

# Trinity Te Deum

The official newsletter for Trinity Lutheran Church

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Sunday School and Bible Study 9:15 AM – Divine Service 10:30 AM

Austin, Texas July 29, 2012 Volume 14, Issue 4

August- September 2012

## A Creed for the Third Millennium

It is the year 2032. A new ice age has set in. The northern states are virtually unlivable in the winter, so people must migrate south. It appears that God has abandoned the world. People are afflicted with a host of psychological problems that one therapist calls millennial neurosis. His positive message is able to give hope to the masses. He writes a book entitled *God in Cursing*. The title is taken from an Elizabeth Barrett Browning poem. "For God, in cursing, gives us better gifts / Than men in benediction." By positive thinking mankind can thrive in the new ice age. His gospel is really that of humanism.

The above is the storyline from a book by Colleen McCullough entitled *A Creed for the Third Millennium*. She wrote it in 1985. It's interesting that 27 years ago the apocalypse on the horizon was not global warming but cooling. It's interesting that it can be said God gives better in cursing than men can give in benediction. It's also interesting that the "messiah" who latches on to this truth makes it completely about what men do and not about what God gives. Finally it's interesting that even

now, in this third millennium since the birth of Christ, we still need creeds.

This is not the position of the contemporary church or the so-called emerging church. No, we've got to start from scratch. We've got to rethink, to reformulate the faith that was once and for all handed down to the saints. The doctrines that were handed down to us through the centuries are not sure and certain enough for the new millennium. We can't accept anything that has been confessed before us.

This is not the recipe for a thriving church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century but for apostatizing, for falling away. For centuries, Lutherans have called the Small Catechism "the layman's Bible." Do you know why? Because in it is distilled the great truths of the Holy Scriptures. Go ahead, sit down with just your Bible, and write yourself a creed. Do you think you will come up with something better than the Apostles' Creed or Luther's Small Catechism?

In truth everyone has a creed; everyone has something to say about what they believe the Bible teaches. If they believe the Bible is fairy tales, that's their creed. If they believe the Bible is unreliable, that's their creed.

What's your creed? I suggest that neither you nor me nor anyone else could come up with a better creed than the Apostles'. Furthermore, as we move forward in this third millennium into its challenges, problems, uncertainties, and anxieties, I think Luther's explanation to the Apostles' Creed is the creed for us. That's why our Midweek Advent and Lent sermon series on the Second Chief Part of our Small Catechism will be entitled *A Creed for the Third Millennium*. The Creed that served us in the first two millennia is well able to serve us in the third, and Luther's explanation that has served for almost half a millennium is more than adequate to serve us for at least a few more centuries.

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## A Creed for the Third Millennium:

(An Advent and Lent Midweek Sermon Series on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chief Part)

All services are on Wednesdays at 7:30 PM

November 28  
Believes in a Creator

December 05  
Believes in a Provider

December 12  
Believes in a Protector

February 13  
Believes a Man is Lord

February 20  
Believes in the Purchasing  
Power of Blood, Suffering, and  
Death

February 27  
Believes Righteousness, Inno-  
cence, & Blessedness can be  
Eternal

March 06  
Believes it Cannot Believe

March 13  
Believes There is no Salvation  
Outside the Church

March 20  
Believes There will be a Last  
Day

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## Saving Thelma and Louise

I remember a few years back how our nation expressed so much impatience with gridlock in congress. We heard how people just wanted something to get done. We were tired of going nowhere. It made me think of a couple of women in a car at the edge of the Grand Canyon. With the image of Thelma and Louise in my mind, it occurred to me that there are times when a foot on the brake is better than a foot on the gas pedal!

At the Southern District Con-  
vention last week, I heard the

tension between those who wanted to step on the gas and those who wanted to hit the brakes. I don't believe that either one was trying to be reckless. No one wants to drive the Synodical bus over the cliff. However, it occurs to me that we've got our Thelma and Louise moments!

