March 21, 2023
Sermon for Feast of St. Joseph, Observed
by Rev. Michael Mohr, Central Illinois District President
Delivered at Trinity Lutheran Church - Springfield

In the Name ☩ of Jesus. Amen.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself. These are the greatest of God's commands – commands we cannot fulfill by our own reason or strength… commands we fail to obey in thought, word, and deed… and in that failure, our need for a Savior becomes all the more evident.

And that is what this text is about, first and foremost – the coming of our Savior, preserved from a premature death at an inopportune time. Our Lord came to die that cursed death hanging upon a tree in order to bear the full curse of our transgressions in our stead, yet throughout His life, Satan tried to bring our Lord to an untimely death by alternate means. To be stoned to death at the hands of Jews gathered for the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem, "but He escaped from their hands," John tells us. (John 10:39) To be thrown from a cliff at the hands of his former friends and neighbors at Nazareth, but Luke tells us He passed through their midst. (Luke 4:30) Satan himself brings Christ to the precipice of the Temple, speaking Scripture to Him to tempt Him to throw Himself down, only to be rebuked by the Word made flesh – "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." (Luke 4:12) But here, in these first passages of Matthew's Gospel, we see the Father of Lies in his first attempt to devour the Only-Begotten, and to do so by twisting God's Fourth Commandment servant – the state – to dispatch the child with all due haste and efficiency.

God the Father, the Eternal Begetter of the Eternally Begotten, thwarts this plan of Satan – not in the unleashing of legions of warriors doing cosmic battle in the spiritual realm, but by breathing forth His ever-strengthening Word. Where Satan would hiss out his lies to twist and distort God's Fourth Commandment – the authority of the civil government – into a self-inverted will to power, God breathes out His Spirit into this cloven world to restore the broken – to affirm the Fourth Commandment vocation of guardianship – love your neighbor as yourself.

Here, in the work of Joseph – not the guardian of Jesus by will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:13) – here, in the work of Joseph we have held before our eyes what it is to be neighbor to the child and His mother.

The child and His mother – four times in our text we see the object of Joseph's work. The child and His mother – the child and His mother – the child and His mother – never just the child alone. Yes, this child is the most important – this child is the Savior of us all, but this child – God in the flesh – in drawing us to Himself draws us to our dearest neighbors, our neighbors in need, our neighbors who share that same flesh and blood and for whom He also has died. He places into our care both as neighbor and as citizen the child and her mother, including and especially those experiencing a surprise pregnancy – those who have been stripped of their other neighbors: their families, their friends – whether by shame of the circumstance by which the child was conceived, or anger at not being able to overpower and control the divine and cosmic working of procreation.

Protect the child and His mother – this is the task set before Joseph as guardian in our text this day. Protect the child and her mother – this is the task set before us as neighbor and citizen in God's Holy Word for us this and every day.

The task set before us.

Sooooo…

how do we accomplish this task? Again, our Lord provides example for us in the lives of the saints who walked before us. Saint Joseph, Guardian of our Lord, shown to be example of guardianship and protection for our Lord and the Blessed Virgin Mother. Saint Joseph, example to us in how we fulfill that guardian task of defending our neighbor – mother and child – from the deadly hand of Herod – or Cæsar. Saint Joseph, the strong and silent one, without a single word of his recorded in Holy Scripture, because that is what it is to follow the example our Lord gives in him. The work at hand is the Lord's – the Father of all Creation – to preserve and provide. God breathes forth His Word, and faithful hearts receive it, faithful hearts believe it, and faithful hearts are compelled by it to action. He the vine, we the branches who cannot do otherwise than bear the fruit the vine brings forth. Bear the fruit - perhaps of providing Egyptian evacuation: a caring ear to hear the laments and anxieties, a safe place to acknowledge the life now growing in the womb and to come to grips with the responsibilities this now entails. Bear the fruit – perhaps of providing Nazarene refuge:

the diapers, and the prenatal care,

the diapers, and the baby formula,

the diapers, and the parenting classes and support,

and oh, did I mention, the diapers?

Bear the fruit of appealing to God's servant – the king, the Cæsar, or (in the case of our democratic-republic) the governor and legislators – appealing to God's servant to act according to his vocation in the kingdom of the left to act for the good of the neighbor, of every neighbor… to protect the child and her mother.

This is the fruit our Lord brings forth through us, the tasks He accomplishes in us – He who labored all labor to be done

even as that tiny Bethlehem-born, Nazareth-raised child,

growing in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man,

sacrificing Himself upon the cross to accomplish all things and fulfill all of God's Law in heaven and on earth. To Him be all glory and praise, now and forever. Amen.

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Almighty God, from the house of Your servant David You raised up Joseph to be the guardian of Your incarnate Son and the husband of His mother, Mary. Grant us grace to follow the example of this faithful workman in heeding Your counsel and obeying Your commands; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.