

Dear Members and Friends of St. John Lutheran,

"Wow! Was that awesome, or what? For the first time, I felt really close to God. Why can't my church be more like [this Christian concert]?" This was a quote from a young woman who had attended a Christian event. Pastors often refer to such experiences as "mountain top." Why can't church be more like the **mountain top experiences** that people feel from time-to-time. Isn't that what God wants? Doesn't He want us to *experience* His presence?

Let's look at what Scripture has to say. From Romans chapter 10, we read: *"For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. ⁶ But the righteousness based on faith says, 'Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' " (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷ or " 'Who will descend into the abyss?' " (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸ But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); ⁹ because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."* St. Paul says, *"Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'"* He's referring to our attempts at reaching out to God through **feelings and emotions** – as if we have to do the ascending to reach God. People that do this try to generate one mountain top experience after another to try and reach heaven. Paul also states that we should not try to sadden our hearts or fill ourselves with remorse, in an attempt to feel Christ's pain and suffering on the cross (*"Who will descend into the Abyss, that is, to bring Christ up from the dead"*).

To be sure, emotions are a gift from God, and we will experience God's peace and joy from time to time. We may also sense a deep sadness as we hear about Christ's suffering and death (this often happens on Good Friday). **But these feelings and emotions are not to be viewed as proof that God is alive in us.** Some days we will feel more connected to Him than others. Some days, we won't feel anything! St. Paul is warning us not to fall into the trap of human emotions – thinking that feeling God is part of our justification – that forgiveness of sins comes from inner feelings. We are indeed justified by faith in Christ, but this is **never** an inner feeling. Saving faith **points outside of ourselves** to the God-Man that hung on the cross of Calvary as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

So let's look at the young woman's final comment: *Why can't my church be more like this?* The design of our Divine Service is not accidental or the arbitrary work of man. Every element of our worship was design so that **God can come to us** with His blessings. This is how our Lord wants to bless us – through His means of grace. St. Paul says, *"But the righteousness based on faith says ... 'The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart' (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."* We confess with our mouths that we are sinners that deserve nothing but condemnation. We receive God's blessing of Absolution – we have the assurance of His forgiveness. We hear the Word through Scripture readings, preaching and hymns, and our faith is strengthened. We 'confess with our mouths' that Jesus is Lord when we confess together the creeds (Apostles', Nicene, Athanasian). And we receive the promise of the forgiveness of sins through the Sacraments (Baptism and the Lord's Supper) so that we can be freed from our

slavery to sin and the eternal consequences of not keeping God's law (even though we might not *feel* anything!).

Yes, the church down the road may offer praise songs that were designed to stir up your emotions. Yes, pastors can write sermons that are designed to tug on your heart strings and give you a warm, fuzzy feeling inside. But does the worship service deliver God's blessings through His means of grace? Are you confronted with your own sinfulness during worship? Has the clear message of the cross and Christ's atoning work on it been delivered in Word and song? If not, you're missing the blessings that God has for you. You may experience an emotional rush, but that will fade quickly when you leave the sanctuary. Then what do you have? God knows what is best for us, even when we're sure that we know a better way. He has given us His means of grace, through Word and Sacrament, and continues to keep us connected to Him. This is His promise, and our Lord is faithful!

Pastor Travis