For instance, our Southern District was considering a resolution for a partnering relationship with the five million member Ethiopian Evangelical Church, *Mekane Yesus*. We heard from their President. We heard from people who had been there. We heard how it's time for us to tell the world about Jesus. Well, who can argue with that? And who doesn't want to be a positive influence on other church bodies? When there are so many other directions possible, and so many other influences, it is nothing but fraternal for us to want to reach out a helping hand, provide resources and positive, confessional encouragement. However...

When brothers came to the microphone to express concerns over that church body's ordination of women (which appears from their website to be something they consider a positive thing), I heard from some that familiar sentiment: ***We're tired of gridlock!*** I can appreciate that, especially when people have gotten excited about something and want to move forward.

However, when you're edging toward the cliff, depressing the

brake pedal is a good thing! In our Synod today, there are strong sentiments in favor of ordaining women. Others are doing it, why shouldn't we? More to the point of last week's convention, I seemed to detect in a few remarks the idea that "*We in the LCMS don't ordain women, but others do. It's part of their culture,*" as if that makes it okay.

During floor discussion, the EECMY was commended for its stand against homosexuality. But, isn't that something many in our own country are comfortable with? We don't do it, but many do. With logic like that, it's only a matter of time before our own Synod goes the way of others, since we live in a world that continues to influence us, and the more it does, the more people will consider it acceptable, whatever "it" happens to be.

*We're tired of gridlock!* We want to tell people about Jesus! We want to lend a helping hand! Fine, but let's be sure what the Scriptures say, and not simply what a culture – ours or any other – happens to deem permissible. What does God say? And so, what Jesus are we talking about? The one who ***does*** ordain women or the one who does not?

The Christ of Holy Scripture is the One Who died for sins. The Christ we are called to speak about is the One Who has real forgiveness for real sins – sins which sinners recognize and confess to be sins. If that doesn't include same-sex orien-

tation, then it doesn't need Jesus and His forgiveness. If it doesn't include Johnny having two daddies or Madeline having two moms, then it probably doesn't include the Bridegroom being represented by women pastors so that the Bride is effectively served by a bridesmaid rather than by a man who stands, like a groomsman should, in the stead of Christ. But if it does, then it's time we stopped relegating such things to whatever a community or culture allows and start addressing them according to God's Word, because sinners need repentance and forgiveness, and that's the reason to speak of Jesus!

I don't think anyone wanted to run the bus over a cliff last week, and I know those who were giving taps to the brake pedal were not trying to slow down the genuine work of reaching the lost with the saving Gospel of Christ Jesus. Quite the contrary! However, if we want the world to not just hear the name "Jesus" repeated, without really getting to the Gospel; if we want them to actually benefit from His mercy, we need to clearly diagnose the nations' ills according to God's Word. We need to lovingly call sin what it is, so that Christ may be applied as the Cure! If we just want to end gridlock and move forward without being clear what constitutes sin, I'm not sure how we'll ever get talk about Jesus where it needs to be, namely, by applying His death and resurrection, His Baptism, Absolution and Holy Supper, to the very things

people and a culture may accept and approve, but which God calls sin and for which He has provided a Savior.

Pr. Rick Sawyer  
Vice-chairman, [ACELC](#)

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## The Blind Man and The Elephant

By Rev. Todd Wilken

You've heard the story of the elephant, haven't you? There were six blind men who were curious to know what an elephant was like. Each one laid his hands on a different part of the animal. The first blind man felt the elephant's side and concluded that an elephant was like a wall. The second man felt the elephant's tusk and concluded that an elephant was like a spear. The third man felt the elephant's trunk and concluded that an elephant was like a snake. The three other blind men felt the elephant's knee, ear and tail and concluded that an elephant was like a tree, a fan and a rope respectively.<sup>1</sup>

The story is the subject of a famous poem by John Godfrey Saxe, *The Blind Men and the Elephant*. What you might not know about this poem is how it ends:

*And so these men of Indostan  
Disputed loud and long,  
Each in his own opinion  
Exceeding stiff and strong,  
Though each was partly in the  
right, And all were in the wrong!  
So, oft in theologic wars  
The disputants, I ween,*

*Rail on in utter ignorance  
Of what each other mean,  
And prate about an Elephant  
Not one of them has seen!2*

This story is often used as a critique of religion in general, and Christianity in particular. The general critique is that "theologic wars" or theological differences among the religions are the result of ignorance rather than true knowledge of God. The critique particular to Christianity is that theological differences among Christians are the result of the same ignorance.

