

BY FAITH, THE CHURCH PERSEVERES

When God brings judgment, the Church is saved -- When God brings judgment, the Church is strengthened.
Hebrews 11:29-31

In Jesus' name, my fellow redeemed:

We say this in the Apostles' Creed: **I believe in the holy Christian Church, the Communion of saints...** We say this in the Nicene Creed: **We believe in the holy Christian and apostolic Church...** What are we saying in these confessional statements?

Roman Catholics are taught that the "apostolic church" is that church which is able to demonstrate a succession of elected bishops, or popes, going back to the original apostles chosen directly by Jesus. Peter is regularly cited as that particular apostle from which is derived this succession of leadership leading up to today's pope.

Scripture speaks of no such thing. What Scripture clearly teaches is that the Church is all who believe in Jesus according to the faith that is revealed in the New Testament writings of the apostles, inspired by the Holy Spirit, as were the writings of the Old Testament prophets. Paul writes, for example: *... you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.* Ep 2 So it is clear that the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints, is visible only to God, for he alone is able to see who his believers are. And a natural result of this saving faith is how the Holy Spirit leads true believers into congregations, or visible churches, through the means or tools God has ordained for this purpose. These means are the Gospel in the preached Word and the Sacraments Christ has instituted.

Only in heaven will anyone be able to actually SEE the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints, those whose faith on earth was founded on the written Word by the ancient apostles. But here on earth, we can only see groups of people being gathered and led by the Gospel that is being proclaimed and the Sacraments that are being administered. St. John's Lutheran is one of those "visible churches" seriously committed to nothing but the preaching and teaching of the Gospel and the administration of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

We have spent most of the summer preaching on Hebrews 11 which focuses on the saving faith in the hearts of Old Testament believers. That same Lord and same faith preserved the Holy Christian Church throughout history, and it is the same today. As a member of the Holy Christian and apostolic Church in today's world, the fact remains: BY FAITH, THE CHURCH PERSEVERES. Even when God brings judgment, the Church is saved; and, when God brings judgment, the Church is strengthened.

This portion of God's Word speaks of these truths: *By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had marched around them for seven days. By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.*

First is mentioned the "visible church," that is the massive group of Israelites trying to escape Egypt.

That there were unbelievers mingled with the believers of that massive group of people whom Moses led to the shores of the Red Sea is evident from the many times God had to deal with those stubborn Israelites who regularly complained against Moses and against God. But at the shores of the Red Sea, God intervened to save them all because he had so promised. The Bible says: *As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD. They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!"* Ex 14 Had these people believed what God had told their ancestor father Abraham 400 years earlier, that after 400 years God would deliver them from their slavery and take them to the Promised Land where someday the Savior would be born, they would have waited for the Lord to act instead of whining and crying in fear. But Moses told them to be quiet: *Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.* Ex 14

Our tiny Lutheran Churches are a pitiful lot in the eyes of the world. We are often the objects of vicious ridicule for standing on what the Bible says. It's disheartening to see many who call themselves "Lutheran" wandering from the faith and joining the world in its gross sinful behaviors. It's tempting to think that if we just compromise this doctrine or that doctrine, just a little, that we might grow in size and be more successful. But the apostle reminds us: *By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.* When God brings judgment, the Church is saved. Stand firm on the Word of God, and you will be among those who will be saved even as the world goes to hell!

Listed among the great men of faith in this chapter is a woman who, before she came to faith, was a prostitute. She was a citizen of the Canaanite city of Jericho, the first city on the list of God's enemies who were going to be defeated and displaced by the Israelites. Her name was Rahab. Rahab was one of God's elect. In fact, little did she know that she

would be the mother of the Savior Jesus! She would marry into the faith and 14 centuries later, a man named Joseph, and a young virgin named Mary, both direct descendants of Rahab, would bring the Savior Jesus into the world.

Where and when did Rahab come to faith? Rahab herself tells us. In Joshua 2 we read: ***I know that the LORD has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, ... When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.*** Here was a citizen of Jericho who heard enough so that the Holy Spirit worked faith in her heart and she confessed her faith in proclaiming the Lord, the God of Israel, to be the only true God.

God knows who are his elect, the ones chosen for his divine purpose. And we ask: Who are God's Elect today? They are members of the Holy Christian and Apostolic Church. That is, they are all who believe and confess that Jesus is the Savior, and who are baptized into his name. They are those who gather together for the comfort of forgiveness while eating and drinking the actual body and blood of the Savior in his Holy Supper, his Holy Communion, that is the Communion of Saints.

When God brings judgments, the true Church is saved. Just as he saved the VISIBLE CHURCH, Israel, from Pharaoh by parting the Red Sea, and saved a member of the Communion of Saints, Rahab, from death when Israel destroyed Jericho, he knows who we are and where we are today so that as we travel through this life his Word and Sacrament continue to strengthen us, the members of the Holy Christian Church.

Rahab lived in Jericho. Our text says: ***By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had marched around them for seven days.*** You must all know well the story of the Fall of Jericho, and how Joshua marched around the city in complete silence, once each day for six days, and then on the 7th day, he marched around it seven times. The Bible says: ***The seventh time around, ... Joshua commanded the people, "Shout! For the LORD has given you the city! The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the LORD. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall be spared..."*** Josh 6 It is a significant revelation of Joshua's faith when he shouts, ***the LORD HAS given you the city...***, past tense. It's already done!

Don't think that this was easy to do! No one has ever disarmed and defeated an enemy by a quiet march and a shout. This was God's plan and it required faith in the Israelite congregation to risk their lives in this very silly military maneuver. No doubt, by the fourth or fifth day, the army of Jericho was mocking, laughing and pouring down insults upon such foolishness.

Even today, the enemies of the Church mock and ridicule us. But as Bible History reminds us, the walls of Jericho did fall as the Lord had said. Rahab was spared as her fellow Church members had promised. And just as the Lord had saved Israel from Egypt by opening up the Red Sea, the power of God's Word was revealed as the source of God's salvation. By faith, the Church perseveres because God strengthens us through adversities.

Therefore, anyone who confesses to believe in Jesus must also believe what Jesus says in His Word. And that's why Christians who gather together in visible congregations must be totally committed to the purity of God's Word among them in how it is preached and taught, and that the Sacraments are administered as Christ himself has instituted them.

We will want pastors and teachers who are faithful to God's Word, give all we can to train them and pray that God send them to us and throughout the world. We will support them with our prayers and resources, and support them by worshipping regularly to hear that precious Word by which God has called, gathered, enlightened and sanctified each and every one of us to be members of the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints.

We will NOT want to compromise for any reason the doctrines of Scripture so that we will always be members of the Apostolic Church that is founded on God's Word. We will lovingly warn others of errors and heresies that Jesus has warned will always creep into the visible congregations of this world until Judgment Day. Watch out for church groups that do not hold firmly to every word that is written. The Apostle Paul clearly warns: In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: ***Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage-with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.*** 2 Ti 4 Those times are now upon us!

God HAS GIVEN us the city! God keep us faithful to his Word! God keep us united to the Holy Christian and Apostolic Church through our unity with those who are also faithful to God's Word! May that denomination always be our Evangelical Lutheran faith -- the Faith by which the Holy Christian Church Perseveres for eternity. Amen.