Whether you feel it or not, you have the same youthful vitality which guided the early New Testament church. Just as God's word guided our forefathers, 150 years ago, it lights the way for us. God's Word has not changed (James 1:17). What was written by the evangelist John, or the apostles Paul or Peter is still true today. That Word is **given by inspiration of God** (2 Timothy 3:16/KJV) and ***it still lights the path to the cross where Jesus Christ died.*** Only the holy, precious blood of Jesus Christ which was shed upon the cross could atone for sin. That holy blood was shed for us. That innocent blood redeemed us from the condemnation of sin. That precious blood has forgiven us all our sins (1 Peter 2:9). Through His Word and through the sacraments, God brings us the forgiveness of all our sins and renews us with the Holy Spirit so that we do **not grow weary** or faint (Isaiah 40:31).

Do you have aches and pains?

Think of the ache in the heart of Mary Magdalene when she walked to the tomb on Easter morning. Look at this altar painting as Mary falls at the feet of her risen Savior morning and exclaims **"Rabboni!" (which means Teacher)** (John 20:16). Here is the central teaching of the Bible—that Christ died for our sins and that Christ has risen again because of our justification (Romans 4:25)! Look inside Lord's empty tomb and know that the pain of sin has been removed! Look and see Our Savior's now glorified body and know that we are no longer separated from God! Your Redeemer lives and the great enemies of sin and death have been defeated! ***God's Word lights the path to the empty tomb*** and assures us that **our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us** (Romans 8:18).



Do you feel weak?

Do you feel your voice and your light are lost in the noise and darkness of this world? In the twenty-first century, our faith faces challenges which could not have been imagined 150 years ago; and yet **the light shines in the darkness [and] and the darkness has not [overcome] it** (John 1:5). No matter what others may say, Christianity has not changed. Remember that we have God's promise which says: **my word that goes out from my mouth ... will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it** (Isaiah 55:11). You can lift up your voice and speak strongly. The psalmist even tells us that we can **speak [God's word] also before kings, And will not be ashamed** (Psalm 119:46). The apostle Peter explains that in the Bible, **We have the word of the prophets made ... certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and [Jesus Christ returns]** (2 Peter 1:19). On that day when the last trumpet sounds (1 Corinthians 15:53), we will be raised, together with the bodies that now rest in this cemetery, and we will **meet the Lord in the air** and live with Him forever (1 Thessalonians 4:17). ***This inerrant Word of God strengthens us as it lights the path to heaven.***

It is significant that we are observing this congregation's anniversary during the 500th anniversary year of the Lutheran Reformation. It was Martin Luther whom God used to restore the authority of God's Word. As a result of the Lutheran Reformation, countless millions of people—including all of us here today—have heard the pure life-giving Word of the gospel proclaimed in the Lutheran church and received everlasting life. Our faith and our salvation are based on the Word alone.

God's Word is everything to us. It is a light for our path.

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Many things have changed in 150 years. But God's Word has not changed. Today, God's Word still comes to us in many wonderful and trustworthy ways:

When you hear or read the good news that your sins are forgiven because of Jesus Christ, you can trust that word of promise.

When you recall God's promise that in Baptism He made you His very own child, you can take Him at His word.

When you hear Christ's words, *This is my body which is given for you* and *This is my blood of the new testament which is shed for many for the remission of sins* (Matthew 26:28/KJV), you can believe those words.

We gather here today, not to laud the founders of this congregation—but to give thanks for those who passed-on the faith to us and to remember the **leaders who spoke the word of God to you** (Hebrews 13:7). It is by God's grace that we teach and preach the same Word of the Bible and the same Gospel as was preached 150 years ago because without God's grace, ***"[we] would have ruined everything long ago"*** [Martin Luther's Sacristy Prayer].

God's Word is everything. It is why this congregation was formed. It is why we continue today. And now **as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus** (2 Timothy 3:14-15).

Lord, keep us steadfast in Thy Word.

As it was in the past, so be it today, and unto life everlasting.

Rev. Craig A. Ferkenstad

TO GOD ALONE
BE THE GLORY