

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
Sermon for Sunday, October 4, 2009
Rev. John Israel, Visitation Pastor (Retired)

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

This morning my sermon is based on a number of Scripture passages, simply because it's kind of hard to know when somebody's not going to be able to be here. And I have to, and so I have a number of passages that we'll touch upon as we get to them in the sermon.

In Christ Jesus, dear friends. Many years ago, when my children were teenagers, we decided that we needed a second car in the family. My wife had the shopping to do, we had a large congregation and I was running around with the other car. And the children were in high school, and you know how they have to go places all the time. So finally we decided we had to have a second car. We went to the local dealer and about the only thing that fit into our economic status was an old used Buick Wildcat. With a 460 cubic inch engine and a speedometer that went up to 135 miles an hour. Yeah, you're laughing - but years later I would look back on that and say how stupid we were to buy a car like that with that kind of horsepower when we had teenage drivers. But that is a story for another time.

Anyway, everybody loved that car. It was just great. When we stepped on the accelerator, it pulled you right down back in the seat. And it had lots of room, and the kids loved that. Room for their skis, room for their fishing stuff, room for their hunting stuff, room for their friends. And they drove it all over the place.

Well, one day when I was sitting in my office, the phone rang. And it was the fellow who was at the station where we generally bought our gasoline. And he said, "Pastor, you better come down here right quick." He said, "Your son is here with your Buick and it's running awful." He said, "I think the timing chain has jumped a notch or so." So I hurried down there. And as I was going down there, I'm calculating what is it going to cost to replace that timing chain and so forth. When I got there and I listened to it run (and it was running terrible) I thought, "I bet they're right." But then I took my place behind the drivers' seat and I looked at the gas gauge. And it was empty. REALLY empty. It practically broke the needle off. And then a little light went on in my head and I went in the station and I bought three bottles of carburetor and gas line cleaner. I poured that into the tank, put in about 5 gallons of gasoline and we started it again. And at first it stood there and shuddered and hissed and sputtered. But then one more cylinder started running. Then another one kicked in. Pretty soon it was running as smooth as our old gray cat purred back at home. And I remember saying something to my son, something like this: "Son, if you are going to drive this vehicle, you're gonna

have to fuel this vehicle.” I think it wasn’t quite that nice, but anyway, that was was something I said.

Well, that Buick standing there and sputtering has been for me a kind of a metaphor, kind of a picture of our Christian life and faith in this world. Sometimes our Christian faith and life sputter, just like that Buick. For example, God tells us that we ought to be content. “Godliness with contentment is great gain,” St. Paul says. “If we have food and clothing, we will be content with that,” Paul wrote to Timothy. So, we try. and then our neighbor comes home with a brand new, shiny car, a new hybrid. And he parks it in his driveway and we look out and say, “Argh! Why can’t I have one like that?” And there goes the contentment down the drain.

God tells us not to worry. He tells us He’ll take care of us. Jesus uses nine verses in Matthew chapter 6 to convey that idea. So we say to ourselves, “Ok, I’ll be fine, and things will turn out well.” And then the economy tanks, like it did a year ago. I just wonder how many hands will go up if I ask, “How many of you checked the Dow every morning about a year ago to see how far your 401k had gone down the tubes?” It gets a little bit scary.

Well, God also tells us we ought to love our neighbors as ourselves. And we try to do that. But you know, there always seems to be a relative or a neighbor who seems to be half crazy and gives us all kinds of grief. And we’re supposed to love that person and we don’t want to.

