

So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.” And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias. And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

I know I have mentioned before an old legend which says that after the ascension of Jesus, the angels asked Him: “Lord, what are your plans now for the salvation of the world? How will the message of your love get out?” Jesus pointed to the disciples, wandering home after the ascension. “They are my labourers. They will get the message out.” “And what if they fail?”, the angels asked. “Then what is your plan?” Jesus replied, “I have no other plan.”

For forty days, the resurrected Lord made His presence known to His followers. He talked with them, taught them, and encouraged them for the task that lay before them. The Lord was looking to the future; to all that was to be accomplished from the day He led them to the Mount of Olives and ascended back into the glory of His heavenly home. He gave them a wonderful promise: *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*” (Acts 1:8 - ESV) Christ wants His church to understand that He wants the Gospel shared with all people. He had told the disciples: *For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.*” (Luke 19:10 - ESV) He made it clear that *it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.* (Matthew 18:14 - ESV) This is the great love that our Saviour has for all of lost and sinful mankind. He sends His church to be witnesses of His death and resurrection so that the lost may be saved. He sends His church to proclaim the forgiveness that comes because He took our sin upon Himself at the cross. It started with the apostles, and in fact, the word *apostle* means “one who is sent”. The message that those first witnesses were to proclaim was given to them by the Lord Himself. Before His ascension, Jesus had told them: *“Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.*” (Luke 24:46-47 - ESV) And He leaves them with everything they will need to accomplish His plan. *And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.*” (Luke 24:48-49 - ESV)

The ascended Lord looks to the future and sends His disciples to proclaim His Gospel message. They know it is going to be a humongous task. To accomplish it, they realize that it is necessary to fill the vacancy among the apostles left by Judas. Peter tells the whole group of believers: *one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.* Our text tells us that after a time of *fervent* prayer, the disciples do something that seems so strange: they cast lots. But it wasn’t just the “luck of the draw”. This wasn’t just a matter of flipping a coin. There is a proverb which says: *The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.* (Proverbs 16:33 - ESV) God made the choice, and He chose Matthias.

There is a great deal of timeliness for us in this text today. We have a vacancy in this congregation. We need someone to take the place of the pastors who have gone before. As the disciples knew that they needed to fill the vacancy left by Judas for the work of the church, so we know we need to seek the Lord’s direction and blessing as we look to our future.

As we look to our future as His church, it is important that we remember that God has a plan for His Church. In a few weeks, this congregation will gather for a call meeting, to extend a call to a pastor to come and serve us in the name of the Lord. We will ask the Lord to continue the work of the apostles among us by giving the servant who will share the same truth that the apostles proclaimed—that wonderful good news of the Saviour who loved us and who has brought us forgiveness and life through His death, resurrection and glorious ascension. We will not cast lots, but I do hope and pray that we all join in fervent prayer that the Lord would provide the shepherd we need. As we think of what we want, may we also, in every situation, but in this one in particular, ask: “what is Your will for us, Lord? Show us, as You showed the disciples, the one You want to fill the

office of pastor in this place.

I found it quite interesting that our office devotions this week had a reading from Numbers, where God says to Moses : ***“I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and his sons from among the people of Israel, to do the service for the people of Israel at the tent of meeting and to make atonement for the people of Israel.”*** (Numbers 8:19, ESV) The Levites were chosen by God to serve as the priests and the servants of the tabernacle and temple. It is the fact that they are a gift for God’s people that caught my attention. In the same way, we hear St. Paul speak of Christ’s ascension and say: ***“When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.”*** (Ephesians 4:8, ESV) Then Paul tells us what those gifts were and are: ***“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”*** (Ephesians 4:11–12, ESV) God’s gifts to His church include the pastors He sends in His name to help us in all we do as the servants of Christ, carrying out the Lord’s plan for His church into the future.

It is God’s will that the good news of forgiveness and life be passed on from generation to generation. It was—and it is—Christ’s desire that the Gospel be proclaimed to all nations. His apostles played a key part in that plan. The witness they bore to Christ and His grace and mercy become the foundation of the church. Paul tells us: ***So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.*** (Ephesians 2:19-20 - ESV) They passed on what they had seen and heard; they told that news of the Lord who came in human flesh, who died to take away the sins of all of lost and dying mankind; and who rose to give us life. Even as He ascended, the Lord sent them so that we, too, may know this good news. Through them, and through those who followed after them, we are part of the Lord’s plan for the future. Equipped for works of service, we go out and share what we have come to know. We testify of the Lord, who has loved us and brought us life as His people.

Like Matthias, we have been chosen. We were not chosen by lot, but by grace. Paul says: ***Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.*** (Ephesians 1:3-4 - ESV) He chose us, Peter declares: ***that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*** (1 Peter 2:9 - ESV) But what qualifications do we have? One thing we all have in common is that we ***all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*** (Romans 3:23 - ESV) But after that our qualifications may vary. Some of you have known the good news of the Gospel all your lives. You have always known that you are a redeemed sinner. For others, this good news of forgiveness and life is relatively new. The joy of all that is yours in Christ is still something fresh and wondrous. But we all have been chosen through the Gospel. The Holy Spirit has opened our eyes and hearts in faith. Through the Spirit’s work in the Word, we can sing, ***“Amazing grace—how sweet the sound—that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”*** (LSB 744, st. 1)

Now, knowing all that Christ has done for us, we go to tell everyone what He has done. We tend to think of that as the most intimidating task in the world. We think it is going to be far more than we can handle. But we have the same assurance that the apostles had—that the Saviour, who loves us, continues to bless us for this task. He gives us His Spirit, to lead us as we share.

And it really isn’t hard. We simply tell others what Jesus has done for us! When someone wishes us a good day, you could say, “yes, God has blessed me richly in this day”. If you are hiking with friends, who comment on the beautiful scenery, why not say, “God does good work, doesn’t He?” Use these opportunities as openings. Peter tells us: ***“in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.”*** (1 Peter 3:15–16, ESV) No, we aren’t going to see everyone agree with everything we say. We may have to share again and again. It is also important that what we do and what we say agree. If we say Jesus is Lord, but live as the master of our own destiny, that is a contradiction. If we want to invite people to church, but always grumble and complain that church is too long, or that it is boring or that we don’t like the cookies during the fellowship hour, we aren’t going to get people excited about joining us.

On the other hand, if we speak of the joy and blessings we share in Christ; if we speak of the Saviour, who loved us and freed us from our guilt and shame; if we live a life that is different from the world, then we are sharing in Christ’s succession plan. We can be cheerleaders for God’s church. We don’t have to convince people. We just have to share what we’ve been given.

As Christ ascended into heaven, He left His church looking to the future. That future, of course, includes His glorious return. It also includes the responsibility He has given His church to proclaim the Gospel. God gives servants like the apostles and prophets, the pastors and teachers to make known His love to us. We will remember that as we call another pastor. But we also

are witnesses to His love, His forgiveness and His deliverance through His death and resurrection. God grant that we may look to the future when ***“all people [are] saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.”*** (1 Timothy 2:4, ESV) Amen.