Is what this story says true? When it comes to theology, are we Christians like blind men, each with his own partly-right, partly-wrong opinions? Is Christianity itself merely one, limited, half-true perspective on God?

Although it usually doesn't, the elephant story should raise all sorts of red flags for Christians. First, it asserts that all knowledge of God is perspectival. Second, the story suggests that knowledge of God is gained by examination. Third, the story implies that knowledge of God is limited to analogy. Finally, the story states that all religions have some partial knowledge of the true God.

### **My Perspective, Your Perspective**

The elephant story is a perfect example of Perspectivism, an idea developed by nineteenth century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Perspectivism is a theory of how we know what we know --an epistemology. Nietzsche famously wrote: "The only seeing we have is seeing from a perspective; the only

knowledge we have is knowledge from a perspective.”<sup>3</sup> Perspectivism says that our knowledge, like the blind men’s knowledge of the elephant, is always partial, always limited by our particular point of view, and never completely accurate.<sup>4</sup>

Many Christians today are Perspectivists. They might not know what that word means, or even who Friedrich Nietzsche was, but they are Perspectivists nonetheless. When it comes to Christian doctrine, they no longer use words like “true” and “false” or “right” and “wrong.” Instead, they prefer “my point of view” and “your point of view.” Objective truth has been replaced by subjective perspective; doctrinal definition has been replaced by positions, views and opinions.

The fatal flaw of Perspectivism is that it is logically self-refuting. Nietzsche’s dictum, “the only knowledge we have is knowledge from a perspective” must apply equally to all knowledge, including the dictum itself. If all knowledge is mere perspective, then Perspectivism is also mere perspective. But the Perspectivist doesn’t think that his knowledge is just one perspective.

Consider a character in the elephant story that is usually ignored, the narrator. Again, the narrator ends the elephant story with the following judgment of the blind men and their perspectives:

*And so these men of Indostan  
Disputed loud and long,  
Each in his own opinion  
Exceeding stiff and strong,  
Though each was partly in the  
right, And all were in the wrong!*

Of course, the narrator can only make this judgment because he has actually seen an elephant, right? He has seen an elephant and knows far more about elephants than the blind men know. He has seen an elephant and knows that an elephant is really nothing like a wall, spear, snake tree, fan or rope.

Isn’t that exactly what Perspectivists are claiming? Aren’t they claiming to have seen the elephant, or in their case, to have seen God? They believe that they are in a position to judge the truth claims of all religions: “each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong.” Yet that judgment would require that the Perspectivist himself knows something absolute and comprehensive about God. So, Perspectivists inadvertently and inconsistently claim to know more about God than all the world’s religions combined. The elephant story shows what Perspectivists really think: Everyone’s knowledge of God is partly-right and partly-wrong except their own.

## Touching God’s Tail

The elephant story also suggests that knowledge of God is gained by examination. In the story, one of the blind men put his hands on the elephant’s tail and concluded that an elephant was like a rope. Of course, an elephant isn’t anything like a rope. Yet each of the other blind men put their hands on a different part of the animal, and reach different, but equally mistaken conclusions. How do they reach these conclusions? They begin knowing nothing about elephants. They cannot see the elephant, so they examine the animal with

their hands. They fail to realize that there is more to the elephant than the small part they have examined.

So, the elephant story suggests that Christian theology works the same way, we are all like blind men groping various parts of an elephant: We begin knowing nothing about God. We nevertheless are able to examine one or more of God’s attributes, but like the blind men, we fail to realize that there is more to God than the limited set of attributes we have noticed.

