

In the ✠ name of Jesus.

Luke begins our text reminding the reader of the overarching context. Luke has this in mind as he is writing this account, and we should have it in mind also as we engage these texts. Luke reminds us that Jesus is “*journeying toward Jerusalem.*” Along the way, to be sure, Jesus passed “*through towns and villages, teaching,*” but His was not a meandering, purposeless trek to Jerusalem. Jesus was going there to be “*taken up*” (Luke 9:51) unto cross and death. Jesus was going to Jerusalem to accomplish the salvation of the world (Luke 9:31), to sprinkle the “*blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*” For “*In [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight*” (Eph. 1:7-8).

Was this salvation the content of Jesus’ preaching as He moved from town to town on His way? Well, we’ve heard some of that in the last several weeks, as He talked about the heavenly inheritance and being rich toward God (Luke 12:13-21), about seeking the kingdom of God and a treasure in the heavens (Luke 12:29-34), and about, not an earthly peace, but a heavenly one that would come through His fiery baptism (Luke 12:49-51). It seems so.

Thus, it’s not too surprising that a certain man came up to Jesus in one of those villages and asked Him about this salvation that He was preaching. But the exact question was somewhat surprising and perhaps a bit puzzling: “*Lord, will those who are saved be few?*”

Now, the person is not identified, and apart from the fact that Jesus’ “*exodus*” (Luke 9:31) was on His mind and so He preached it, we don’t know why this person asked this question—certainly not in the way that he asked it: “*Lord, will those who are saved BE FEW?*”

If I may be permitted to engage in a bit of speculation here, my thought is that this person was pious and sought to live a godly life. He could have been a Pharisee, we don’t know, but as the label “Pharisee” often carried a negative connotation, Luke didn’t say here. I think it’s likely that he was a keen observer of those around him, and —this is pure speculation —saw mostly unrighteous behavior. God’s word of law was being ignored or flouted.

We might say, “Much like today.” Indeed, if Jesus were to hold a “town hall” meeting with us today, I could imagine such a question being posed to Him: “*Lord, will those who are saved be few?*”

Now in every generation, I submit, almost everyone wants to be saved. If I asked for a show of hands today, “How many of you want to be saved?”, I suggest that everyone’s hands would go up (except the little ones who don’t understand the

question, and probably would wonder, “what is going on here?”). At the very least, no one wants an eternity of “*weeping and gnashing of the teeth.*”

I should add here that God most assuredly wants you to be saved. St. Paul says it explicitly: God “*desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*” (1 Tim. 2:4). This is not a salvation that comes from questioning whether there is a hell or not. If what Jesus describes as that place without His presence, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, is not hell, I know that I don't want to go there either.

But no, this salvation, Paul says, comes from knowing the Truth, that is, Him who is the Truth. And you know that's Jesus, who called Himself “*the way and the truth and the life*” (John 14:6), who also said, “*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free*” (John 8:31-32). Indeed, a bit later in that chapter of John, Jesus identifies Himself as that truth, saying “*if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed*” (John 8:36).

Jesus is God's evidence in the flesh, that God wants all people to be saved, “*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him,*” (John 3:17), through His being lifted up on a pole, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. For as the Israelites of old looked on the serpent, they were saved; so as we look to Him who was lifted up unto death, we are saved; that is, as we believe in Jesus, we have eternal life.

Now Jesus' answer to the person in our Gospel is a bit cryptic: “*Many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.*” Therefore, many will not be saved; but what about those who will be saved? Gladly, you and I know that it will not be few who are saved, for we know that heaven will be filled with “*a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages*” (Rev. 7:9). And these are the ones who confessed and who cry out still in heaven, “*with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'*” (Rev. 7:10).

Salvation belongs to God It is not our doing. You know the passage: “*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works ...*” (Eph. 2:8-9).

Then why does Jesus answer this person, “*Strive to enter through the narrow door*”? Because He is not talking here about a salvation accomplished by your striving to keep the moral law. He is not talking about you achieving something by your own human effort. Rather, Jesus is talking about fighting “*the good fight,*” keeping “*the faith*” (2 Tim. 4:7).

Ἀγωνίζεσθε, Jesus says, from which we get our English word “agonize.” It’s the same word used by Paul in the reference I just mentioned from 2nd Timothy, and again in 1st Timothy: “*Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses*” (1 Tim. 6:12).

This striving is the internal struggle that is produced in sinners confronted with their sinful state, who are being called to repentance, though their flesh resists even knowing that apart from this repentance, they will likewise perish (Luke 13:3, 5).

It’s the internal struggle of Christians who forget that the Lord’s discipline is an expression of the Lord’s love for them: that the Lord disciplines those whom He loves, that the Lord is treating you like sons.

It’s the internal struggle in Christians, made new by Holy Baptism, who know the right and want to do right, and yet, too often in weakness succumb to the wrong, who fall prey to temptations and snares and “*many senseless and harmful desires that plunge [us] into ruin and destruction*” (1 Tim. 6:9).

Yet, it’s a struggle that drives the Baptized Christian back to Christ with St. Paul, saying “*Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*” (Rom. 7:24-25), and then back to their baptism, drowning “the Old Adam in us ... by daily contrition and repentance ... [putting him to death along] with all sins and evil desires,” “that a new man [might] daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever” (Luther, Small Catechism, “What does such baptizing with water indicate?”).

It’s the Christians daily struggle to “*deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow [Jesus]*” (Luke 9:23). For following Jesus is not a one-time event, like “choosing to follow Jesus.” To be sure, there are one-time events in the lives of Christians — baptism, confirmation, etc., — but these events have ongoing consequences and expectations. Paul says to the Christian, “*Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness*” (1 Tim. 6:11). And then, failing that, returning to the Lord’s house and to His altar to receive your dose of the medicine that heals the sin-sick soul.

The Lord began a good work in you, but from that point on, there is a lifetime of engaging with His word, serving your neighbor, repenting of sins, being forgiven, eating Christ’s body and drinking His blood, that your faith may be strengthened, that He might bring to completion what He began (Phil. 1:6), that you may be found to be faithful to Christ unto death (Rev. 2:10), that, passing through that narrow door, you may receive the crown of everlasting life. For the door will one day be shut. And after that, there is no entry. After that, there is

condemnation: *“I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!”*

This person in our Gospel asked Jesus, *“Lord, will those who are saved be few?”*, thinking probably that he was one of the few as he looked around him and saw manifold unrighteousness. Jesus answered him, *“To be sure, many won't enter my salvation, but not because of the way you're thinking. You must look to me and believe in me. 'Strive to enter through the narrow door' — by repentance and faith. 'I am the door' (John 10:9).”* *“There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved”* (Acts 4:12). *“If anyone enters by me,”* Jesus said, *“he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture”* (John 10:9). God grant us this faith unto the end.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.