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Lent 2

March 16, 2014

The Scepter of the Cross Rises like the Dawn

Psalm 110:2, 3

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen. The word of God through which the Holy Spirit testifies about Jesus is Psalm 110.

The LORD will extend your mighty scepter from Zion, saying, "Rule in the midst of your enemies!"

Your troops will be willing on your day of battle. Arrayed in holy splendor, your young men will come to you like dew from the morning's womb. (Psalm 110:2, 3 NIV11).

This is the word of our Lord.

Dear friends in Christ, fellow saints washed clean in the blood of our risen Savior:

At a glance, a scepter and a cross are opposites. Although our decorative crosses are smooth, strait-edged, and at times ornately embellished, you well know that the cross Jesus hung on was not. It was more like a rough-hewn tree trunk with the branches lopped off, not even fit to be a beam for a house. A scepter, though, was finished smooth and ornately decorated with jewels and precious metals. A cross brought suffering and shame; a scepter symbolized power and prestige. A cross was for criminals; a scepter was for kings.

But the cross is our King's scepter. It's the symbol of his saving power. Its message carries greater authority than any royal decree. And what a different kind of message it is! For the message of the cross does not demand, threaten, or condemn, as law does. Just the opposite! Rather than demanding perfect obedience from us, the cross declares that Christ has perfectly obeyed the Father's will in our place, freely crediting his righteous record to us. Rather than threatening us with God's anger over our many sins, the cross freely promises full forgiveness because God's love sacrificed his Son for us. Rather than condemning us as the sinners we are, the cross graciously gives us new life to live before God in righteousness and holiness now and forever. So rather than the suspicion, selfishness, and terror that come from the law's demands, threats, and condemnation, the good news of the cross creates in us faith, love, and hope. For the good news of the cross is backed by the full authority of our King, the Lord Jesus Christ. We have no excuse to doubt it. For though the world rejects it, the cross is our Savior's scepter. It carries his power to save, bringing us into the new day. For like the dawn the scepter of the cross rises, spreading around the world and enlightening dark hearts.

A. Spreading around the world

Where was the cross? On Calvary, also called Golgotha. Where was this hill? Outside Jerusalem, the city of David, also called Zion. That's where it started. But it did not stay there, just as the purple dawn starts in the east but does not stay there. Listen

to what the Psalm says to the Messiah, “The LORD will extend your mighty scepter from Zion, saying, ‘Rule in the midst of your enemies!’” (Psalm 110:2 NIV11). The message of the cross has spread from Jerusalem around the world into the very midst of our Savior’s enemies.

Recall how on the fiftieth day after Jesus rose, during the festival of Pentecost, the apostles began preaching in Jerusalem the Good News of Jesus. After quoting verse one from this Psalm about Jesus seated at God’s right hand, Peter declared, “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ ... Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:36, 38, 39 NIV84). Three thousand were baptized that day.

You see, dear friends, that’s how the scepter of the cross rises like the dawn: through the preaching of the Gospel and through baptism in Jesus’ name. In fact, you could say that God’s Word and Sacraments are the scepter of the cross. For they proclaim the powerful message of the cross with the full approval and authority of our King, the message of forgiveness and eternal life in Christ. Through the Gospel in Word and Sacraments Christ reigns as King giving his people faith, love, and hope.

That all started there in Jerusalem, the city of Zion. But it did not stay there. Pentecost was the first glimmer of the reddening dawn as the scepter of the cross began to rise. The Book of Acts tells us how the Gospel of Jesus spread to Judea and Samaria and then to Antioch in Syria where the Good News was shared with non-Jews as well. The church in Antioch sent out the Apostle Paul to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentile world. The scepter of the cross continued to rise.

As the Roman Empire collapsed in the following centuries, Christians shared the Gospel to the invading Germanic tribes. The message of the cross continued to spread. Some of their descendants came over to America founding churches so that the Gospel still shines out among us today. Look at a globe and see that the Gospel has spread from Zion to Germany, to America and Australia, to Russia and China, to Argentina and Zambia, and everywhere in between—spreading around the world

And though the world still rages against our King and counts his cross as weakness and foolishness, he reigns in the midst of his enemies. He reigns by the power of his Word, the Gospel of the cross, the Gospel of forgiveness in Christ, the Gospel that alone brings true faith, love, and hope.

As you and I live in the midst of this hostile world, don’t give up on the Gospel. We sin by neglecting God’s Word and sacraments, by treating them only as routine, or by running after others things for spiritual nourishment. We sin by using the Gospel as a club to beat faith into people or by using the cross of forgiveness as a carrot to entice ourselves or others into doing the right thing. We sin by listening to whatever comes out of our own hearts or out of the lips of others rather than listening to the one and only message that came out of Zion, the message of the cross of Christ proclaimed by the Apostle and written down in the Bible alone.

When you and I see the deepest darkness of our own sin against the Gospel, how

brightly the cross shines, more brightly than any dawn! Your King has taken away your sin, nailing it to the cross. You are forgiven. That's his promise, carrying the full weight of his unchanging authority. Believe it. For the scepter of the cross rises like the dawn. It rises in you and me, enlightening our once dark hearts.

B. Enlightening dark hearts

The Psalm says to the Messiah, "Your troops will be willing on your day of battle. Arrayed in holy splendor, your young men will come to you like dew from the morning's womb" (Psalm 110:3 NIV11). How much is in that word "willing!" By nature we were not willing. We were born dead in sin, spiritually powerless, spiritually helpless, spiritually unwilling. We weren't neutral. We were hostile against God, at war with him. We were unwilling, obstinate, rebellious creatures. How dark our hearts were!

But the scepter of the cross changed you and me when it rose in our hearts like the dawn. So remarkable was this change that Jesus says we were born anew, born again of water and the Spirit, reborn not of flesh, not of human desire or will, but born of God. We were changed from unwilling rebels into obedient children, willing troops ready to follow our King listening to his word, ready to suffer with him bearing our crosses.

Through faith in Jesus, you, dear Christian, stand ready arrayed in the full-armor of God. For the righteousness of Jesus Christ covers you. What holy splendor the perfect obedience of our Savior is! You, dear Christian are arrayed in that holy splendor of his righteousness, the righteousness that stands before God innocent and guiltless.

How this happens in you or me, I cannot explain. It's like the dew. In the morning it's there. It didn't come down as rain. It didn't bubble up from a spring. It didn't leak out of hose. It just came out of the air. We see the result, but we don't see how it happens. Or think of the wind, we hear its sound but can't see where it comes from or where it goes. So also you and I and all who have been born again of the Spirit.

New life is in you, like dew on the ground. But how the scepter of the cross creates that new life in us and gives us rebirth, I cannot explain. But I know when a baby is baptized, new life springs up. When the word of the Gospel is heard and believed new life is nourished. When Christ's body is eaten and his blood drunk in the Lord's Supper by mouths whose hearts confess it, new life is refreshed. Don't ask me how. It's like the morning dew. I can't explain it. But our Lord promises that it is so.

How wonderfully the scepter of the cross has enlightened your hearts and mine like the morning dawn! And now as willing troops, we get to share that message of faith. We get to show his love in our lives. We get to give the reason for the hope that we have. We get to support the shining of his cross around the world as we work together in our synod to spread the Gospel. How we pray for the scepter of the cross to shine into the dark hearts of other rising like the dawn! Amen.

The peace of God that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.