Does this describe how Christians gain knowledge of God? At first, it might seem so. It is true that in our natural, fallen state, we know nothing about God -- not God himself. Speaking of fallen man’s state of knowledge, the Apostle Paul writes,

*For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.<sup>5</sup>*

Our natural knowledge of God is extremely limited. “What can be known” isn’t much: his eternal power and divine nature. That is, we know only that an all powerful Deity exists, nothing more. In this sense, we are like those blind men who have heard of elephants, but know nothing about them.

It is also true that in our fallen state, we are spiritually blind. In fact, regarding our spiritual blindness, the elephant story really doesn’t go far enough. In the

story, the men are blind, but they are still able to examine the elephant directly with their hands. According to Christianity, we are not only unable to see God, we are unable to directly examine him in any way. And we only know of God (like the blind men know of elephants) because God has made plain his existence and power --but nothing more-- in the created world around us.

So, regarding our natural knowledge of God and our spiritual blindness, the elephant story also has a point. In fact, we're worse off than blind men when it comes to knowing God. But this is where the story goes wrong. It assumes that we gain knowledge of God by examination. We don't.

Christian knowledge of God isn't gained by examining the attributes of God; it is given by revelation. God doesn't reveal himself as a composite of individual observable attributes. He reveals himself in the Incarnation, in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

To rightly understand Christian theology, consider this twist on the story: what if the elephant could talk? In the elephant story, what would happen if the elephant weren't the passive object of the blind men's examination? What if the elephant could talk and tell the blind men exactly what and who he is?

This is why the elephant story ultimately fails as a critique of Christianity. Christianity claims to have heard from the elephant himself. Christianity asserts that the elephant has spoken and revealed himself to blind men. Christianity asserts that the unknowable God has made Himself

known, that the unseen God has revealed himself, that the spiritually blind are made able to see, and that those unable to know God are given knowledge of God in Jesus Christ.

For Christianity, the elephant is Jesus. But unlike the elephant in the story, Jesus doesn't just stand there as the passive object of our examination. Rather, he speaks and acts to reveal himself to us. And, when Jesus reveals himself, he reveals God.

Like the elephant in the story, Jesus does subject himself to examination after his resurrection: "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe"<sup>6</sup> but it is his revelation, not our examination that produces knowledge of God and faith.

## Is God Like Something Else?

The elephant story also implies that knowledge of God is limited to analogy. That is, that we know God only by comparing him to something else.

In the elephant story, although the men were blind, they were still apparently able to gather knowledge of things other than elephants: walls, spears, snakes, trees, fans and ropes. Otherwise they would have no point of reference. They wouldn't have been able to liken the elephant to anything else. Even then, the best that the blind men could do was draw an analogy between the elephant and those things with which they were familiar: "The elephant is like a \_\_\_\_\_."

Is this how Christians know God, only by analogy? No, not at all. Take one of the foundational and most mysterious doctrines of Christianity, the doctrine of the Trinity: Is it an analogy? No. God is not like Father, like Son and like Holy Spirit. God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In fact, the Trinity defies analogy. Many have tried, but all have failed to find something truly analogous to the Trinity. It simply cannot be likened to anything else without doing damage to the doctrine itself.

This is also why the historic Christian Creeds make absolutely no attempt to liken the Trinity to anything else; they simply confess what and who the Trinity is. Why? Because Christian knowledge of God is not knowledge by analogy; it is knowledge of God himself, even if that knowledge surpasses our reason.

Or, think of it this way: Jesus himself is no analogy. Contrary to what many Christians think, Jesus did not come to reveal what God is like; he came to reveal God himself. To see Jesus is to see God. To touch Jesus is to touch God. To hear Jesus is to hear God. Not only is no analogy necessary, any analogy would be an implicit denial of Jesus' divinity. Does Jesus use analogies to describe God's work to save sinful mankind? Yes, we call them "parables." But Jesus is no parable; he's God.