Jesus has called us to be lights in a world of darkness. Sometimes all we seem to be is flickering candles or smoking wicks. Our Christian faith and life do sputter sometimes and hiss. What can we do about that? Nothing, by ourselves. But God has a solution. He calls it His holy Word. And it comes in two basic parts: Law comes first. Remember, when I looked at the fuel gauge and suspected that my son had driven that car so far that he had sucked all the garbage out of the gas tank and pulled it into the carburetor and the gas line? And then I went and got those 3 bottles of carburetor and gas line cleaner and poured it into the tank? Well, God’s Law is a solution a little bit like that. If copper gas lines and metal carburetor parts had feelings and voices, they would’ve screeched and screamed when I poured that stuff in and it got pulled into the engine, because that was just very caustic, smelly sort of stuff. Well, God’s Law is like that. It stings and it burns and it hurts, as it dissolves our pride and self-righteousness and rebellion. Just listen to some of the things the Law says: “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” Does that mean me? Yes! Of course. “Behold I was shapen in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me,” David wrote. You mean, I was a sinner when I was that cute little kid in the crib? Yes, sir. And I’ll tell you what, give me two toddlers and one toy and I’ll show you how wars begin. I can’t imagine people saying there’s no such thing as inherited sin. They obviously have never seen children. It just keeps going on and on. Paul says, “The wages of sin is death.” is that bad for me? Yes, it is. And if you don’t believe that, go to some quiet place and take your catechism and turn to the 10 Commandments. And read them one by one, just ponder them and ask yourself very thoughtfully, “Have I really kept any of these?” And if you’re honest, the answer is going

to be “No.” And even if you think you’ve kept some of them, remember that epistle lesson we had some Sundays ago, where James said, “Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point, has become accountable for all of it.” Yes, we are what we confess every Sunday: poor, miserable sinners.

Ahh, but thank God that the fueling stuff that He gives us does not stop with the Law. There’s another component in that mixture - the precious message of the Gospel. As the gasoline I poured in made that Buick run so smoothly, so the Gospel of Jesus Christ creates and empowers the faith and life that we need so desperately as we hear it. It is the octane that gives us life. The clear message that God has loved us so much that He sent His one, holy precious and perfect Son to take upon Himself our flesh, to live in this world. And live the perfect life we can’t even begin to live. And then to allow His heavenly Father to dump upon Him all of the sins, all of the guilt of the whole world and pay for that as He died in suffering and agony we will never understand as He hung on the Cross. And then on the third day, He rose from the grave to assure us that He was indeed the Son of God as He claimed, and to tell us that He had actually done everything that He came to do. Our sins are forgiven.

As the Scriptures put it, God made Him, (that is, Christ) who knew no sin to become sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. To us Jesus says, “Fear not, your sins are forgiven.” That fuel empowers our faith and lives and the lives of all God’s people throughout the world.

So, where’s the pump where you get that fuel? Primarily, I guess you would say you get it here in church. Here, you hear the Word preached and read. And you are reminded of your Baptism. We receive forgiveness in Holy Communion as we receive the Body and Blood of Christ. We confess our sins, we hear the absolution pronounced to us by the pastor and we hear our prayers and songs rise to mingle with those of the angels above. We need to be in church on Sunday, or whenever the church service is in your particular parish. If we let our car run out of gas, the engine dies. If we fail to hear God’s Word regularly, our faith can shrink and our witness dies. There are additional ways and times in which our faith is fueled - when we pick up our Bible at home and read, when we come to Bible class and learn more about the Holy Scriptures, when we join in personal and family devotions in our homes - and our church provides for free marvelous devotional materials which lead us again and again to the foot of the cross. We need to use them, we never get too much.

Someone has said, “Every illustration limps.” And so with my metaphor of the sputtering Buick. It limps. After the incident that we talked about, that car ran for many many years. My goodness we drove it all over the country, we even pulled a travel trailer up and down the mountains. And when we traded it off, it still was running fine. I wish I could tell you that if you faithfully fuel your faith and life in the Word, it will always run smoothly and never give you any trouble and be perfect in every way. But I can’t do that, for two reasons.

First of all, we have that sinful human flesh which we inherited from Adam and Eve back there in the Garden. And that human, sinful flesh, Old Adam or Eve - whichever one you want to call it, drags us away from God, drags us into sin, tempts us terribly. And then as long as we live in this world, we have this business with Satan. He sits beside us in church and tries to distract us from the prayers and the sermon and whatever else, to make us think about what we're going to have for dinner rather than what's going on in the Scriptures. He sits beside us when we turn the television on, seeking to make us rejoice in all the immorality and evil that is portrayed there. He's always around, trying to lead us away from Jesus, and that's going to be the case - that struggle - until Jesus comes home. That's one more reason to be faithfully fueling our faith, because we really need to do so.

May God help us as we do that, day in and day out. Amen.

And now may the peace of God which is beyond all human understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.