

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen

I'm sure you've all heard this before....or something like it.

- On the one hand.....this, this, and this.
- But on the other hand.....that, that, and that.
- Indecisiveness. More things to consider. Two sides to the coin so to speak.

As I was praying and thinking and preparing for this message today, that thought came to mind for me regarding our spiritual life.

- Connecting our faith with the realities of life.
- On the one hand, we have faith, trust, belief in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
- But on the other hand.....at times, life doesn't seem to be all that good, or said even more bluntly, bad things happen to us.

What is going on? Where is God?

- On the one hand.....we believe in God.....But on the other hand.....why are you, God, allowing this to happen?
- Do you care? Can you help? Doubts and weariness enter in.

Let me give you some examples.

- On the one hand, we have the promises of faith that God will protect us.
- Our creed says He will guard me against all harm and danger.
- But on the other hand.....there are all these mass shootings.

Oh yes, there are some who are miraculously saved.

- But on the other hand, there are innocent victims.
- So many hurting and mourning and crying out for help.
- It doesn't seem that God guarded ALL, from harm and danger.

On the one hand we have the splendid promises of marriage.

- The agenda says that God has established and sanctified marriage and has promised to bless therein all who love and trust in Him.
- But on the other hand.....Christian marriages sometimes fall apart.

On the one hand we have the promise that God will never lay anything on us above what we are able to bear.

- But on the other hand.....we have experiences that, that light at the end of the tunnel is probably the train.
- How do we deal with the disconnect between the promises of faith and what we experience in the real world?

This all reminds me of a story that we are told about President Truman.

- The president's economic advisor's regularly told him.....
- Well, Mr. President, on the one hand this, this, and this.....
- But Mr. President, on the other hand that, that, and that!
- And one day and exasperated Harry Truman said, "What I wouldn't give for a one armed economist!"

Today is the first Sunday in the Epiphany Season.

- It is the day in the church that we always celebrate the Baptism of Jesus.
- And at the Baptism of Jesus, God speaks to us, so to speak, as a one armed preacher."
- There is no, on the one hand this; but on the other hand that.
- No indecisiveness.
- God our Father says, "THIS IS MY BELOVED SON."

At the Baptism of Jesus, God speaks to you and me the same way He spoke to Job.

- Perhaps you remember the account of God and Job that I am referring to.
- Things were not going well for Job.
- He had lost his possessions.
- He had lost his family.
- He had lost his health.
- And he had lost his honor. He is being scoffed at by his friends and those around him.

And he begins to lament.

- To rationalize his situation.
- He claims that he is just.
- He says, "I have not looked lustfully at women."
- He says he has not denied justice to any of his servants.
- He says he has not denied the desires of the poor or let the eyes of the widow grow weary.
- And he says, "Yet my life ebbs away and days of suffering grip me."

And he then even addresses God. He says.....

- I cry out to You, God, but You do not answer.
- I stand up but You merely look at me.

He says.....

- God, You turn on me ruthlessly, with the might of Your hand you attack me.
- He says, You snatch me up and drive me before the wind, you toss me about in the storm.

He even says.....

- Oh that I had someone to hear me.

Can that at times be you and me?

- On the one hand, this, this, and this.....
- But on the other hand, that, that, and that.

Others of Job's friends had spoken first to him; but then then Elihu speaks out to Job.

- He was angry with Job because Job was justifying himself rather than God.

And Elihu speaks and says.....

- Job, listen to my words. Pay attention to everything I say.
- He says his words speak from an upright heart. My lips sincerely what I know.

He says.....

- The Spirit of God has made me.
- The breath of the Almighty gives me life.
- I too, am a piece of clay.

And he says.....

- In this, Job, you are not right.....
- For God is greater than any mortal.
- For God does not speak now one way, now another.

And Elihu gives quite a compelling argument and testimony and words from God to Job....and us.

- I invite you to sit down on your own and read Job chapters 32 through 37.
- In consideration of the length and focus of this message I will not go through them.

But more importantly, in Job chapter 38, God Himself then speaks.....

- And He sweeps all of Job's reasoning and rationale aside.
- And God says, "WHERE WERE YOU WHEN I LAID THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD. I AM GOD!"

