Collect of the Day

Almighty God, You know we live in the midst of so many dangers that in our frailty we cannot stand upright. Grant strength and protection to support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Scripture Readings

Psalm 111
(antiphon v. 3)
Deuteronomy 18:15-20
1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28

Hymns

Hymn of the Day – 842
Other Hymns – 583 (OT), 696 (E), 533 (G), 541 (G), 849

Prayers

Let us pray for the whole Church of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs.

Heavenly Father, Your servant Moses promised that You would raise up a prophet like him from among Your ancient people, putting Your words into his mouth. We bless Your name that You fulfilled that promise when You sent Your Son with the words of eternal life for us to hear and to treasure. Make all ministers of Your Church faithful in preaching that Word, and grant all Your people grace to hear and welcome it with joy. Lord, in Your mercy, hear our prayer.

Gracious heavenly Father, Your beloved Son spoke with power and showed His authority to release from the oppression of the devil those whom the enemy had afflicted. Through our Saviour's mighty Word, continue to free those in bondage to the powers of darkness, transferring them into the Kingdom of Your Son, that with us they may marvel at Your gracious love. Lord, in Your mercy, hear our prayer.

Kind Master, You summon Your children to consider and weigh the impact of their actions on their weaker brothers and sisters and so not to live in such a way that they are merely pleasing themselves. Help all the members of our congregation to be considerate of one another and not to put needless stumbling blocks in the way of each other's faith. Lord, in Your mercy, hear our prayer.

Lord and Ruler of all, into Your merciful keeping, we commend all those entrusted with civil authority among us. Help them to serve our nation and communities with honour. Remember also all in our armed forces and particularly our chaplains who minister to them in Your name. Lord, in Your mercy, hear our prayer.

Heavenly Father, You invite everyone who is godly to offer prayer to You at a time when You may be found. Hear the cries of Your children who call to You in their time of need: those who are ill, hospitalized, injured, grieving, lonely or frightened [and especially all we name before You: ____________]. Have mercy on them all, O Lord, and let them take comfort in Your steadfast love that surrounds those who trust in You. Lord, in Your mercy, hear our prayer.

Lord God, You are our hiding place. You preserve Your children from trouble and surround them with shouts of deliverance. Receive our thanks for all the faithful departed who have gone before us and now rest in Christ. Bring us with all Your saints to the joys of the resurrection. Lord, in Your mercy, hear our prayer.

Into Your hands, O Lord, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in Your mercy, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.
“Temple, Synagogue, Church” is the theme of today’s sermon . . . and for good reason. After all, around this time of year . . . February 2nd to be precise . . . is the feast of the Presentation of our Lord – the time when 40 days after He is born, Mary and Joseph bring the Christ Child into the temple in Jerusalem in order to present Him to the Lord in accordance with the Law of Moses. And then, here in today’s appointed Gospel Reading we read of the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry some 30 years later when He goes into the synagogue in Capernaum on the Sabbath Day. And, of course, we normally hear about all this as we gather together in our church buildings and places of worship.

But why? What was the purpose of the temple in Old Testament times, of the synagogue in Jesus’ day, of church buildings in our day? In short, why go to church?

Well, in the first place, we go to church in obedience to God’s command and to follow Jesus’ own example. So we read: “And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath Jesus entered the synagogue.” And notice that it doesn’t say, “And on the Sabbath Jesus slept in late”; or that “On the Sabbath Jesus went to the hockey arena or the coffee shop.” Nor does it say that Jesus went to the synagogue only if He felt like going, or that He went only once in a while. In fact, St. Luke, in recording this same event in his Gospel, says, “On the Sabbath day He went into the synagogue as was His custom.”

To be sure, Jesus did not go to the synagogue every Sabbath Day because He needed to go. After all, He was the One who wrote the Book that was read there in the synagogue. He, as we confess in the Nicene Creed, is “very God of very God” – the One who was at the heart and center of the synagogue services, the One of whom those various sacrifices in the temple were all about.
But since Jesus is also true man as well as true God, since He came down to this world in order to take our place under the Law; He joyfully and willingly obeys God's Law – including the Law which says in the Third Commandment: “Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy.”

And that Law still applies to us today. After all, as our Lord Himself says: “If you love Me, you will obey My commandments.” And again: “He who belongs to God, hears what God says.” And to those who think that it doesn’t really matter if they go to church or not, that they are children of God and heirs of eternal life even if their worship attendance is rather sparse or non-existent; the writer of Hebrews would admonish and encourage them, and – yes – also us, in these words: “Do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together as is the habit of some.”

Well, secondly, then, we go to our place of worship in order to hear God’s Word. So our text continues: “And immediately on the Sabbath Jesus entered the synagogue and was teaching. And they were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.”

Now, the worship services in the synagogues in Jesus’ day that were scattered throughout the Roman world centered in the reading and hearing, the explaining and meditating on God's Word, the Old Testament Scriptures – the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. But instead, however, of expounding upon and unfolding the truth of God’s Word, the scribes or teachers of the Law would often use that Word as a kind of ‘pre-text’ to talk about all kinds of mundane matters, about the multitude of man-made rules and regulations that they imposed upon people – such as that which St. Paul mentions in today’s Epistle Reading.

