

Today, we confirm three young men in the Christian faith. We thank God that he has kept them in their baptismal faith and brought them to Lord's Supper. We welcome them into our congregation as adult, communicant members, with all the rights and responsibilities thereof. And to their parents, to the Board of Elders, to all the members of this congregation, I say... I did my best.

Christian education isn't always easy. In fact, I don't know that it's ever "easy." There are times when it is more difficult and less difficult, but it's never easy. That's because when you teach God's Word to a young person, you aren't just fighting against normal things like boredom and distraction. You're actually fighting against their old Adam.

There is a part of them that is actively resisting the things that you are saying. That hears God's Word of Law and Gospel and says, "No! I don't like that. I don't want to follow the rules. I don't want to ask for forgiveness. I want to be in charge." They may want to be obedient, but there's a part of every person that is in rebellion to the Word of God. Christian education is hard.

And so it is often abandoned. It's replaced with things like colorful cartoons that teach very little of substance. It's substituted with games and snacks and prizes and things that have nothing to do with God's Word. It's transformed from education into entertainment. Because education is hard, but entertainment is easy.

But this isn't a recent struggle. It's been a problem for most of the history of Christianity. Christians have always struggled to catechize their children. And have often thrown in the towel when it got too difficult.

Martin Luther actually wrote about this phenomenon once. He says, "We do not see this pitiful evil, how today the young people of Christendom languish and perish miserably in our midst for want of the Gospel, which we ought to be giving them constant instruction and training." He gives us a hard truth: Children need constant instruction and training or their faith will wither and die.

But do you know where Luther wrote these words about Christian education? He wrote them in his commentary on the book of Lamentations. A portion of which we have as our Old Testament lesson today.

Lamentations is an interesting book of the Bible. One that people generally don't enjoy reading. But that's exactly why it is so important to read. Because Lamentations is a book of confession and repentance.

According to ancient tradition, Lamentations was written by the prophet Jeremiah, and since it reads very much like the book of Jeremiah, there's no reason to doubt that. Based on its content, Lamentations was written shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C., and was most likely a message from Jeremiah to the exiles now living in Babylon.

And in this series of five poems, Jeremiah recounts the horror of seeing Jerusalem burned to the ground. Of seeing the Temple torn brick from brick. Of seeing the suffering of Jerusalem's residents after Nebuchadnezzar besieged the city. The starvation that they endured. The abuse they suffered as Babylonian soldiers took them into captivity.

Jeremiah laments all these tragedies and then he calls on the people to repent. Because this wasn't any ordinary case of one king overpowering another king. One army defeating another army. Judah was defeated because God withdrew his hand of protection. Judah was defeated because God made sure that the Babylonians were victorious. This was a divine punishment, pure and simple.

And when God punishes you, it means you've done something wrong. When God punishes you, it means you have sinned. And the correct response is not self-pity or frustration or rejection of God's Law. The correct response is repentance.

And that is exactly what Jeremiah calls the Israelites to do. *"The Lord is in the right, for I have rebelled against his Word."* *"The punishment of your iniquity, O daughter of Zion, is accomplished."* *"Woe to us, for we have sinned!"*

And it's right smack in the very middle of this lament for Jerusalem's destruction and call for contrition and repentance that we get this passage from our Old Testament lesson. A passage that is very, very different from the rest of Lamentations. Because it's actually rather... hopeful. Joyful, even.

*"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord."* This isn't a lament. This is a psalm of joy to the Lord for his goodness and faithfulness. What is going on?

Well, what Jeremiah is doing here is something that he does throughout the book of Jeremiah as well. He looks to Judah's past. At the sins they committed. At the rejection of God's Word. He looks to Judah's present. At the wrath of God poured out. At the punishment humanity has justly deserved for their sin.

And then, like he does here, he looks to Judah's future. At the faithfulness of a God who will not abandon his people. For God's love is indeed steadfast and never ceasing. His mercy towards sinful humanity never comes to an end. And so we can always hope in him, no matter the circumstance. We can always wait for him, for he will always be our salvation.

This was something that the Israelites needed to learn. They needed to learn that even though God had sent them into exile, he had not abandoned them. In fact, his plan of salvation was more firm than ever.

For after that exile, he would not only bring them back to their land and the city of Jerusalem and the Temple within Jerusalem. No, he would do even better. He would stand among them as their savior. He would show his steadfast love by being born in flesh and blood, in their midst. He would preach of God's continual mercy on their hillsides and in their cities. He would bring his salvation by dying on a cross and rising again on Easter morning. *"The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him."* The Lord was good to those who waited for Jesus, their Messiah and Savior.

But then Jeremiah goes on. And he writes this passage that inspired Martin Luther's commentary that I read to you earlier. Because this message of waiting for the Lord, waiting for his salvation, is something that needs to be taught to every generation. Not just to exiles in Babylon, but to you and me too.

And it especially needs to be taught to our youth. *"It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth... For the Lord will not cast off forever, but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love."* Today, unfortunately, we have a lot of youth who are only taught games and snacks and prizes and things that have nothing to do with God's Word. They are only entertained. They are not catechized.

And when life gets hard, when shame for their sin overwhelms them, when the sinful world around them becomes unbearable, they say, "But I was taught that being a Christian is about games and snacks and prizes. I was taught that being a Christian is about having fun."

But being a Christian is not always fun and games. Being a Christian can be very hard. For as Jesus himself demonstrates to us, being a child of God often means giving your cheek to the one who strikes and being filled with insults.

But being a Christian is also about knowing that the Lord will not cast off forever. For as Jesus was not abandoned to the grave, but raised on the third day, so we also will not be abandoned to the grave, but see the day of resurrection, when all will be made new. For the Lord has compassion and an abundance of steadfast love.

Martin Luther was right: it is indeed a pitiful evil when the faith of young people perishes for want of the Gospel. And so I pray that no matter what else our confirmands today may have learned, they at least learned this: *"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is his faithfulness."* Amen.