

Lent IV *Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22*
The nations have come to us for healing. Have they found it?

**Rev. Neil Mittelstaedt – Mission Executive and
Pastor, Our Savior, Rego Park**

107:1 O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.

107:2 Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, those he redeemed from trouble

107:3 and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

107:17 Some were sick through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities endured affliction;

107:18 they loathed any kind of food, and they drew near to the gates of death.

107:19 Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress;

107:20 he sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from destruction.

107:21 Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind.

107:22 And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices, and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.

Have you ever been sick or had someone in your family seriously ill? Psalm 107: 17-22 is a God-given testimony about what sick people can expect from a gracious God. But I want to ask the question, "Can churches get sick? Does this psalm have something to say to the Atlantic District as a whole?"

It's not what we want to hear on our 100th birthday, but the churches of the Atlantic District are obviously unwell. Not to miss the point, this means, of course, that the pastors and people of the District are sick. Why do I say that? Why are we obviously unhealthy? Well, I know several married couples who wanted to have children but were not able to get pregnant. It was painfully obvious to them that something was wrong. Similarly, year after year, congregations of the Atlantic District have very few converts increase their family, we see few unbelievers born again, few spiritual babies, often none. In the Christian Church this is spiritual infertility, an obvious, obvious symptom that something is amiss.

Some congregations have new members transfer to them. This makes us happy, and it should. It's like the childless couple who have their nieces and nephews come over for a visit. Or perhaps transfers are like having adopted children, which is terrific. At the same time, transfer membership is no indicator that our infertility is healed.

The word of God gives us very specific direction on how to handle serious illness: "Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble" [Ps 107:19]. But these clear words here, and many other places in Scripture, only serve to make us more concerned about the health of the Lutheran Church. When or where specifically do we cry out to the Lord in the face of obvious childlessness? Where is the crying out in prayer for evangelism, for the conversion of the lost, and for their discipleship in the Church? Psalm 107 testifies that, like a doctor, the Lord sent out His word and healed those who cried out (v.20), but we appear to be avoiding the doctor.

In my experience as a pastor I have seen a number of parishioners who wouldn't go to the doctor. Their reasons may be similar to our reasons for not crying out to the Lord. Some of them were proud ("There's nothing wrong with me!"). We have to acknowledge that Lutherans, especially the clergy, tend to be terribly proud, especially of our theological heritage. Is this what's keeping us from humbly seeking the Doctor?

Some of my parishioners were fearful ("I might be told I have something seriously wrong with me"). I think that we as a church are afraid of this, too. And we're afraid that God's aggressive treatment might upset our routine.

Some of my parishioners were ignorant ("I didn't know my medical insurance paid for that"). Similarly, we may not have realized that Jesus' blood pays for all our sins and that we can come boldly before God to ask for healing. Or we may be uninformed about the amazing promises made in Scripture regarding prayer, and so we don't "cry to the Lord in our trouble."

We have a serious fertility problem and we need to cry to the Lord. Sustained, focused prayer for thousands to be saved and to be catechized and disciplined in the Church, this is what Scripture prescribes. If pride, fear, and ignorance are keeping us from doing that, then we already know what's needed: repentance. Pride, fear, and ignorance are characteristics of the old, unbelieving Adam that lives within us all. But we are those who have been baptized and have faith, therefore the Lord Jesus Christ lives within us, too. He is victorious. Let us then confess our sins and renounce the old Adam and his ways, and turning to Jesus be washed clean of all sins. And forgiven, let us live by faith in union with Christ, crying out loudly in Him for the saving of lost souls and the healing of our spiritual infertility.

*Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and He saved them from their distress.
He sent out His word and healed them;
and delivered them from destruction.*

*Let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices,
and tell of His deeds with songs of joy.*

A day of fasting and prayer for the Atlantic District has been planned for Wednesday, March 29th.
Please join us.

-Neil Mittelstaedt