**Sermon Epiphany 3C**

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**Text:** *“For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law.” (Nehemiah 8:1-10)*

My fellow redeemed in Christ, we acknowledge that the Holy Scriptures are the inspired and inerrant Word of God. They are the unique rule and authority in the life of a Christian; our fellow human beings can and often do err in their advice, rules, and preferences, but God’s Word is incapable of error. That means two things. Firstly, it never leads us astray. In the words of the One Hundred Nineteenth Psalm, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” (Ps 119:105) The Psalms also declare: “the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever, the just decrees of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether.” (Ps 19:9) The Holy Scriptures are just as valid and certain as when, five hundred odd years before the birth of Jesus Christ, Ezra the priest and his cohort of Levites read from the Torah in the newly rebuilt city of Jerusalem. Secondly, though, and more to our purposes today, God’s Word truly delivers on what it promises.

This is both good and awful news (“awful,” both in the classical sense of the word, “awe-filled,” and also its current meaning, dreadful). The Word of God is two things at once. It is, in fact, two words: God’s Word of Law and His Word of Gospel. St. Paul in writing to Timothy describes a faithful “worker” – that is, a pastor, preacher, and teacher. “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” (2 Tim 2:16) St. Paul likely chose that word “dividing” as a throwback to our Old Testament lesson. We are told that the Levites “read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.” (Ezr 8:8) In the Hebrew language, that is, literally, “and they divided, so that the people understood”. This is not splitting hairs. As important as a careful pharmacist organizing pills and setting them in proper doses, or a butcher separating good meat from the scraps, our text indicates separating the words that kill from the words that give life.

The Law tells what to do and what not to do. It holds out rewards and punishments. The Small Catechism quotes this appendage to the First Commandment at the close of all ten: “I, the Lord your God, and a jealous God, punishing the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me, and showing love to a thousand generations of those who love Me and keep My commandments.” The Catechisms apply this passage in terms of earthly rewards and punishments. Obey the Law – both the moral law and civil laws that are just (or, at the very least, conscionable), then things will generally speaking go well with you and those around you. Touching our relation to God, however, none of us can keep the Law satisfactorily.

The Law always accuses. There is a reason why, when the assembly heard the scroll of the Torah read to them, all of them “wept when they heard the words of the Law.” (8:9) Paul called out the Galatian heretics: “You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.” (Gal 5:4) Harsher words can hardly be imagined. A good majority of people refuse to take this medicine. They feel robbed of something. From the time of St. Paul, St. Augustine, Valla and Luther, down to our own day with teachers such as Stephen Paulson and his *Outlaw God* series, teachers have railed and slandered those who remind them that there is no everlasting reward that comes through the Law. God did not speak His Word of Law as the way to save ourselves. He gave it to show how insurmountable the distance is between us and Him.

The ancient Israelites discovered this truth when they had been sent into captivity in Babylon. But deeper still than that national trauma, in our Old Testament text, the people are as it were “cut to the heart” when they hear God’s holy and perfect Law. The people said “Amen, Amen” when Ezra glorified the Lord (Ezr 8:6). They recognized that neither they nor their Judean ancestors kept the six hundred and thirteen laws, commands, and ordinances prescribed in the first five books of the Old Testament. Under penalty of death they all demanded to be followed to a T – and they never were. Not, that is, until the coming of the promised Messiah some five hundred years after the event. Christ fulfilled the Law with all its ordinances and sacrifices. “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets,” said our Lord in Matthew chapter five: “I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.” (Matt 5:17-18)

And indeed, all was accomplished when our Lord said at the end of all his suffering on Mt. Calvary: “It is finished.” (John 19:30) These words are recorded by St. John, but St. Matthew records the event where the sky darkened and the earth split open (Matt 27:45, 51-54). These historic events may represent heaven and earth passing away – and, if we take this to be the meaning of Jesus’ words, the Law itself did pass away with His own passing. The Law with its ugly accusation gives way to the Gospel. But what about those of us who weren’t there when they crucified my Lord? The benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection were themselves anticipated in the Old Testament era. Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Levites took care to assure the people after mindful self-examination of their sins that the death and destruction which they had witnessed was not the final word. They are told not to weep, for “This day is holy to the Lord your God.” He also calls a feast, and tells them again not to be weighed down with grief, for “the joy of the Lord is your strength.” (Ezr 8:9, 10) And today, we have the Supper of our Lord which gives us pardon and peace. As the Church sings, “This is the feast of victory for our God. Alleluia.”

The Word of God is both awful news and good news. Do not mistake the two; they both deliver what they promise. He wounds in order to heal; He gives Law in order to give the Gospel. “The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.” (1 Sam 2:6) And in the hour of our death, no special prayers, no works or worthiness of ours, but only the Gospel will serve as a steady ferry to the other side. St. John, when he beheld the Revelation, began to weep loudly “because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it.” (Rev 5:4) As both he and we now know, there is one in heaven and on earth who is worthy: Christ, the Lamb who was slain, whose blood set us free to be people of God. It is the same Christ who promised, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Matt 5:4) – that is, those who take no pride or pleasure in their own works, but rather find joy and comfort in Christ alone, and through faith in Him be saved. Amen.