

“According to Your Word”

A little boy rips off the wrapping paper and sees the toy he’s always wanted. He rips open the cardboard box – but the toy is strapped down by a bunch of those pesky, plastic, zip-ties. Try as he might, the toy just won’t come free. So, he turns to Dad and says – “Daddy, I cannot by my own reason or strength get this toy out of the box.”

Of course, that’s not completely true, is it? Dad could give the little boy his sharp pocketknife – and the child might get lucky in cutting off all those plastic strips – but that’s not very “reasonable.”

“I cannot by my own reason or strength” – that’s catechetical language – language from the meaning of the Third Article of the Creed in the Small Catechism. “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to Him.” “I CANNOT.” It’s absolutely impossible. There’s not even a chance of getting lucky.

“I cannot by my own reason or strength” – that’s not just the language of Lutherans – that’s the language of the Christian Faith. That’s the language of Zechariah & Elizabeth when it was announced to them that they would have a child. That’s the language of Mary, the Virgin – when Gabriel announces to her that she will not only give birth to a son – but that, “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.”

And “it was so.” “It came to pass.” John the Baptist is born to Zechariah & Elizabeth. Mary conceives a child in her womb. The Virgin gives birth to a son. And you believe in this same Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior.

None of these things happen “by my own reason or strength” – all of these “come to pass” – because of the will and strength of God.

“I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith ...”

“By the Gospel” – that’s how He does it – that’s how God does all these things that are impossible for me and you, and Mary, and Zechariah and Elizabeth. It is by the all-powerful Word of God – a Word that does what it says – a Word which our Lord speaks, in order to give life.

It is that Word which comes from the mouth of the Lord “in the beginning” and creates all life – creating light, land, the seas, the heavens, plants and animals, man and woman. God says, “let there be” – “and it was so.”

God says to the man and the woman, “be fruitful and multiply” – and it was, and it IS so. That very Word of God, spoken “in the beginning,” continues to bear fruit today – giving life to new boys and new girls – as their fathers and mothers are God’s instruments in procreation – in giving life!

By their own reason or strength – Zechariah and Elizabeth could not conceive. Zechariah was old, and so was his wife, Elizabeth. Elizabeth was barren – her womb like a desert in which there is no life – as good as dead. But the Lord speaks a Word, and a new life, a human life, is conceived in her womb – and six months later when Mary comes to visit, Elizabeth will be sporting her own little “baby bump.”

“Mary, you’re going to have a child,” God says (through His messenger, the angel Gabriel) – and Mary responds – “I cannot by my own reason or strength have a child” – “I am a virgin” – “I have not known a man” – “How can this be?”

Unlike Elizabeth, Mary is young, her womb is fertile – but without a man, without a seed – life is impossible. Like Elizabeth, Mary is not able to have a child without God’s intervention. And God does intervene.

The Holy Spirit comes upon her and a child is conceived in her womb. God becomes incarnate – the Son of God takes on human flesh and blood. And now, true man like you and I – He grows and is nurtured in His mother’s womb – until the time fully comes – and Mary gives birth to the baby Jesus.

You cannot – not by your own reason or strength – believe in Jesus Christ or come to Him. You cannot believe that a virgin can become pregnant without a man – or that God would take up residence on earth, that this tiny baby in Mary’s womb is the Son of God – or that this one laying in the manger is the Savior of the world – or that without the shedding of His blood, you cannot live after you have died.

IN, and OF, and BY yourself – you are barren, a desert, a virgin, an unbeliever. You are “dead in your trespasses and sins.” “But the Holy Spirit has called [you] by the Gospel.” The Gospel Word of God overshadowed you, creating new life in you, the life of faith in Jesus Christ. The Lord draws you forth from the womb of the font – a newborn child of God – one who is holy and precious in His sight.

And like a father is supposed to do – the Lord preserves that life and faith He has created. The Lord nurtures and feeds that life and faith. The Lord protects and keeps that life in the one true faith.

And all this He does “by the Gospel” – daily speaking His promises into your ears – delivering the gifts that are yours in Christ Jesus – the precious gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation.

We pray in the Collect: “Stir up your power, O Lord, and come and help us by Your might.” The Lord hears and answers your prayers – coming to you this very day, to do mighty and miraculous things.

To you who live in fear of the His temporal and eternal punishments – the Lord says, “I forgive you all your sins.” To you who are weak and parched - He feeds you with His own Body and Blood – preserving your life and strengthening your faith.

To all of us, who cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to Him – He comes to us, speaking His Word, that we may, AND DO, believe in Him.

How can this be? How can my sins be forgiven? How can my wicked deeds be banished from God’s sight? How can my body be raised from death to life on the Last Day? How can I live eternally?

“Not by my own reason or strength” – not from me – but from the Lord who works such mighty deeds in me, and freely bestows on me the treasures of His kingdom.

And so, with all believers in Christ – we simply rejoice with Mary to say – “let it be to me according to your Word.” Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.