The Word of the Lord from Psalm 80:3: “Restore us, O God. Let Your face shine, that we may be saved.” This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

“Restore us, O God. Let Your face shine, that we may be saved.” That’s the prayer of the people of God through all time, is it not? I can imagine Adam and Eve, fresh out of Eden and stunned from their fall from holiness, their heads still bowed in shame from the enormity of sin’s curse and the fear of seeing a wrath-filled God. You know as well as I do that some sins are more bitter than others. Sometimes, you can fix up and repair what you’ve done so that life goes back to normal. But sometimes, your sin destroys things, takes things, defiles things that can’t be recovered no matter how much you wish or how hard you work. All that is left, then, is trust in the mercy of God who has promised redemption in the Messiah – who has promised on the Last Day to restore and recreate all that has been lost. That’s the prayer of the antiphon for today: “Restore us, O God. Let Your face shine, that we may be saved.”

It’s the prayer that you’ll find throughout Psalm 80, our introit psalm, repeated three times and building in its plea throughout the repetitions. It’s the prayer of the faithful of Israel as they watch their nation conquered by enemies around them: for while God gave them the Promised Land as surely as He gave Eden to Adam and Eve, the nation has forsaken Him. Now, the enemies chip away and destroy. Now, Israel also knows the bitter shame of losing what God so freely gave; and so the faithful among them pray, “Restore us, O God. Let Your face shine, that we may be saved.”

God will restore, in His time, because He has promised; and that time is at hand in Mark 1, as the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begins. The gospel begins with the Lord keeping His promise, “Behold, I send My messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.’” There’s a bit of a mystery here that Mark throws at us: that last part, about the voice in the wilderness, is the part that’s straight from Isaiah. The first part is not; and so, being sleuths of God’s Word, our question is, “Where is the first part from? Where does God say, ‘Behold, I send My messenger’?”

The answer should get our juices flowing, because God says it twice: once in Exodus, and once in Malachi. In Exodus 23:20, the Lord is speaking to His people in the wilderness when He says, “Behold, I send a messenger before you, to guard you on the way the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.” In Malachi 3:1, the Lord says, “Behold, I send My messenger, and He will prepare the way before Me.” Did you catch that? In the first, the messenger goes before God’s people. In the second, the messenger goes before God Himself.

When Mark quotes this “Behold, I send My messenger” promise, which does he have in mind? Obviously, the messenger is John the Baptist, but is he going before God’s people or is he going before the Lord? Obviously, he’s going before Jesus, so our question is really this: as Jesus goes about His way, does He go as the people of God in the wilderness, making their way to the

* English translations often say “angel,” but it’s the same word as “messenger.”
Promised Land? Or does He go as God Himself? Mark doesn't help us pick one or the other: his version is sort of a mash-up of both Old Testament prophecies.

So ... why not both?

This is Jesus Christ, the Son of God: Mark has already spilled those beans in the first verse. He's conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary; and Mark is busy proclaiming the truth that Jesus is both God and man. Jesus wears sandals just like the average person standing around listening to John the Baptist; but the feet that wear them are God's own feet, and John isn't worthy even to stoop down and untie them, no matter what those sandals have stepped in on the road. Likewise, Jesus baptizes people with water, just like John the Baptist; but when Jesus baptizes with water, He also baptizes with the Holy Spirit because He and the Holy Spirit are one, together with God the Father.

So when Jesus goes about His work, He does so both as His people and as God Himself.

