

Grace and peace are yours dear friends from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's gospel text is one of the most hopeful messages and the most comforting words we could possibly hear as it relates to our present and eternal relationship with our Lord and Creator. It is the complete fulfillment of the Good News that the Kingdom of God is indeed our inheritance and a declaration that our holiness before God has been restored.

You see my friends; it just does not get any better. Jesus departs from us so the Holy Spirit may come and reside within us. We have new life; what will we do with it? We have salvation; will we accept it? We have been forgiven; will we believe it?

Today, three young adults will be Confirmed in the Christian Faith and affirm the 'new life' they have, understand, and take responsibility for. They will declare their acceptance of salvation and confess their belief in Jesus Christ who died for the forgiveness of our sins.

The tradition of celebrating Confirmation on the Day of Pentecost goes back in our church history to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, 300+ years before Martin Luther. Today there is a renewed focus in many denominations (including the Catholic Church) to restore the celebration of Holy Confirmation to the Day of Pentecost! The lighted RED candles for each Confirmands is also a tradition that dates back to the early days of the church and reminds us of the Holy Spirit that is ever-present in our lives and world today.

Unfortunately, some traditions come to an end and do not face the same hope of future restoration. On our altar is a tradition represented in the mighty St. Bernard dog, named for an Augustine monk; St Bernard de Menthon<sup>1</sup>. You see, 8,000 feet above sea level in the Western Alps is the Great St. Bernard Pass, a treacherous 49-mile route between Italy and Switzerland. In the year 1050, St Bernard, the monk, built a monastery to help people traveling the route. Approximately 600 years later, the monks acquired their first St. Bernard dogs and within the next 100 years, servants called *marroniers* were assigned to travelers between the monastery and Borge St. Pierre, a city on the Swiss side.

The dog's broad chest helped clear a path in the snow. However, the *marroniers* soon discovered the St. Bernard's possessed a tremendous sense of smell and unique ability to discover people buried in the snow. Soon, they sent the dogs out in packs of two or three to seek out lost or injured travelers. For the next 150 years, the St Bernard tradition grew and thrived. These special dogs would dig in the snow and find an injury traveler; when/if located, one dog would lie on the traveler to keep them warm while the other dog returned to the monastery to alert the monks, who would then organize a rescue.

The system became so organized that Napoleon and his 250,000 soldiers cross through the pass in 1790 and 1810 and never lost the life of one soldier. Like any true and worthy cause, urban legends crop up to embellish the stories, which is the case of the casks of liquor strapped to the dogs collar. According to the Jess Blumberg, author of a story published by Smithsonian.com in 2016, there is no history, evidence, or records of this practice.<sup>2</sup> However, the legend of Barry, a St. Bernard who lived at the monastery from 1800-1812 is true as he save over 40 people and is now immortalized in Natural History Museum in Berne Switzerland.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/a-brief-history-of-the-st-bernard-rescue-dog-13787665/>

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

As of 2004, the tradition of the St Bernard officially ended and a foundation was established to ensure the survival of the breed. Rescue efforts continue to this day, but with technology, funding, and other resources the monks now rely upon helicopters (among other means).

Why the history of the St. Bernard? Well, because in the second year of confirmation class, I ask the students to read a book from author Jim Kraus who writes, ‘real life fiction’ with a theological purpose, meaning, and design. In the case of this year’s book, *Conversations with St. Bernard*, the parents of a young boy (born with heart and lung issues) get their son (Alex) a dog; a St Bernard he names Lewis, because together they will be like Lewis and Clark; exploring the world. Naturally the two becomes best friends, but must then part ways until Alex can undergo allergy shots due to his sensitivity to Lewis.

In the tradition of St. Bernard’s, Lewis is going to save a life, but Alex will not be the first, instead, it is the life of a family friend who is willing to care for Lewis while Alex receives a year of allergy injections. At the end of the book, Alex and Lewis are reunited and you can imagine the celebration!

In as much as the proud and majestic St. Bernard saved human lives, their message and purpose holds meaning for each of us today in the context of what our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ has done for us. Jesus came to save our life that was destined for death: our final and complete termination and the price for sin. We may have thought we were lost, but to God our eternal life and comfort was always part of His design for us.

John, Isabella, and Kaleab may not remember a lot about the confirmation days, but the story of a St. Bernard and how God works through us all, will be a fond memory of their Christian growth at Christ Lutheran Church. The dog they take with them can be a sign of comfort knowing they are not alone, but cared for and guided by a loving Spirit, a generous Lord, and a faithful God. Each confirmand was asked two questions: What is God doing in your life and what is God doing in the world. Their answers provide the reflections I share now.

Kaleab goes forth today with the understanding that Confirmation is a decision *he chose* for the sake of making a difference in his church community. He understand his decision carries new responsibility and new risk that can only be encountered with the same faith that carried him to this point. More than anything, Kaleab sees (what we should all see) that Confirmation is the point in his life where he becomes (with the help of God) a witness and an example of the Christian life for others to see: he sees his life as the mean by which others may come to know what God has done for them through Jesus Christ.

Isabella already sees the activity of God’s gifts present in the lives of people helping people...AND, people improving the quality of life for people; as in the gifts of arts, music, painting, dance, and a variety of creative talents and skills. With a pure heart, Isabella sees the value of each human life to God and the need for all people to work together. She understands that we cannot all be artists and still have value to God (and those around us) when we have no creative talent what so ever. Because sometimes, the patience and compassion to sit and hold someone’s hand (who is lonely or afraid) is the greatest gift, blessing, and treasure you could ever provide... or ever receive!

As you might know, teaching is a treasure in that each person we teach offers his/her own unique view and teaches us something in return. No two papers, reviews, or ideas are the same...and these three collectively present a beautiful and reassuring message (and confirmation) that the Holy Spirit is alive, well, and at work in their lives and the lives of the members of Christ Lutheran Church.

Now John's reflection is a most unique message that is deeply rooted in faith and trust. It is the reality that God is truly in control of this world in ways we can see and understand and in ways that we are still exploring. At the heart of John's message is what I attempt to share with you in my messages on Sunday's, which is the need for 'relationships' in the world, in our community, and in our personal lives. And through these relationships, God accomplishes His work through our hands and hearts for our mutual prosperity and our eternal future. John was the only person who used a word that I had to look up in the dictionary and sees that God is doing a good job in caring for His creation and us.

It is my prayer for them, as they grow, learn, and experience life that they continue to see the Holy Spirit at work in them and in their world as they see it today. When the times of doubt and darkness arrive in life; I pray their foundation in faith formed at Christ Lutheran Church will keep them safe. I pray our church's teachers, members, leaders, and memories will sustain them in times of trouble and provide them with courage and strength to know and believe that someone is pushing through the snow towards them...someone who will stay with them and keep them warm until their rescue is secured.

Barry, the St. Bernard saved over 40 lives during his lifetime; the number of lives to be touched and saved through these three fine young adults is known only to God. Today is a celebration, a gift, and the beginning of a new relationship for (and with) Isabella, John, and Kaleab. And together, we trust in the Spirit, we give thanks to the Lord, and we glorify God who provides the peace that passes all understanding that keeps our hearts and minds through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.