Sometimes the Christian Church does not look so good. We hear about the continuing scandals in the Roman Catholic Church. Maybe you remember the televangelist scandals of the 80’s.

Even on a local level, things can get ugly. We at Trinity/St. John are blessed with congregations in which, by and large, things run smoothly and people get along with each other. But maybe you have been in congregations where that has not been the case. Last week’s reading from Galatians referred to people in Christian congregations **biting and devouring each other**. You know it can happen. And even when it does not, sometimes the Christian Church still does not look so good. The family of God on this earth has endured financial struggles, boring sermons, dull worship and anemic activities.

The prophet Isaiah could have easily identified with us. He knew that the family of God sometimes does not look so good. You see, the family of God did not look very good through much of the Old Testament. There was corruption, worship of false gods, and idols mixed in with worship of the true God. There were jaw-dropping scandals. Nobody seemed to care about the words of the Lord. In last week’s Old Testament lesson we heard the prophet Elijah complaining to God that he thought he was the only one left who cared about the Lord! Isaiah, too, knew it: the family of God sometimes does not look so good.

But, oddly, we hear Isaiah say: **Praise God for the Church.** Really? Even though it looks like it is falling apart? Even though it is an embarrassment? Praise God for the Church? Why? Let’s listen to Isaiah and find out.

If you had been alive in Old Testament times and heard the word, **Jerusalem**, you would have thought of the temple and what went on there. That is where the Lord interfaced with people. For that reason, the name **Jerusalem** became kind of shorthand in the Bible. When the prophets talk about **Jerusalem**, they are often talking about the family of God – believers.

New Testament writers picked up on this. For instance, in Revelation, when the Apostle John writes about the family of God finally glorified, he calls it the **New Jerusalem**. So, in our reading today, **Jerusalem** refers to the family of God - all believers everywhere. Nowadays, in New Testament times, we often call this **The Church**, or **The Holy Christian Church**, the family of God, made up of all those around the world who believe in the true God.

Note that when we talk about **Jerusalem** or **The Church** in this way, we are not talking about a visible organization, but rather the group of believers on earth.

Isaiah writes: **Rejoice with Jerusalem and celebrate with her, all you who love her.** **Share her joy with her, all you who have been mourning over her.** In other words, Isaiah says: **Praise God for the Church.**

But praising God for the Church would not have come easily for the people who first heard Isaiah’s prophecies. There was corruption in the organized, visible church at that time. There were also people who went to church just for show, who went through the motions of worship without really believing anything. Because of all this, God promised to bring judgment. Can you see why people would be, as Isaiah says, **Mourning over Jerusalem**?

Nevertheless, Isaiah writes: **Rejoice with Jerusalem and celebrate with her, all you who love her. Share her joy with her, all you who have been mourning over her.** Praise God, Isa says, for the Church. But why?

Here is why: **So that you may nurse and be satisfied from her comforting breast, so**
that you may suck and find delight from her milk-filled breasts. You will be nursed. You will be carried on her side, and you will be bounced on her knees. Just like a man whom his mother comforts, in the same way I myself will comfort you, and you will be comforted concerning Jerusalem.

That brings to mind a familiar picture - a crying baby. What is it that makes babies cry? I know of a couple things. Babies cry when they are hungry. They cry when they are scared. They cry when their diapers are messy.

That is true in a sense for older kids and grown-ups, too. We cry when we are hungry, when we do not have something that we need, when we are scared, when we are afraid of what is coming. We feel hurt and saddened when we sin and make a mess of things.

Do you know what I mean? Have you even been hungry for love or acceptance - not just from people, but love and acceptance from God? Have you ever been afraid of the future? Have you ever made a mess or been hurt by somebody else’s mess?

The common denominator in all these things is sin. We hunger for love from God because we sense - and the Bible backs us up on this - that we lack what it takes to make God love us. When we are fearful of the future, our fear is often related to the fact that we do not really deserve a whole bunch of blessings from God, but we do have some punishment coming, though we hate to admit it. And messes? Who of us does not have something in his or her past that stinks?

We are hungry for something. We are scared. We have made a mess of things. So where do we go? We go to the Church - we go to the family of God. And there God himself comforts us.