When God says, “Behold I send a messenger before you” to His people in Exodus 23, where are they? They are in the wilderness, camped at Mt. Sinai, after their long bondage in Egypt; and by the grace of God, they’re going to cross the Jordan River and return to the Promised Land where they began. Where is John the Baptist preaching in our Gospel? He’s in the wilderness, right by that same Jordan River. Jesus shows up in the next verse after our Gospel lesson, by the way: and what little do we know of His life up to now? We know that He was born in Bethlehem, within the Promised Land; and we know that, due to Herod's wrath, He also has spent some time in Egypt like the Israelites of old. He’s made their journey there and back, and now His public ministry is about to begin. How does it begin? With His baptism, where Jesus gets in the water and effectively says, “I’m here to identify with all of you sinners. I’m taking My place with you. I’m taking your sin to the cross. I’m going to do what you couldn’t do: I’m going to obey God perfectly, just as I have all the way to Egypt – and back – already. I’m going to keep all of His commands, and then I’m going to die in your place.”

In other words, as Jesus goes about His life, He does so on behalf of all the people of God. He does what they’re supposed to do. He just does it better. He does it perfectly.

He does it perfectly because He's not just fully man, but fully God. He doesn't lose an ounce of His divinity when He becomes flesh. That's why He lives a perfect, holy life – because He is perfect and holy God. That’s why He heals the sick, feeds the hungry, casts out demons and raises the dead. At the same time, though, He doesn't use His divinity to His own advantage. He doesn't avoid the hardships of humanity: in His body, He suffers hunger and weariness. He knows grief, weakness and exhaustion. And through only the soul that sins shall die – which means that He need not die, He still submits to betrayal, mocking, scourging, suffering and death.

If you’ve been hanging around here for a while, you know why He dies: as the Son of God goes about His life in the place of His people, for their sake, He also goes about His death in the place of His people. And as He lives as they're supposed to live – but better; so He also dies their death – but worse. Which is to say that it is better. His death is worse because He dies it for all, suffering the condemnation for the sin of all. His death is better because it is not died in eternal hopelessness, but in the hope of the resurrection.

If you want the technical jargon for what we’re talking about, the explanation to the Small Catechism describes this helpfully as Jesus’ active and passive obedience. In everything that He does, with every law that He keeps, Jesus is actively obeying His Father for you. In His
death, as His death is done to Him by others, He is passively fulfilling the law in your place, namely the law that says, “The wages of sin is death,” and “The soul that sins shall die.”

When God forgives you, He gives you the credit for both Jesus’ life and death. He does not hold your sins against you because Christ has died for them all. At the same time, He also credits you with Jesus’ righteousness and His righteous obedience. So when God looks upon you, He sees one whom the law doesn’t condemn because He sees His Son’s holiness.

All of this is why Jesus goes forth both as God and as His people. He goes forth as the Lord to do all things well, and He goes forth as His people to do all things well on their behalf.

To put it in the language of Psalm 80, this is how the Lord restores His people. This is how His face shines upon His people.

Remember the lepers from Luke 17? We spoke of them at Thanksgiving. The disease of leprosy is one of the best visual reminders of the corruption that sin brings: God has given the lepers bodies, but because of sin they are rotting away, just as sin seeks to rot your soul and thus kill you in body and soul both. The lepers cannot do anything to unlep eryf y themselves, anymore than you can uncrupt a rotten apple; and the law is quite clear that lepers cannot draw near to God because their bodies are corrupted and unholy. In Luke 17, Jesus draws near to them. He takes their leprosy into Himself, for He bears our diseases to the cross: you could say that He becomes the leper so that they can be clean. Thus He is going about His life and death as the Lord and as them, that they might be His holy people. In other words, the Son of God in human flesh doesn’t glower at them because they are unholy: His face shines upon them, and in His light He makes them cleansed and whole.

Similar is the start of John 8, where the scribes and Pharisees confront Jesus with a woman caught in adultery. She’s broken the law of God. She is thus defiled and unholy because of her sin. According to the law of the Lord, she deserves condemnation. But the Lord does not stand before her with eyes of wrath, but eyes of grace: His face shines with grace, not with fiery condemnation. Again, He is going about His life and death as the Lord and as her. He takes her adultery upon Himself, and He will suffer for it on the cross. He becomes the sinner so that she can be holy, for with His forgiveness, He restores her as a holy child in the eyes of God.

