

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father, from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and from the Holy Spirit.

I know you were listening to the Old Testament reading from Zechariah this morning. The first two words in the reading, chapter 9, verse 9, are "Rejoice Greatly!" Rejoice greatly.

Time spent listening to news reports these days might make it difficult to get into that "rejoice greatly" message. It could be a challenge to feel excited. But God's message is exactly that. The text this morning is the reading we heard from Zechariah 9, vv 9-12.

You may know that I'm from Minnesota, grew up there and lived there as an adult for a few years. If you have done some tourism in Minnesota - maybe during the two weeks in the July when there's no snow - you may have been to Itasca State Park. Itasca State Park is beautiful.

Lake Itasca, there in the park, is a sight to see ... and it has the significance of being the beginning source of the Mississippi River. There you are, at the beginning of the Mississippi River ... and you can wade across in knee deep water. It's only about 15 yards wide. 2500 miles later, going south finally through Louisiana, the Mississippi varies between half a mile wide and a mile and a half wide. At some points it has a depth of 200 feet.

It's hard to imagine, hard to visualize that huge river, winding through 23 states on the way to the gulf when you see it as a little brook flowing out of Lake Itasca. The mighty Mississippi demands some pretty big thinking. It's difficult to envision how truly large it is.

This morning we have a text that demands some pretty big thinking too. It was written about five hundred years before the birth of Christ. Zechariah's ministry was to a rag tag band of exiles that had recently returned from the land of Babylon after nearly seventy years of captivity.

Zechariah described the blessing God had in store for them. A great king would come. This King would bring a peaceful rule that will extend "from sea to sea, and even the ends of the earth", Zechariah prophesied. This King will drive away the "war horse and break the shield and sword" used in battle.

Those ancient people must have wondered who this King would be. At that point in history Israel was very small. Some of the commentaries describe it as being about 30 miles north to south and 30 miles east to west. It may have had a population of about 50,000. At that time a fella named Zerubbabel was the "king", but he had been appointed by the emperor of Persia. He didn't have any real authority. The capital - Jerusalem - and the temple were in ruins. It was very, very difficult to imagine something - someone - in the way God described for them through Zechariah.

There the ancient Israelites were, standing knee-deep water at the beginning of the spiritual Mississippi to which Zechariah drew their attention. Human eyes, human imagination, could not see or anticipate that spiritual river any more than you or I could envision the Mississippi as it flows into the Gulf of Mexico while we stand where it begins in Itasca State Park.

In fact - let's take a step further. Knowledge cannot inform you fully about the Mississippi .. or about many things.

Ask just about anyone the name of the Jewish baby who's birth we celebrate on December 25th every year. Most folks have the knowledge ... the information ... that gives them the answer - Jesus. But knowledge doesn't really cover it.

It took 500 years for the prophecy Zechariah announced to be fulfilled when Jesus was born. You and I receive the truth and the power of that fulfillment because of FAITH. Faith is the reason we can know and see His Kingdom stretching from sea to sea ... to the ends of the earth. We see that and know that through the eyes of faith even when a faithless world cannot see.

King Jesus has followers in almost every nation on the face of the globe. Indeed His Kingdom does stretch "from sea to sea and to the ends of the earth". His Throne is established by faith in the hearts of each of us who have been gathered by the Holy Spirit.

And who knows how God will add to this mighty kingdom? Even now we hear of millions of millions of Christians in China, just waiting to be more open about their faith. Some say the geographic center of Christianity may in coming years switch from Europe to Africa. Who knows how many people will be blessed by the gentle rule of King Jesus 2000 years from now if the Lord tarries.

The Mississippi meanders east and west north and then south, but always knows where it is going. And no one, no one can impede its flow.

So also is it with God's kingdom in Jesus Christ. Many rulers both ancient and modern have tried to erase all memory of Jesus and his followers from history. But one after another, they have failed. We remember names like Herod, Nero, Stalin, Hitler, and Chairman Mow. They had their moments of glory, but as with all tyrants, how quickly they fade, never to rise again.

Jesus continues and triumphs over and over again, despite all obstacles. He rises in the hearts of his people, in our hearts. We have the honor, the privilege of serving Him in the midst of every one of life's moments, in any circumstance of life.

The obvious question becomes "what is our job"?

In his small catechism, Luther reminds us that God's kingdom "comes on its own". It is not the result of the will or effort of human beings. When we pray "thy kingdom come" what we are really praying for is our inclusion in that kingdom. Our prayer is to be part of the Kingdom - to be a participant.

Back in the day Zechariah and his people rebuilt Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple. That was not accomplished because they did it on their own. Zechariah's words and the words of the prophets before him have been kept for us along with the pages which fill the rest of Scripture. People didn't achieve this by their own effort. Their efforts could not have had success in and of themselves.

We are all of one accord in the Faith .. in the rock-solid faith that "salvation is a gift from God ... and not of works." Even so, you and I also hear Paul's words in this morning's lesson from Romans. We join in Paul's confession - I know what I'm supposed to do - the good things - and I know the wrong I should not do ... but I keep doing the wrong. Painfully true, isn't it.

God does not let us hang there in that pain. The message continues: "Wretched man that I am, Who will deliver me from this body of death? --- Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Listen ... do not ... do not enter the struggle you and I face with the misunderstanding that our Salvation in Jesus - our gift of Salvation because of Faith - applies only at that moment when we step from time into eternity. It applies now .. it applies here, today ... and tomorrow and the next. Our Heavenly

Father does not step away. He does not say "You're set .. see you when it's time to come home." He has blessed us beyond the eternity of salvation. He has blessed us to be part of the timeless, innumerable throng that is the Body of Christ ... which points to Him and which witnesses to Him in word - and in deed. Do not struggle with that challenge as if success depends on you. Do not fret over situations that seem insurmountable or beyond understanding.

In all circumstances, God stands with us. In every victory we are blessed to give Him thanks. In any difficulty we are blessed to turn in prayer for guidance and for strength. God is continuing in His Kingdom and He has chosen you to participate. Our Heavenly Father takes the little drops of water that are you and me ... and He builds us into a mighty river - a flowing voice for Salvation in Jesus Christ.

May we "jump into" that ever flowing kingdom! May we worship our King of peace, whose gentle rule, continues to flow out to the nations. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for making us part of the river.

May the joy we have in Jesus ... may the peace we have been given with Faith ... may the love we have from our God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit ... be the very breath we take in each moment. In our Savior's Name. Amen.