

The 4th Sunday in Lent
“The Great Gospel Surprise”
Luke 15:20
March 30, 2025
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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, our text for this 4th Sunday in Lent is from our Gospel reading, Luke 15:20

“20And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.”

There is a well-known saying which Julius Cesar said after defeating Pharnaces II, the king of Pontus, in a battle in 47 BC. “I came, I saw, I conquered”. “Veni, Vidi, Vici”.

It’s been repeated by other leaders and popularized in movies. It generally means that there is a swift and decisive victory.

In the parable that Jesus speaks today about the lost son, this phrase could similarly be employed. Except, we could reverse the first two words and say: “I saw, I came and I conquered”.

For the father of the lost son was ever watchful, always hoping that his lost son would return. He constantly kept an eye out for him. And when he saw him from a distance, haggardly, beaten down by sin, almost unrecognizable from the son who had left his home, the father didn’t wait a second, but came to him! He ran to him.

And, then he conquered his son. Yes, he conquered him with compassion. He conquered him with love and through his arms around him and kissed him!

He conquered him even before his son could offer up terms of negotiation. He conquered him before his son could confess his wrong doing.

This was absolutely unexpected. This was the opposite of what was deserved. For the son had wasted all his possessions. He didn’t come back home a better man, but a worse one. He didn’t come back home to speak of his accomplishments that his father could be

proud of, but came back home in shame and poorness. He had nothing good to offer to his father that he would be taken back. He only came hoping for mercy.

But to his great surprise, there were no sharp words of condemnation. There was no ridicule, “I told you so”. There was no comparison with the older son who had stayed home and didn’t mess up his life. There were no words at all when the father came to his son, only the action of great compassion!

This was a great surprise! This was the Gospel surprise that every Christian knows and cherishes. For each of us is the lost son. Each of us has been tempted by the allurements of the world in so many ways and have not been always faithful to God. When we take an honest look at ourselves as we did in the confession of our sins at the beginning of the service, we speak the words of today’s Psalm, Psalm 32:5 with humbleness and a contrite heart.

**“I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I have not hidden.
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,”**

For without this acknowledgement of sin to God, there is a wasting away of body and soul as the Psalmist says.

**“When I kept silent, my bones grew old through my groaning all the day long.
4 For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me;
My vitality was turned into the drought of summer.”**

The lost son came to his senses after he hit rock bottom. No food, no friends, no hope. It was so bad he even desired to eat the pigs food if he could. He was wasting away. The younger son came to the world of sin, he saw and partook of all of its evil, and he was conquered. Veni, Vidi, vici.

The devil conquered Adam and Eve. And as a son or daughter of Adam and Eve, we too are born with original sin. We too are born in bondage of the devil, conquered, lost and without hope.

But there is hope. There is hope in the great compassion and mercy of God the Father. For Psalm 32 doesn’t leave us destitute and despairing, does it. But quickly says:

“And You forgave the iniquity of my sin.” *Veni, Vidi, Vici.*

For God saw, God came and God conquered... sin, death and the devil.

Yes, this battle was not bloodless. For God the Father to offer complete reconciliation instead of just punishment to each of us lost sons and daughters, there had to first be a battle for the reconciliation of the world! There had to be an offering for the sins of the whole world. And that battle happened on Mount Calvary.

For the Son of God, innocent and righteous, willingly gave His life for the sins of all people, for you and me! Our Epistle tells us so clearly of the great Gospel surprise!

**“18 Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation,
19 that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.”**

Not imputing their trespasses to them – not imputing your trespasses to you! Instead God the Father reconciled the world to Himself through Jesus Christ! For He imputed our trespasses to Jesus and imputed His righteousness to us!!

Listen to the great Gospel surprise intently again and again as we hear it in our epistle reading from 2 Corinthians 5:

“For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

Through faith in Jesus, you are now called the Righteousness of God. You are restored in Him, in Jesus. For apart from Jesus you are lost and condemned. But “in Him” you are found. You are a new creation as our epistle so beautifully says!

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.”

Anyone! All repentant and lost sinners who have received the great Gospel news of forgiveness in Jesus have become new!

As our Psalm 32 tells us:

“Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered.

2 Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity,

And in whose spirit there is no deceit.”

When your transgressions are forgiven, when you are washed of all sin in your baptism, when you eat and drink the body and blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sin, God says to you, “Veni, Vidi, Vici” I came, saw your sin and conquered it for you personally. He does this over and over again and again throughout your life.

That is why Martin Luther said in the very first of his 95 thesis that began the reformation of the rediscovery of the great Gospel surprise:

“When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

Our entire life is one of receiving again and again through Word and Sacraments, the Good News of the Gospel in Jesus Christ. God hears our confession again and again, as the lost son humbly said,

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.”

To our great surprise, God calls us His son and daughter again. He claims us anew and gives to us everything that is His. What a celebration ensues!

“Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. 23 And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; 24 for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ And they began to be merry.”

What’s mine, says the father is yours. Rejoice with me! So, right before Jesus tells us the parable of the lost son, He tells us of the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. Jesus tells us what happens in heaven when a lost sinner is found.

“Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” *Veni, Vidi, Vici* – the angels rejoice each time that God conquers sin and sets free one sinner!

So, Psalm 32 concludes with these words:

**“But he who trusts in the Lord, mercy shall surround him.
11 Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, you righteous;
And shout for joy, all you upright in heart!”**

In the parable, was everyone celebrating in the father’s household? Was the older son glad to see his younger brother? Were the pharisees celebrating to see Jesus rubbing elbows with sinners and tax collectors? No, they complained that Jesus received such sinners. And the older brother, with the same self-righteousness, would not go to the party.

Such is also the sin of haughty boaster of one’s works. This sin of thinking that one can merit salvation by one’s works needs to be conquered also. So the father, sees that the son is not present. He saw and came to his son. For the elder son needed to repent and the father shows the same compassion to him. He tells him that this same great Gospel is his also and always has been his.

“Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours.” The father calls on his son to acknowledge that his brother is part of the family again. He was lost but now is found. It’s a call of repentance to the older son to receive a lost sinner and show the same compassion that he has received.

The parable doesn’t tell us if the older son repented and went to the party or continued to begrudge his brother of mercy. The story is left unsaid. But your story and my story continues. The compassion of our Triune God continues. He is always faithful to forgive and restore and show us amazing love in Jesus. God continues to see our lostness when we sin, and comes to us with His precious Word and Sacraments of reconciliation and conquers all our sin again and again. *Vidi, Veni, Vici*. God sees, God comes, God conquers with the Good News of the Gospel in Jesus our Savior. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” Amen. (Philippians 4:7)