

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The king had just died, so a man goes to the temple to burn some incense before the LORD to commemorate the king. He knew what to do, he had seen it done many times before. This time, however, something was different. He was sure that the bit of robe that he saw out of the corner of his eye wasn't there when he first got to the temple. As he looks around, he notices that the surroundings are just a bit different, too.

So, he follows the train that he saw out of the corner of his eye; it keeps going and going and going, filling the temple. It comes to a throne, and seated on the throne was none other than the Lord. In awe, and not quite aware of what's going on, he looks around and sees six-winged seraphs flying around; with a pair of wings they covered themselves out of modesty—they are in the presence of the Almighty with a man among them—with a pair they covered their faces as was reverent. Flying around, they cried out to each other in one voice, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!" The whole place shook at their cry, and smoke of incense filled it.

Incense...that's when the man realizes what's going on; that's when he comes to his senses. He's standing in the heavenly temple in the presence of the only, true God, Creator of the universe. The man falls down on the ground, prostrate, face-down. "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts." (cf. Isaiah 6:1-5)

Dear hearers, this confession did not come to him from himself. He received it by faith as it was given to him by the Father in whose presence he found himself.

The men had been out on the water all night. They had not caught a thing. Maybe their nets are getting old. Maybe they didn't clean and mend them as well as they thought or ought the morning before. Dejected, they head back to shore. It's a catch-22, you could say. They probably need new nets, but without catching anything, they haven't the income to get new nets. The best they can do is get back to shore, clean them again, and carefully mend them for one, two, maybe three more nights of fishing.

A Man happens by the docks. The fishermen see Him approaching their boats off in the distance, but act oblivious as they tend to their nets. Without warning, the Man steps into one of their boats. Curious, but irritated at what's going on, the man whose boat He stepped into walks over to investigate. The Man urges the fisherman to push out a little from shore. "Hey, beats mending lousy nets," the fisherman thinks. The Man is a rabbi, and He's going to teach the people from just off shore. It's a great chance for the fisherman to get a little shuteye before heading out again to fish with lousy nets that night. So, he takes his net, gets in the boat with the Man, and shoves off.

The fisherman couldn't help but listen to the Man. He had a grasp on things unlike any rabbi he had ever heard before. There's something different about this Man, but the fisherman just can't quite put his finger on it. Then, the unthinkable happens. The Rabbi turns to the fisherman and tells him to put out toward the deep water and let down his nets. "The fish are too deep to catch," the fisherman thinks, "but, I'm out here already anyway; no time lost in doing it." "Master," he says, "we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net."

He hauls in a record catch, so great it is breaking his net. His boat is starting to sink for the load, but his partners are coming out to him to help, and their boats begin to sink for the load, too. They get to shore and see their massive haul. That's when it dawns on the fisherman; that's when he comes to his senses. He knows who this Man—this Master Rabbi—is. This is none other than the

Messiah, Emmanuel—God-with-us. The fisherman falls before the Rabbi and cries out, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!”

Dear hearers, this confession did not come to him from himself. He received it by faith as it was given to him by the Son in whose presence he found himself.

It’s been a long week for you. You’ve had your good days and bad days, bearable moments and moments you wish you could do over. The alarm went off this morning, and you rolled out of bed, ate a little breakfast, took a quick shower, put on some clothes, and before you knew it, you had made your way through those double red doors. You took a bulletin and made your way to a seat, maybe even talked a little with a friend you haven’t seen since this time last week.

Then, however, the music starts. You sang the words, “Increase my feeble faith, Which Thou Thyself hast wrought,” and you began to think about what’s going on. Perhaps it was other words from the hymn. Maybe you came to your senses when the pastor chanted the invocation and you responded, “Amen.” Then, it really came to the front: “Our help is in the name of the LORD, Who made heaven and earth.” (Psalm 124:8) “I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin.” (Psalm 32:5b) There’s something different here than the world out there. In fact, you are in the presence of the Almighty where He said He is for you. Here, around Word and Sacrament, is the specificity of the locatedness of your God for you!

