

The Jesus Mask

Co-Missioners,

Today we share what might be called an exercise in devotional theology. It comes from our editor, Jerome Burce. Back in March, when the church he serves shut down its regular operations, he started posting a daily devotion to the congregation's Facebook page ("Messiah Lutheran Church of Fairview Park"). That's one way of working from home, as he says.

The short devotional reflection is a genre unto itself. It's been practiced since forever, as it seems. "Portals of Prayer"—Concordia Publishing House, LCMS—was a fixture in the homes that a lot of us grew up in. Burce reports that it's still sought and used by his congregation's senior contingent. So is "Christ In Our Home"—Augsburg Fortress, ELCA. A Roman Catholic priest stops by periodically at Messiah for copies of each of them.

Here are some of the challenges the genre presents. Brevity. Clarity. Quotidian topicality. An utter avoidance of terms like the last. Fidelity to the Word.

And if you're penning such things from a Crossings perspective, then you're also driven by the prayer that whatever you dole out on this particular day is a genuine crumb from the table of Master Christ. See last Sunday's Gospel, Matt. 15:27 in particular. This means addressing the real and immediate needs of genuine sinners by scraping at the scabs of false faith and the estrangement from God that festers beneath. Then it means touting Christ—crucified, no less—as God's own answer to this estrangement, and yet again inviting the faith in him that will

satisfy, heal, enliven, and grace the day.

And all of this in 200 words or so. One is bound to blow it as often as not. Lord have mercy first and foremost on those who dare to push that mercy.

Last week Burce strung together a six-day series around the theme of masks, one of our current hot issues. We offer it for your own musing and meditation, and for your thoughtful critique as well. How might you, likewise called to deliver a down-to-earth Gospel to down-to-earth people, accomplish this more effectively? That's a question we can never stop asking.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossings Community

The Jesus Mask: Six Timely Devotions

by Jerome Burce



Masks.

I saw them everywhere on the past week's road trip, on every face, in every store, at every rest stop. As I sit at my desk again on this morning after, I can't recall a single person who wasn't masked—aside, that is, from a fellow at the gas station nearest my home. Everyone else in that thin slice of America I drove through seems to have gotten it. At last. Thank God.

And will we still be wise three months from now? God grant that too.

Now. If only God's Christians would be just as serious about strapping on their Jesus masks when they head out their doors for another day in public places. Can you imagine what this country would look like or how safe it would start to feel?

Let's think this week about the Jesus mask, God's gift of gifts for the health of the world during the lifelong road trip that all of us are on.

Yes, it's way past time for us baptized types to wise up and use it—deliberately, consistently. God grant this above all.

August 11—

A bit of Latin to start the day: "larvae Dei." The masks of God.

That comes from Martin Luther, though whether he coined the term or snatched it from some older thinker, I cannot say. In either case, he did his usual Luther-thing and spun some gold from it. Gold as in Gospel. A little chunk of gleaming good news for each of us to slip into pockets or purses and carry through this coming stretch of hours.

Masks are God's thing. He wears them all the time in his dealings with us. Some are scary. A pandemic, say. Behind it lurks the grim unhappy face of Whoever Is In Charge—or so it must be. Haven't all of us been sensing as much these past five

months?

Ah, says Luther, look again. Rest your eyes and hearts today on that other, greater mask, the one God strapped on in earnest the night his Christ was born. "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see," as we sing on Christmas Eve.

God's favorite mask is the Jesus mask. He wears it all the time these days. That's the only place to look if you want to see what's really ticking in God's heart where you're concerned right now—and not just you, but your children, your parents, your neighbors. Including those unruly neighbors who don't seem to care enough to strap their masks on in dreadful times like these.

More on this tomorrow.

August 12–

On my trip last week I saw one mask that made me cringe. You could lock me in a room full of covid-positive people and I still wouldn't wear it. It advertised a point of view I find abhorrent. I thought poorly of the person who had it on.

There are yard signs here and there in my wider neighborhood that produce the same reaction in me. "What gives with the people who live in THAT house? Are they out of their minds?" Not that I'd say this out loud of course, or loud enough for them to hear it.

Ah, the times we are in. How stuck we are with the burden of hiding our contempt for other human beings. How else can we get along?

