

Our Saviour Lutheran Church • Baltimore, Maryland

The Anniversary of the Dedication

Ninety-Six Years • The House of God and the Gate of Heaven

1 Kings 8:22–30 • Revelation 21:1–5 • Luke 19:1–10

The Shape of This Festival

This church was dedicated on September 7, 1930, the Twelfth Sunday after Trinity that year, with the Rev. Adolph John Stiemke as pastor. The preacher was the Rev. Dr. William Dallmann, who had founded the congregation in 1892, and he titled his sermon “Confessing Christ in Augsburg in 1530 and in Baltimore in 1930.” The year was the four-hundredth anniversary of the Augsburg Confession, and the cornerstone of this building names it a church of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. The parish had bought the ground at 33rd Street and The Alameda in 1919 and put up a frame chapel seating two hundred, which served until this house was finished. The festival itself is ancient. German Lutherans called it Kirchweih, and it descends from the dedication of Solomon’s temple and from the Feast of Dedication that our Lord Himself attended in John 10.

The Propers are Jacob’s at Bethel. The Introit is his cry at the foot of the ladder, “Surely the Lord is in this place: this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” The Gradual adds God’s own promise from Exodus 20, “In all places where I record My name I will come unto thee and bless thee,” and the Verse is the sparrow of Psalm 84, who has found a house at the altars of the Lord of hosts.

What Makes a Building Holy: not the stone, not the architecture, and not the act of dedication, but the Word of God and prayer, since this is where the means of grace are delivered to sinners. Luther, on the patriarchs: wherever an altar is built and a tent pitched, “there the establishment of a little church is pointed out, a church in which people came together to teach and hear the Word of God, to pray, to praise God.”

The Color is red, for the Spirit who gathers and sanctifies the Church through the Gospel, and for the blood on which she is founded.

The Readings at a Glance

Old Testament: 1 Kings 8:22–30. Solomon stands before the bronze altar in front of the whole assembly and spreads out his hands toward heaven. The Hebrew is precise: not yad, the hand, but kappayw, the hollow of the palms, turned up and open, which in that world was the posture of a man with nothing in them. He praises the God who keeps “the covenant and the hesed,” the steadfast, unearned love, and marks the difference between Yahweh and every deity who must be bought. Looking at seven years of stonecutting he says, “You spoke with Your mouth, and with Your hand You have fulfilled it this day.” Then comes the hinge of the prayer and of this festival: will God indeed dwell on the earth? The heavens and the heaven of heavens cannot contain Him, much less this house. The building does not confine God. God binds Himself to a place so that sinners may find Him, and He gives His reason for it: “that Your eyes may be open toward this house night and day, the place of which You said, My name shall be there.” The petition Solomon ends on is the one this parish still needs: hear, and forgive.

Epistle: Revelation 21:1–5. John sees a new heaven and a new earth, and the Greek chooses its word carefully: kainos, new in kind and quality, not neos, merely recent. This is not the scrapping of creation but its renewal, the same promise made to our bodies in the resurrection. The sea is no more, which to his first hearers meant that chaos, the beast’s own element, and every separation are finished. The city comes down out of heaven from God: no one builds it upward, as at Babel. She is a bride adorned, kekosmemene, dressed not in jewels but in the righteousness given her at the font. Then the voice from the throne: behold, the skene of God is with men, the tabernacle, the same word the Greek Old Testament used of the tent Moses raised, and the same root John used when he wrote that the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us. What we receive here in Word and Sacrament under a roof will then be unveiled without one. He will wipe away every tear, and the One on the throne says, “Behold, I am making all things new,” in the present tense.

Holy Gospel: Luke 19:1–10. Zacchaeus bears a name built on the Hebrew for clean and innocent, which everyone in Jericho would have heard as a joke. He is an architelones, a word found nowhere else in the New Testament, the contractor who bid for the customs of a major trade crossing and took his cut from the men beneath him, and he is rich, which in Luke is a diagnosis. One chapter earlier a rich man walked away sorrowful and Jesus said a camel would sooner pass through a needle’s eye. Now the camel is up a tree. He kept trying to see who Jesus was, blocked by the crowd and by his own height, so he ran ahead and climbed, which no man of his standing would do. Jesus stops beneath him, calls him by name, and says He must stay at his house: dei, the word Luke uses for what God has determined, and meinaí, to abide. They grumble that He

has gone in to a sinner. Zacchaeus stands and gives away half, and repays fourfold, the heaviest restitution the Law knows. Salvation came to that house because the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost, and He still enters houses He was not invited into.

