

If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

It has always been my custom, as time permits, to ask for prayer requests at the end of Bible studies. There are always those things that weigh heavily upon our hearts and that we want to share with our brothers and sisters in Christ—both to have them join in prayer, remembering Jesus' promise that *"if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven."* (Matthew 18:19, ESV) and to find the support and care of our family in Christ. Here, too, we think of the words of Holy Scripture that declare: *"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."* (Galatians 6:2, ESV) While I typically offer the petitions requested, I will say it would be better if we could all feel confident enough to speak those requests ourselves. There has been one common request of late, tied to the struggles and violence we are seeing in our world, most of it centred in these days around Iran. People are concerned, and their concern is about more than just rising gas prices! Since there are strong ties to the oil industry here in Calgary, we have people who have lived in areas that are now being hit by bombs. I have had the opportunity to speak to a few of them. Some have co-workers in the area. Some have friends that they came to know while serving in the Middle East. They are concerned for the safety of those people. Places where they once lived have been hit by bombs. They grieve the loss of security. What is happening in our world?

That question arises for many of us: "what is happening in our world?" What is all this going to mean in the coming days? There are those who have already turned to doomsday scenarios, fearing the absolute worst. There are those who look to the description of the end times and the visions of the book of Revelation and they assume that we are seeing the end. To be honest, that could indeed be true, but only God knows the time and the plans that will unfold according to His purpose.

As we look to these days, or as we look to each and every day of our lives, for that matter, God has an answer for our questions and our uncertainties. In the words of our text today, God gives a great and wonderful promise to our prayers. He says: *if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.* If we want things to be different in the world; if we want things to be different in Canada, then we need to pray. If we want things to be different in our church or in our homes, we need to pray. God calls us to prayer, and He has given great blessings to those who heed that call. He calls us to let go of the sinfulness that keeps us from Him. He promises to forgive our sins. And He promises to hear our prayers. He promises that prayers offered in accordance with His holy will shall, in fact, bring results. God has an answer for our anxiety and uncertainty in these days and all our days. Pray! He will hear and answer. He will bless His people. He will bless our land. He will bless us as a church.

The words of our text come after the dedication of the temple Solomon built to fulfill the desire of David, his father. That day Solomon offered a prayer saying: *"But will God indeed dwell with man on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built! Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O LORD my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you, that your eyes may be open day and night toward this house, the place where you have promised to set your name, that you may listen to the prayer that your servant offers toward this place. And listen to the pleas of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen from heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive."* (2 Chronicles 6:18–21, ESV) When he finished his prayer the glory of the Lord filled the temple so that the priests could not even enter the temple. Solomon offered sacrifices and the people celebrated with a feast for a whole week. Now the Lord appears to Solomon in a dream and tells him: *"When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land."* (2 Chronicles 7:13–14, ESV)

If we go back to that question, "what is happening in our world?", we might find ourselves trapped in the same wrong idea as the disciples in our Gospel lesson. They pass by a man who had been blind from birth. Their question to Jesus is: *"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"* (John 9:2, ESV) They saw all misfortune, pain and struggle as the consequence of sin. They aren't wrong; if there were no sin, we would not see disease and death. We would not see war

and hatred. We would not see unfaithfulness or selfishness. The problem is that they were looking to a specific sin as the cause of the blindness. There has to be some reason why this man deserved his blindness. Jesus' answers puts things into a different perspective: ***"It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him."*** (John 9:3, ESV)

Jesus wasn't saying that the parents or the man were sinless; after all, Scripture is very clear: ***"None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."*** (Romans 3:10–12, ESV) Sin is at work in the world, in our church, in our homes and yes, in our hearts. We all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and God has to deal with that sin. The disobedience of people can bring His discipline and His punishment. God may withhold the rain or let pestilence sweep the land. It is not that the Lord is vengeful, but that like a caring father, He will do what it takes to turn people from their sin. And what does He promise? Listen again to all that God says to Solomon and to us: ***If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.***

Many years ago, when he was a young boy, Norman Vincent Peale found a big, black cigar, slipped into an alley, and lit up. It didn't taste good, but it made him feel very grown up—until he saw his father coming. Quickly he put the cigar behind his back and tried to be casual. Desperate to divert his father's attention, Peale pointed to a billboard advertising the circus. "Can I go, Dad? Please, let's go when it comes to town." His father's reply taught a lesson he never forgot. "Son," he answered quietly but firmly, "never make a petition while at the same time trying to hide a smoldering disobedience."

In all the cares and worries of life, God wants us to pray and seek His face. But do we still have that smoldering disobedience in our hearts? We dare not forget that we are sinners. And our sins have brought hurt and struggle and strife. Our thoughts, deeds and words are far from being all they should be. But thanks be to God for His grace and mercy! God calls us to turn from our wicked ways—and He empowers us to do that as the Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts. God bids us to humble ourselves, trusting not in ourselves, but in His great mercy and power. God calls us to seek Him—and leads us to Himself through His Word of life.

More than that, God has already answered our prayers. We pray for His blessing and we are confident in faith that He is eager to come to our aid and to our rescue, because He has come to save us. We know that in a small manger in an insignificant town, Jesus Christ came for His people. He came to that hill called Golgotha and carried in His flesh the burden of a world's sin. He came to cross to die—and rose again that He may come to His people in their need. We seek a Lord who lives and who intercedes for us at the right hand of God. We know Christ is coming again, to bring us the fullness of all God has prepared for us.

And, my dear people, so loved by God that He gave His Son for you, never forget that nothing in this world—not drones with missiles and bombs; not evil dictators, not over-zealous politicians; not even the hatred of people against one another can keep the Lord from bringing His healing and grace to those who trust Him. Yes, evil continues to work in our world. Things are less than perfect. Yet God promises us through the words of our Old Testament lesson today: ***"For a long time I have held my peace; I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor; I will gasp and pant. I will lay waste mountains and hills, and dry up all their vegetation; I will turn the rivers into islands, and dry up the pools. And I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I do, and I do not forsake them."*** (Isaiah 42:14–16, ESV) What God tells us is that while there are times when He holds back, in order to fulfill His greater purposes, nothing can prevent Him from keeping His promises of forgiveness and life to those who turn to Him. Yes, things are different for us, for as Paul said in our Epistle lesson: ***"for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light"*** (Ephesians 5:8, ESV)

In that light we find hope, even as we wonder, "what is happening in our world?" We have the promises of God at work for us. He calls us to prayer. Prayer is essential to our lives as people of faith. All that we would do as a church—as the family of God—we do as we are led by prayer. In prayer we confess that we have fallen so far from His glory. In prayer we give thanks to God for the dying and rising Saviour who brings us forgiveness. In prayer, we come to seek God's will and purpose, and to find His strength for our tasks. In prayer we ask for His blessings, and in prayer we give thanks for the blessings He so freely gives. What would happen if every member of Foothills Lutheran Church began the day in prayer, and asked God for His blessings upon His church, His people, and their own lives? We know what will happen, for we have His promise: ***I***

will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal (and restore and bless) *their land* –and our church and our lives.
Amen.