If you had the room to fall to your knees, you just might have done so, but that’s when you called out to your God:

O almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto Thee all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended Thee and justly deserved Thy temporal and eternal punishment. But I am heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them, and I pray Thee of Thy boundless mercy and for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of Thy beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to be gracious and merciful to me, a poor, sinful being.

Dear hearers, this confession did not come to you from yourself. It was given to you by CPH. But, you received it by faith as it was given to you by the Holy Spirit in whose presence you now find yourself, for He has gathered you here around the Word and Sacraments so that you would receive Jesus and the forgiveness of sins which He won for you on the cross.

The prophet Isaiah confessed his sins (perhaps not as heartily and sincerely as you have). Then, one of the seraphs took the tongs from the incense altar, plucked a burning coal from the fire, and touched it to the prophet’s lips. “Behold, this has touched your lips; Your iniquity is taken away, And your sin purged.” Isaiah literally got a taste of the mercy of God. Where he should have died, instead he is purged by fire and the Word of God. Then, the voice of God rumbles over all that is going on, “Whom shall I send, And who will go for Us?” “Who will speak the Word of Law and Gospel to this people?” Emboldened by the mercy he has been shown, Isaiah says, “Here am I, send me!” What a joy it must have been to relate to the people the mercy of God that he himself received, even as he entered the oft-despised office of prophet. (cf. Isaiah 6:6-8)

The fisherman Peter is at the feet of Jesus. He’s cowering for fear of his life because who Jesus is. He confessed his sins (though not as poorly and miserable as you may have been). Jesus reaches down with a graceful hand, touches Peter and tells him, “Do not be afraid.” With a word, Jesus has forgiven Peter for His sins. More than that, Jesus tells Peter, “From now on you will catch men.” The fisherman is going to cast the net of God’s Word over people, proclaiming to them the Law and the Gospel. Many will be caught in that net, some will be missed, some will get through, and some will swim or jump out. To Peter was given the task to preach in the name of Jesus repentance and forgiveness of sins, beginning in Jerusalem. (cf. Luke 24:47) It is a privilege for Peter to carry from the lake

shore the mercy and grace that he had received from the mouth of Jesus and speak of it to all who would hear, a new and also oft-despised office into which he would be placed.

And you, dear hearers, having been brought here by the work of the Holy Spirit, hear the wonderful words of Holy Absolution from the mouth of your pastor as if from the mouth of your God, Jesus, Himself: "I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." To you, grace and mercy have been shown, even if perhaps you weren't moved in awe as described earlier. To you was given the confession of your sins. To you was declared the remission of your sins for the sake of the bitter sufferings and death of Jesus the Christ, the Son of the living God, sealed for you in the resurrection of the Lord, and sealed to you in your baptism into His death and resurrection.

Now, are you tasked with spreading the Word of God? Yes! It may not be your vocation—that is to say, to you it is not given to forgive sins in God's stead and by His command and to administer the sacraments—but God does place you in your various vocations in which you are set free by Him to tell of grace and mercy to you. God, in Jesus Christ, has called you out of darkness and placed you into His marvelous light, even as you still live among a people of unclean lips. Tell them; speak of the mercy that God has shown you, as you fill the oft-despised office of Christian.

It's not easy, and you will fail miserably. Many will reject you and hate, if not for the mercy and grace you speak of, then certainly for the mere fact that you are called by His name. The world hated Him, it will hate you too because of Him. But do not lose heart, which is so easy to do!

Peter three times denied that He even knew Jesus and often spoke before thinking, putting his anti-theological foot in his mouth. Isaiah struggled with his own doubts and weaknesses, to be sure. You will be tempted to turn from Him who called you His own, just as these two men did, and many times you will succumb to those temptations. You will have good days and bad, bearable moments and moments you will wish you could do over.

The world will forsake you, and you will, time and time again, forsake your God, but your Father in heaven never forsakes you. "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matthew 5:11-12)

It is your Father who spoke to you at your baptism, as he did as Jesus', "This is my son whom I love." (cf. Matthew 3:17) He gives you all that you need out of His bountiful goodness, including but not limited to the confession you make as you come into His presence, just as He did for Isaiah and Peter. Because, most especially, He gives you the merit of Jesus' death on the cross—you are blessed, even in derision and persecution—you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.