I'm so glad that God covered up his own dismay with us when he put the Jesus mask on. I look at that, and what I see in God is grace, compassion, forgiveness, endurance. A willingness to give

your life for someone you can't stand. I keep praying that the Holy Spirit will keep that mask on my face too.

August 13-

I have a funeral later this morning. We'll be commending a dear saint to our Lord's gracious keeping. She was 104 when she died last week. That's a lot of time to spend in a world that swirls incessantly with the deadly virus of sin. She spent almost all of it in the Jesus mask that a pastor strapped on her face when he baptized her in 1916. It did what the Jesus mask does for anyone who takes it seriously and bothers to wear it. It kept her from spoiling other people's lives with her own sin to the extent she otherwise might have. It also protected her from the infections of dismay and death the sins of other people keep stirring up. Above all, it marked her in the eyes of God as his own dear daughter.

God has a plan for this daughter of his—for the rest of us well. It's life everlasting in an age to come when the word "mask" has no meaning whatsoever. No one can imagine what such a thing might be, or why anybody would think to wear one.

"Come quickly, Lord Jesus. Keep your promise. Make this happen. Amen."



August 14–

I'm musing this morning on why so many Christians tend to be so cranky. I think it has to do with the mask we have to wear to be who we are. The Jesus mask, of all things.

I have a vivid memory of the first time I wore a mask on a trip through a grocery store. It was back in April, I think—or early May? About halfway through I noticed that my mood was changing. I was getting seriously testy. For Mr. Unobservant to catch this in himself meant that something dramatic was going on.

I think I mentioned this to my wife before I snapped at her in Aisle 10 or 11. I hope I did—and yes, apologies are still in order.

I remember too how fiercely quick I was to tear that cloth off my face the moment we stepped out outside. It felt so good to breathe freely again. Three months later I'm still doing that. Ripping the mask off as soon as I can. Breathing as I was born

to.

So here's the thing with the Jesus mask. It interferes with the air this sinner breathes as a matter of course. An air packed with the gases of selfishness and conceit, of suspicion and judgment, of me-first, you-second and a whole lot of see-it-my-way-or else.

I 'm used to that stuff. Truth be told, it relaxes me. It feels so natural.

And then some pastor, acting for God, straps a Jesus mask on my little baptized face, and later as I grow up a bunch of other pastors or parents or Christian companions keep nagging me to wear it, and every time I read the Bible the Holy Spirit gets in the act and nags me too.

But really, it's so annoying to breathe the filtered air that God's new creatures are designed to breathe. Filled with other vapors, like gentleness, kindness, patience, love. You-first. Me-last. A whole lot of see-it-Jesus'-way-whatever-that-costs.

I'm still so hooked on the old stuff. No wonder this Christian gets cranky sometimes and itches to run mask-free for a while.

"Christ, have mercy when you catch me doing that!"

August 15-

Really, this mask thing isn't about me. It's about you. It's about this person I've never met before and will never see again.

She's in her seventh long hour of shoveling groceries past the scanner of the store I dropped into while passing through a town a hundred miles from home. Shall I be the one symptomless stranger in ten or a hundred thousand who sprays her with virus

and makes her sick and ruins her year? I don't think so. So on goes the mask as I step through the doors, and on it stays however much I chafe against it.

Or that's the idea as I understand it. If it was just about me—about whether she's the one who would make me sick—chances are I'd run the mask-free risk like those folks who ride motorbikes without helmets because it feels so good to have the wind blowing through your hair. (It really does.)

So for her sake I suffer the mask, and for your sake too. And so it is as well with the Jesus mask.

Our Lord never said it would be easy to look or sound like him. In fact he said the opposite. "If you want to come after me, grab your cross and let's go." The folks who write our liturgies ought to stick that line in the baptismal rite. "What you're in for won't be fun," the pastors say as they mark the cross of Christ on all those little baby faces.

Yes, it's tough for the sinner I am to wear the Jesus mask. To breathe in and out with the Spirit-enriched air of mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and love. But I do it—I keep trying to do it—for the sake of that stranger at the scanner, to say nothing of the people I share my everyday life with.

It's about them. It's not about me. "Help me, God, to remember that—you who wear the Jesus mask for all our sakes today."

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use

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