The Hymns and Their Stories

Opening Hymn: “Alleluia! Let Praises Ring” (LSB 822)

This hymn took more than half a century and three authors to reach the four stanzas we sing. It begins in 1642 with Martin Rinckart, the pastor who gave us “Now Thank We All Our God,” and two long wedding poems he wrote on the Song of Solomon, twenty-eight and twenty-one stanzas, celebrating the marriage of Christ and His Church. In 1655 an anonymous writer expanded the second into thirty-one stanzas in memory of a government official named Johan Scheffer, and rebuilt it on Revelation 21, the new Jerusalem coming down as a bride adorned for her husband, which is this morning’s Epistle. In 1698 a Pietist hymnal printed at Darmstadt cut the whole thing to four stanzas and made it a hymn to the Holy Trinity in turn: the Father who made and keeps us, the Lamb who redeemed His Bride, the Spirit who works faith, and the Triune God praised with the angels. Lutheran Worship changed the opening “Hallelujah” to “Alleluia” in 1982, which is what Rinckart himself wrote. It rides on Philipp Nicolai’s tune of 1599, “How Lovely Shines the Morning Star.”

Hymn of the Day: “Christ Is Our Cornerstone” (LSB 912)

This hymn was written for the day we are keeping. It comes from an anonymous Latin poem of the eighth century or earlier, *Urbs beata Hierusalem*, “Jerusalem, blessed city,” which the medieval Church divided for the dedication of a church: the first half, on the heavenly Jerusalem, was sung in the evening, and the second half, which begins *Angularis fundamentum*, “Christ is sent as the cornerstone,” was sung the next morning. That second half produced two English hymns that look unrelated. John Mason Neale’s “Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation” keeps the Latin meter; this one, made by the Anglican John Chandler for his *Hymns of the Primitive Church* in 1837, recasts it entirely, and our hymnal prints Chandler’s words unaltered apart from the order of the stanzas. The tune has its own story. John Darwall, vicar of Walsall, wrote a tune for every one of the 150 psalms in the Tate and Brady psalter, and this is his Psalm 148. His grandson wrote in 1893 that in Walsall he had only ever heard two of the 150 sung, and this was one; he added that his grandfather’s original opening note gave it “a more festal character.”

Hymn: “Built on the Rock” (LSB 645)

In 1807 the British fleet bombarded Copenhagen, and the Church of Our Lady burned with its great spire collapsing into the ruins. The cathedral lay wrecked for years. Hymnologists suspect that sight is behind this text, written in 1837 by N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783–1872), who had fought his way back through the Rationalism of his day to a Christianity centered on Christ present in Word and Sacrament. His Danish first line is not ours: he wrote “The Church, it is an old house,” an old house that stands even when its towers fall and sink into the ground. The translator supplied “Built on the Rock,” fairly enough, since Matthew 7 and 16 stand behind the thought. The second stanza is the one for a dedication anniversary: God is not enclosed in any building, He “chooses to live with us in love,” and He makes our bodies His temple. Grundtvig wrote nine stanzas, cut two himself, and our hymnal prints five. Ludvig Lindeman of Norway gave it the tune in 1840, and Carl Døving brought it into English for the Lutheran Hymnary of 1913.

Closing Hymn: “Oh, What Their Joy” (LSB 675)

Peter Abelard (1079–1142), a celebrated French scholar, lived one of the best-known love stories of the Middle Ages. He secretly married Heloise; her uncle Fulbert, believing Abelard meant to be rid of her when he sent her to a convent for safety, had men break into his rooms at night and mutilate him. Both entered religious life, and years later Abelard wrote a whole hymnal for the community Heloise led as abbess. This hymn closes its first book, appointed for Saturday Vespers, the hour when the week’s work ends and the Sabbath rest begins, which is why it longs for “those endless Sabbaths” of heaven. Like today’s Epistle, it draws on John’s vision of the new Jerusalem, and in the second stanza it calls that city a place where “wish and fulfillment are not severed,” words that carry a heavy weight from this author. Neale translated it in 1851, and the tune comes from a Paris antiphoner of the later seventeenth century.