And now at the Baptism of our Lord God speaks and says.....

- THIS is My beloved Son.

That word this.

- It is used to point to, to show one thing apart from all others.
- It is at the other end of the spectrum from on one hand and the other.
- God does not point to our intellectual attempts to reconcile faith and life.
- God does not point to what we hope to do.

This is My beloved Son.

- This One who doesn't need to be baptized but does it to show His identity with us sinners.
- This One who would die for all our sins.
- This One who kept the Law in our place fulfilling all righteousness.

God our Father speaks, if you will, as a one-armed preacher.

- That is, no indecisiveness. No uncertainty. Nothing else to consider.

This is My beloved Son.

- The One who comes from the unseen realm that we can only recognize and appreciate by faith.
- This One in whom the only way a connection is made between the promises of faith..... and what you and I experience in this tough, often cruel world.

The City Church in Wittenberg, Germany.....

- Not the Castle Church where the 95 theses were nailed.
- But the City Church where Luther did most of his preaching.

If you go up to the altar you see an altar painting by Lucas Cranach.

- It shows Luther preaching to the crowd.....
- But between Luther and the crowd.....
- Cranach has painted the cross of Christ.

Troubles, unruly children, financial problems, health problems.....

- What is it in your personal life? You add whatever you will to the list.

How does it all come together?

- How am I going to do all this?

In the cross of Christ.

- We need a one-armed focus.
- We need to be focused on one thing. And only one thing. The cross of Christ.

But sometimes it is hard to see the cross of Christ. Isn't it?

- It is easy to overlook it.

And when you do.....

- Remember, **THIS IS MY BELOVED SON.**
- And this beloved Son is the only way to make the connection in your life between all that is going on.

You must move inside the door.

- It is only to here that you will hear the redemptive Word of the Gospel.

When you have reached the point of no return.....

- When the promises of faith and the experiences of life seem to have no real connection.....
- That is the time you pray, God give me your one armed preacher.....
- To point me to the only one who brings it all together.....
- Your beloved Son.

Our Old Testament reading for today helps us with this also.

- It speaks of choices and what our only, real, truthful focus must be.

It implores us to.....

- Look to My Servant Elect. That is, Jesus.
- The idols bring no word.

God the Father's Spirit descended and rests upon the Servant.

- On the other hand, the idols are empty wind.

The Servant comes in quiet, patient gentleness.

- Verses 2 and 3 of our Old Testament reading.
- "He will not cry aloud or lift up His voice, or make it heard in the street;
- A bruised reed He will not break, and a faintly burning wick He will not quench."

What is this saying? Tenderness and love.

- Compassion to the bruised reed and dim wicks marked our Lord's ministry.
- How many times was His attention and help provided to the lame, the blind, the sick, the weak, the deaf, and the outcasts?

Today we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord.

- Jesus stepped down into the baptismal waters so that He could soak up your and my sins.
- He was baptized into our sins so that our Baptism can be into His death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins.

As we bring this message to a close, I invite you to verse 6 of our Old Testament reading.

- "I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you.

On the one hand this; but on the other hand that.

- No, Jesus takes you by the hand.

And is that not what we need as we go through the struggles of life?

- Knowing and confident and focused only on that Jesus has not only taken you by the hand but that He even holds you in His hands.
- Our Old Testament reading also tells us He will not grow faint or discouraged.

We are in a war.

- In many ways it is a bloody, cruel war in this broken, sinful world we are in. And we are part of this.
- But in the midst of all this.....is Jesus.

And in Him we can have a singular focus.

- We can be certain of Him.
- And in our struggles, we can trust in His help. His hand is with you every step of the way.

And in Him you can be certain of the end result.

- He has already won the victory.
- And leading you by the hand, He will be with you every step of the way, and He will take you to our eternal home that He has already prepared for you.

This is My beloved Son.

- And focused on, and in Him, He will see you through it all.
- Amen.

(Please stand) And now, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Having heard the Word of God we now prepare our hearts and minds to confess together the words of the Nicene Creed as found on page 158 in your hymnal.