

Introduction: Good morning, and welcome to Chapel at Wisconsin Lutheran College. My name is Kerry Kuehn; I am a Professor in Department of Physics.

Announcements

Invocation and Singing of Psalm 85

Chapel: Christmas seems so very far off. Here we are, just about in the middle of the forty days of Lent. Yet today in Chapel, we will catch a tiny glimpse of the incarnation of our savior. A distant song. It will feel a bit like when you find yourself walking alone through a church on a weekday evening. Nobody else is around. And then suddenly, far away, you hear, coming from somewhere in the Church basement, the faint sound of a choir practicing for Sunday morning. It reminds you of the sound of the angelic hosts, preparing their glorious songs for the day of the savior's birth.

Today is, after all, the 25th of March. It is precisely 9 months before Christmas. You know what that means: today, in the midst of lent, we celebrate the Annunciation. The Annunciation, you recall, is that unforgettable day on which the angel Gabriel was sent down from heaven to the unsuspecting virgin Mary to announce to her that she would bear a son, Jesus, who would “restore the fortunes of Jacob” and who would be a “light to the gentiles.” This event is vividly recounted in the Gospel according to Matthew.

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God into a city in Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end

Our text for today is -not- this text from the gospel of Matthew. Rather, our text is Psalm 85. But this is a fortuitous coincidence. Psalm 85, after all, is sometimes used as part of the liturgy of the Church during the Christmas season. Why? Because Psalm 85, in a sense, mirrors the text and the events of the Annunciation that we just heard in Matthew's Gospel. Psalm 85 is prophetic and it is messianic. It is prophetic and messianic because it reminds us of God's faithfulness and God's plan of salvation.

It is probably worth noting at this point that Psalm 85 is attributed to the Sons of Korah. Who were the Sons of Korah? If you listened to Mr. Snyder's chapel yesterday, then you perhaps remember. During the time of the Exodus from Egypt, the Sons of Korah—and all of their families—were swallowed up by the Earth. Why? Because they had rebelled against the Priesthood of Aaron, Moses' brother. Some of them, however, were spared this horrible fate. These were probably some of the very young children who had not taken part in their parents' rebellion. In any case, some of the children of Korah were spared from the wrath of God. The prophet Samuel, as it turns out, was a descendant of the sons of Korah. This is recorded in Chronicles. And by the time of King David, the Sons of Korah had their fortunes restored. They had become both respected warriors and leaders of orchestral and choral music.

So now let us turn to the text of Psalm 85. As you listen, try to keep your ears alert for prophetic and messianic language. In particular, try to identify the parts of Psalm 85 that use personification—that speak of God’s righteousness not as an abstract concept, but rather as a person.

Lord, you were favorable to your land;

you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

You forgave the iniquity of your people;

you covered all their sin.

You withdrew all your wrath;

you turned from your hot anger.

Notice, here, God’s mercy: God favors. God restores. God forgives. God covers up sin. He turns from his anger. He withdraws his wrath. The Sons of Korah were intimately acquainted with God’s mercy. While many of their ancestors had perished, they themselves had been spared. They were now living testimony of God’s underserved love.

God’s underserved love, likewise, is the source of our own love, of our own trust, and of our own faith in Him. And faith, as you know, is not something that we generate from within ourselves. It never really is.

Think about it this way: You probably know a person whom you trust. What is the source of this trust? Does this trust come from within yourself? I would suggest that while we can choose how we act toward a person, we cannot choose whether we trust a person, we just sort of recognize that we trust them. It’s a bit like when we care deeply for someone; or when we love someone. It is less that we choose to love them, and more like we simply recognize that we love them.

I think it similar with our faith in God. You and I can decide how we act—whether we go to church, for example—but we cannot decide to have faith in God. It is something that we simply recognize after we already have it. This is because faith is based on who God is, not on who we are. In other words, God is not merely the object of our faith. He is the cause of our faith.

In Psalm 85, we are reminded at the outset who God is: He is faithful. The Psalmist acknowledges this, and then in faith, he lays his requests before God:

*Restore us again, O God of our salvation,
and put away your indignation toward us!*

God has restored his people in the past; and God can restore his people again. Sometimes, however, we must wait. And waiting is hard. So the Psalmist complains to God:

*Will you be angry with us forever?
Will you prolong your anger to all generations?
Will you not revive us again,
that your people may rejoice in you?*

And then he boldly reiterates his request to God:

*Show us your steadfast love, O Lord,
and grant us your salvation.*

You might imagine a long pause at this point in the Psalm. How will God show his steadfast love? How will he grant his salvation? Here it is. It is through his Word:

*Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people, to his saints;
but let them not turn back to folly.*

And now we begin to see in this Psalm an explicit connection to the Annunciation.

*Surely God's salvation is near to those who fear him,
that glory may dwell in our land.*

The Virgin Mary, you might recall, echoes the words of this Psalm in her magnificat when she sings that “God has mercy on those who fear him from every generation.”

And now, in Psalm 85, the salvation of God is a more clearly revealed. Here, we have the righteousness of God, not as an abstract concept, but as a person.

*Steadfast love and faithfulness [they] meet;
righteousness and peace [they] kiss each other.
Faithfulness springs up from the ground,
and righteousness looks down from the sky.*

Yes, righteousness will “look down” from the sky, and righteousness will indeed come down from the sky to the earth in the form of a baby, tucked into the womb of the virgin. The virgin Mary who, like the Psalmist, had been patiently awaiting God’s plan of salvation.

This baby, Jesus, would one day offer himself on the cross as a sacrifice to cover our sins. And then he would lead his people forth in joy with shouts of thanksgiving.

*Yes, the Lord will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.
Righteousness will go before him
and make his footsteps a way.*

This is what the incarnate Christ has done for us. He has made a way for us. Through this season of lent. Through our darkest hours. Even through death itself. **Amen.**

Prayer: Pour Your grace into our hearts, O Lord, that we who have known the incarnation of Your Son Jesus Christ, announced by an angel, may by his cross and passion be brought to the glory of His resurrection; who lives and reigns with You, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Blessing