But Jesus, however, “taught as One who had authority” – teaching the Scriptures as God’s own Word of truth, teaching the whole counsel of God, teaching not ‘what I must do to be acceptable and pleasing to God’, but, rather, ‘what God has done and is doing for me, a sinner.’ A few verses previous to our text . . . and as we heard in last Sunday’s Gospel Reading, Jesus summarizes the content of His teaching in these words: “The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel.”

Now, is not this problem that existed in the temple and the synagogue of Jesus’ day still a problem that infects the church today? For how many pulpits have become nothing more than mere soap-boxes where self-styled preachers spout
off their own opinions and ideas about matters that God’s Word does not even address? How many so-called religious teachers use – or rather ‘misuse’ – the Bible and rant and rave about this or that current political, economic, or social issue; or talk about such things as ‘Ten Principles to Achieve Financial Wealth’ or ‘Five Steps to Successful Living’; while matters pertaining to the kingdom of God, to repentance, to believing the Good News, are seldom, if ever, even mentioned? How many churches are filled with teaching that is blatantly contrary to the Word of God? St. Paul puts it this way in 2 Timothy: “For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth.”

How important, how necessary, therefore, that we note well and take to heart the truth that the main purpose of the temple in Old Testament times, of the synagogue in Jesus’ day, and, yes, of church buildings of our day is to simply hear the Lord God Himself speak to us and deal with us by and in and through His Holy Word. And that is why St. Paul exhorts and encourages us in these words, “Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”

Well, in the third place, we go to church in order to see and receive a miracle from God. So our text continues: “And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, ‘What do You want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are – the Holy One of God!’” Now, not only do the demons or unclean spirits, recognize Jesus for who He really is – unlike the teachers of the Law of that day and unlike many people in our own day; but they also know full well why He came into this world, why He was born of the virgin Mary, why He was presented in the temple, why He would be nailed to a cross; that is, to do battle with the forces of hell itself, to take away the devil’s power over this sin-filled and dying world. St. John puts it very simply in his first epistle in these words: “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.”

And now, Jesus proceeds to show that He indeed is the Holy One of God, that He does have all authority in heaven and on earth; as we read: “But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him.” What a great miracle did Jesus perform here in the synagogue in Capernaum on this Sabbath Day! The devil is overcome solely by the power of Jesus’ own Word. And is not this
also what takes place here in our church buildings and places of worship on every Lord’s Day?

A little baby, who is by nature a sinner and a child of the devil, is washed clean from sin, born again into God’s family, rescued from Satan’s kingdom by water and the Word in Holy Baptism. What a miracle!

God’s Word of absolution is pronounced to you, a sinner, by the pastor in accordance with Jesus’ own command, “If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven”; and, lo and behold, your sins are truly forgiven and Satan can no longer accuse you. What a miracle!

God’s Word is read from the lectern and proclaimed from the pulpit – the Word which, as St. Paul declares, “is the very power of God unto salvation.” What a miracle!

Jesus’ own Word is spoken over the bread and the wine of Holy Communion: “This is My body. This is My blood.” And, lo and behold, we then eat and drink the very body and blood of Him that was given and shed on the cross as the payment price for our redemption from sin and death and from the devil himself. What a miracle!

On the day of His presentation, the Lord of all returns to His temple in Jerusalem in the person of a little Baby. On a Sabbath Day the Holy One of God, Jesus of Nazareth, goes into a synagogue in Capernaum to teach with authority and to cast out an evil spirit. On a Sunday morning in a church building in villages and towns and cities scattered across this nation – this same Jesus who met, fought, and defeated the devil now stands among us and with us; for as He Himself has promised: “Where two or three have been gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them.” What a miracle!

In the fourth place, then, we also go to our place of worship in order to be strengthened in our faith. So our text continues: “And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, ‘What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him’.”

And today, as well; for how can we not but also respond in like manner and so be strengthened in our faith when we hear and see and receive the wonderful, powerful, amazing blessings of God’s Word that is proclaimed in our church buildings? In fact, there is no other way by which saving faith in Jesus Christ can be created
and nurtured, sustained and strengthened within us except through that Word; for as St. Paul says in Romans: “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ.”

Well, fifthly and finally, we also go to church in order to be equipped to tell others about Jesus – the Lord and Savior of all. So our text concludes: “And at once His fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.”

And today, as well; for in our temple, our synagogue, our church we, too, are being equipped and empowered to do that which these people in Capernaum did – to spread the Good News of Jesus to others, to share with them those amazing blessings of God’s Holy Word. After all, when we ourselves receive those amazing, miraculous blessings of Jesus from His Word; how can we not but also exclaim with the apostles Peter and John: “We cannot help but speak about that which we have seen and heard.”

Yes, ‘Temple, Synagogue, Church.’ And as the hymn writer thus pens it: “To Your temple, Lord, I come, For it is my worship home. This earth has no better place, Here I see my Savior’s face. From Your house when I return, May my heart within me burn, And at evening let me say, ‘I have walked with God today’.” Amen.