Think about it. What do we see when we come here, gathered with other believers? Well, as the hymn we just sang puts it: Here are table, font and pulpit. here the cross has central place.

The table or altar is here. Here Jesus feeds us with his own body and blood. He feeds us with his love and commitment to us. He says: I gave up my life to take away from your record all the messes you have made. This is my body, this is my blood poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins. He forgives our past and enables us to face the future.

The font is here. Here God washed us and gave us what everybody’s conscience hungers for: a good standing in the sight of God. Here God said: You are mine now. Do not be afraid. Here God removed our filthiness and gave us in exchange a new and spotless life in his sight.

The pulpit is here. Here God feeds us with his Word. Here he reminds us of what we lack, that we have made messes, as his Word expose the things we want to hide. But then he meets our needs by announcing that he forgives us, and he encourages us to live as the new people we are.

Here the cross has central place. The cross sums it all up, doesn’t it? God has met our need through Jesus. Through the cross he says: If I loved you enough to give up my only Son for you, then what good thing will I not give you?

When babies cry, they want mommy. When we are hungering, scared and messed up - always because of sin - we come to the Church. Here God takes us in his arms as a mother cradles her baby, and he says: Shh, it’s okay. Here he bounces us on his knee and cheers us with his love. Here he washes us, feeds us, speaks to us, comforts us.

Praise God for the Church! Here there is comfort. Here there is peace.

Yes, we find comfort in the Church, but not everybody does. As people look at the family of God on earth, it often does not look very good. The scandals, the backbiting, the apathy - these things are not rare. In fact, someone might say that all the Church is is a bunch of
sinners!

Well, it is. Look around. Peek out of the corner of your eye. See that person near you? A sinner! And reach out and touch your knee. You just touched a sinner! We are all sinners!

It is kind of disturbing, unsettling, to see the sins that other people do, to see their weaknesses, their flaws. But what is even more unsettling is to know that we ourselves are sinners and to know that our holy, sinless God hates sin.

But right in the middle of this horde of sinful people Isaiah says: **Praise God for the Church.** Here is why: **This is what the Lord says. I am ready to extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream.** Then you will see, and your heart will be glad. Like grass you will receive new strength, right down to your bones. Then the Lord’s hand will be known to his servants. The Lord will give the Church peace. And not just a little trickle of peace, mind you, but a flood of peace.

You see, God knows that he should be at war with us. He is holy; we are unholy. He is perfectly clean; we are perfectly filthy. He is sinless; we are sinful and sinning all the time. God should go to war with us and crush us. But instead of crushing us, God has made peace with us.

Think of another passage from Isaiah: **For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.** He is talking about Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Jesus came to bring peace between us and God. Isaiah also writes elsewhere: **But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.** Instead of going to war with us and crushing us, God the Father went to war with his only Son, laying on him all the horrifying punishment that we deserved. Because Jesus took our place, we are freed from ever being punished for our sins. In Jesus, we have peace with God.

God has signed a peace treaty with us in the blood of Jesus. He has promised not to hold our sins against us. And God puts this peace treaty in his Church. In and through the gathering of his people, he gives peace. When his believers put water on someone’s head in his name, God gives his peace. When his ministers distribute the Lord’s Supper, God gives his peace. When the pastor or fellow Christian forgives our sins, God gives his peace.

Are you unsettled by your sin? Come to the Church; here there is peace with God, as a free gift from him. Are you unsettled by other people’s sins? Come to the Church, where we are all a bunch of sinners forgiven by the grace of God, people who are now able to forgive each other as God forgave us.

It is true. The family of God, the Church, often does not look so good. This side of heaven, we are sinners, and we sin often in shameful ways. But there is something else going on in this bunch of sinners, too. God is here among us. God is here, working through us. God is here, speaking his good news of pardon and peace.

That is why we praise God for the Church - not because we are so good, but because God is so good. Through this ragtag bunch of forgiven sinners, God himself gives comfort, God himself gives peace. Praise God for the Church. Amen.

Pastor Keith Bilitz
St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Alma City
Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church, Smiths Mill