+++ 

To you, then. When Jesus goes about His life as God and as His people, He goes about His life for you.

So a couple of little reminders today. One is about the sins that you think little of, because you so easily commit them. You’re used to doing them and you haven’t suffered much for them yet – an off-color word here, a greedy or lustful thought there. These little sins seem to do no more damage than when you belch out loud at home: everybody’s used to it and everybody does it, so it’s just the way things are. But remember James 2:10, that “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.” In other words, even if you were to think one covetous thought once, and otherwise lived a perfect life, that would be enough to condemn you. That one little sin would be enough to require Jesus’ crucifixion if you are to be saved. So if you go about your life simply excusing your everyday little sins as the “cost of doing business,” you’re doing an excellent job of poking the Savior in the eye; and normally, those whom you poke in the eye are not looking favorably upon you. Don’t excuse these sins: repent of them. In that brief time of silence during the confession at the start of the service, remember these “little sins” and marvel that the Lord still has forgiveness for you.
At the other end of the spectrum are the big sins, the ones that you feel the need to keep secret. Secret sins have immense power; and once confessed, they lose control. This is one of the benefits of private confession and absolution: while the most important gift is forgiveness, the revealing of the secret causes it to lose its power. Of course, you don't have to make private confession of sins to be forgiven — it's a help, not a requirement.

But this is a very real danger with the big sins: you're tempted to hide them so that you don't even admit them to yourself. If you've been following the scandals of Hollywood and D.C. over the past several weeks, you've probably read a lot of lame attempts at apologies by predators as they try to parse words to look less culpable. It may just be that they're trying to preserve their reputation or prevent prosecution; but I suspect that it is also because they don't want to admit to themselves how evil they have been. No one desires that level of guilt, shame and self-loathing. This is the danger for you, too, when it comes to big sins: if you do not admit to yourself that you are the sinner who has done them, I don't see how you have confessed to God that you are the sinner who has done them.

Along with the self-loathing is the fear — the fear that if you cannot forgive yourself, God will not forgive you; the fear that if you loathe yourself, God cannot love you; and the fear that if you cannot look at yourself in the mirror, God cannot look upon you with grace. That fear makes sense, but it also contradicts Scripture: it is a lie of the evil one so that you choose either to hide the sin from yourself and God, or else you believe that there is no forgiveness for you.

Whether it's little sins or big sins that afflict you, treasure and pray this prayer: "Restore us, O God. Let Your face shine that we may be saved." Pray with the joy that the Lord answers this prayer. Jesus, who went about His life as His people, includes you among them. He lived that perfect life, with nary a little sin or a big one, so that He might credit you with His perfect, holy obedience. He went about His life as the Son of God so that He might give His life and die His death in order to ransom you.

As He pronounced the lepers and the adulterous woman cleansed and holy, so He pronounces you holy and forgiven. He does not look upon you with eyes of wrath: in His Word and in His Sacraments, His face shines upon you to save. He declares you restored, a new creation in Him, holy and beloved in the eyes of God. It is done! You may not see it yet: just as you may have to live with some illness or affliction until the Last Day, so you may also have to live with regret over past sins. But do not let regret for your sin persuade you that Christ has not taken it away. When He forgives you, He does a much better job of not remembering your sin than you do.

"Restore us, O God. Let Your face shine that we may be saved." That is the prayer of the people God as they wait for His return in glory. That's also the assurance that ends the service, right? For in the Benediction, we hear, "The Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious unto you." It's worth sticking around to hear that, even if the service goes a little long. See, it's a blessing, not an announcement. If it were merely an announcement that the service is over, we could just say, "Jesus has left the building, so you should too." But this is a blessing, for as we declare the Word that the Lord’s face shines upon you, by that Word the Lord’s face does shine upon you. It is one more announcement and giving of grace before you leave this place.

It is an announcement that you are restored in God’s sight, because Jesus went about His life and death, as God and man, for your salvation. You are restored in God’s sight for His sake, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen