

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Third Sunday in Lent, March 3, 2024
Psalm 19, John 2:13-22
The Law of the LORD Revives the Soul

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In this sermon, I want to touch on both our Old Testament Lesson and our Gospel Lesson. But my main text comes from today's Psalm — Psalm 19. Let us consider the first part of Verse 7. It goes this way:

⁷The law of the LORD is perfect and *revives the soul* (Psalm 19:7, LBW)

And so I think to myself, "I wonder whether any of us could use some soul reviving?" I bet we could.

To "revive" something is to give it more life, more spirit, more strength. When Pastor Carol travels, I seem always to forget to water the plants, and so Carol comes home and finds the plants all dragging and dried out. But if she has not been gone too long, she can revive the plants. She plucks off the dead leaves and she waters the plants in a careful way, and they spring back. They revive!

So it is with the soul. It can revive.

It sometimes comes the way of a person, that he or she becomes dispirited. He walks with his head down. She seems to take joy in fewer and fewer things. It might be that the person suffers with depression. Martin Luther did for much of his life. If depression is the problem, we live in a day and an age in which there are splendid medicines and medical doctors and therapists, especially here in New York City. Our congregation has a longtime relationship with the Lutheran Counseling Center - [| Lutheran Counseling Center \(lccny.org\)](http://lccny.org) - which makes the cost of therapy more manageable. Tuck it away in your memory that if you need a therapist, I think we can make it work out.

But sometimes we need some soul reviving, not so much because we are depressed, but because we have become doubtful about our lives. Our conscience is not easy. We are not at peace. Maybe we committed no crime and we are not on the run, and yet we are troubled by the thought that we could have done better. Or, we are troubled because the future looks dim unless we change our ways.

Then, it is great to know that the soul can be revived. Our Psalm says that the key is God's holy law:

⁷The law of the LORD is perfect and *revives the soul* (Psalm 19:7, LBW)

It *is* possible to walk again holding the head up, enjoying the look of the clouds and the sunshine. It *is* possible to feel better about ourselves. There *is* a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.¹

Now, if the law of the LORD were flawed and all messed up, then it is not likely to help us much. But our text says that it is “perfect”:

⁷The law of the LORD is perfect...

Our Maker knows us and knows what manner of life is good for us. His holy law does not deplete life but increases it. It revives the soul.

So, *what is* the law of the LORD? If it can revive us and restore our spirits, it is good to know what it is. That is valuable information.

As it turns out, our Lord Jesus gives us a two-part summary of God’s holy law. Jesus teaches that it is a matter of love. And so we read the answer of Jesus to the lawyer:

³⁵And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him. ³⁶“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” ³⁷And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. ³⁸This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:35-40, RSV)

Love, then, is the thing. Love more, and it will help revive your spirit.

But we must hasten to clarify what we mean by “love.” For that, our First Lesson helps. The Ten Commandments teach us the ways of love. If, then, you want to love the Lord your God with all your heart, then worship only him, do not take his name in vain, and come to church. How can we claim to love anyone if we avoid that person’s presence? So, come to church.

And if we would love our neighbor, the Ten Commandments give us details on how to do that. They are sensible. In fact, they are built into the human heart by our Maker. So, if you would love your neighbor, do not go around stealing from your neighbor or lying about your neighbor or breaking your neighbors heart through adultery. I bet I could use the rest of this sermon to look at each of the Ten Commandments, one by one, and preach to

¹ From today’s sermon hymn, “There Is a Balm in Gilead,” *With One Voice* 737.

anyone guilty, “Cut it out! Stop that!” And if we obeyed, it would make us better people and would revive our souls.

But I do not mean to do that here. Your pastors are available for individual conversation if that would help you think out any one commandment in your life. So the Pastor’s study is available to you. Here in this sermon, I want to bypass a detailed look at the commandments and instead lift up a general summary passage from Martin Luther’s *Large Catechism*. Do not think that Luther’s emphasis on the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ led him to discount the holy law of the Lord. No, Luther believed in both the law *and* the gospel. He did not want one to suppress the other. He does not hesitate, then, to praise both the law and the gospel. Here is his important summary at the end of his long discussion of the Ten Commandments:

Here, then, we have the Ten Commandments, a summary of divine teaching on what we are to do to make our whole life pleasing to God. They are the true fountain from which all good works must spring, the true channel through which all good works must flow. Apart from these Ten Commandments no action or life can be good or pleasing to God, no matter how great or precious it may be in the eyes of the world. (Large Catechism, “Conclusion of the Ten Commandments,” Kolb-Wengert Edition)

So, that is one thing: Luther says that the Ten Commandments teach us how to live in such a way that our life is pleasing to God.

But today’s text goes beyond this, in a happy way. Our Psalm teaches us, not just that obeying God’s holy law pleases *God*, but also that it pleases *us*! It revives our souls.

⁷The law of the LORD is perfect and *revives the soul* (Psalm 19:7, LBW)

It is possible for the sin-sick soul to become healthier and happier. Try living a more holy life.

The “House of the Rising Sun” is a pub or a house of prostitution. The version of the song by the Animals back in 1964 joins other modern versions in placing the House in New Orleans. “The House of the Rising Sun.” It is a clever name, a revealing name. It imagines that the night is spent in drinking or prostitution and the actors stagger out as the dawn approaches... as the sun is rising.

Oh, mothers, tell your children
Not to do what I have done

Spend your lives in sin and misery
In the House of the Rising Sun

And that is good advice, carried along by rough experience: Do not spend your life in sin and misery... in the House of the Rising Sun or in your own pub or in your own home.

This is why Jesus is so upset in today's Gospel Lesson. He is the one person on the face of this earth who knows that sin is suffering. For all its popularity, sin is not good for us. Sin diminishes us. So, when people come to church, Jesus does not want them to be met by salespeople hawking oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers at their business. It made him furious. He actually made a whip of cords and drove them out and overturned their tables (John 2). Because, you see, souls are at stake. When people come to church, they are doing something noble. They are placing themselves into a location where they have a right to think that God Almighty is going to be speaking to their hearts. At least for the morning, they have left the House of the Rising Sun behind them. They have left its sin and misery behind them. They have entered a place on earth where they hope for God's Word, and the managers of the Church dare not distract them with worldly matters nor, worse still, mislead them back into sin.

What a contrast our Psalm poses between sin and misery, on the one hand, and the ways of God, on the other! The ways of sin drift toward lost years and bitterness of spirit. But the ways of God are sweet. This is what we read in Verse 10 of our Psalm. The laws of the Lord are ...

¹⁰More to be desired are they than gold, more than | much fine gold,*
sweeter far than honey, than honey | in the comb. (Psalm 19:10,
LBW)

Gold, fine gold, and honey are nice things on earth. But the Psalmist has found the ways of the Lord to be better.

We have one life to live. We have our threescore or fourscore years entrusted to us, and it is a matter of interest to eternity how we spend those years. Let us not spend them in sin and misery. Instead, let us spend them drawing ever closer to the One who, in his love for mankind, drove out the moneychangers and overturned their tables, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.