This means that Jesus' death is no analogy either. Again, contrary to what many Christians think, Jesus' death is not some grand object lesson, pointing us to something else. It is not a mere demonstration of God's love; it is God's love. It is not God show-

ing us how much he loves us; it is God loving us. To put it in philosophical terms, Jesus' death doesn't signify something else; Jesus' death is the thing itself.

## True Knowledge of the True God

Finally, the elephant story concludes that all religions have some partial knowledge of the true God. Is this true? It depends on how you ask the question. Do the world's religions know there is a God? Yes, non-Christians share that natural knowledge of God. Do they therefore know, even partially, the true God? I answered this question in detail in a 2004 article called "Mere Monotheism,"

*God's [natural] revelation in creation is self-evident, reliable, limited, and yet sufficient to make fallen man accountable to God. But what does fallen man do with this revelation? Fallen man receives this reliable, limited revelation of God and suppresses it in wickedness, misapplies it to things other than God, abandons it in favor of his own speculations, and worships the creature rather than the Creator. In short, fallen man "exchanges the truth of God for a lie." Non-Christian monotheists possess a knowledge of God, but it is "suppressed in wickedness". Jews and Muslims do not worship God according to natural knowledge. Rather, they believe and act against this knowledge, and worship an idol of their own imagination. This is why Scripture often describes this natural knowledge as a lack of knowledge.*<sup>7</sup>

Non-Christian religions know of God, but do not know God

himself. In terms of the elephant story, non-Christian religions are blind men who know that elephants exist, but never actually encounter one, much less lay hands on a specimen. Apart from Jesus, there is no true knowledge of the true God. Here the Scriptural evidence is overwhelming, and comes from none other than Jesus himself:

*No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, He has made Him known.*

*The Father who sent me has Himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, His form you have never seen, and you do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe the One whom He has sent. I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also....Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.*<sup>8</sup>

Only Christians know the true God, and even then, only through God's special revelation of Himself in the Word of Scripture and the Word made flesh. Does that mean that Christianity claims to have comprehensive knowledge of God? No, not yet.

## I Shall Know Fully

Christianity has never claimed to possess complete knowledge of God. The Apostle Paul acknowledges that our knowledge of God is presently partial:

*For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I*

*spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.*<sup>9</sup>

Christians, like little children, are presently limited in our knowledge of God. Full knowledge of God will come only after the final resurrection. Unfortunately, this is exactly where we most often find Christians citing the elephant story as an explanation for the theological differences among Christians. And, here is where we must be especially cautious.

In spite of the elephant story's failure as a critique of Christianity, Christian Perspectivists persist. They believe that theological differences among Christians are the result of our partial knowledge of God. If Christians disagree on some doctrine, instead of searching the Scripture to decide who is right and who is wrong, the Christian Perspectivist says in effect, "each is partly in the right, and all are in the wrong." They interpret Paul's words "now we see through a glass dimly" to say that Scripture itself is unclear in what it teaches. Theology, they say is always provisional and speculative. Theological disputes are a waste of time, no one knows anything for sure, they say. Like the narrator of the poem, they declare that theological differences among Christians are like so many blind men arguing over an elephant they have never seen.

But the Christian Perspectivists are wrong. While it is true that on this side of the resurrection, we

can know of God only what he has revealed of himself in Scripture, that in no way means that this partial knowledge of God is unclear, inadequate or inaccurate. In other words, what Scripture teaches may be partial, but it is nonetheless completely true.

## More Than Revelation

Scripture is especially clear on this: If the true God is to be known, he must be known only in Jesus. And, he is most clearly and most fully known in the death of Jesus for sinners. Jesus came to reveal God, but he came to do more than just reveal God to us, he came to reconcile us to God through his blood on the Cross.

The elephant story is right on one point. We were blind men! We were naturally ignorant of God. But God has not left us in the darkness of ignorance. In the elephant story, the blind men lay their hands on the elephant to discover what it was. But in truth, God has come in the person of Jesus and laid His hands on us, hands scarred by the nails of His crucifixion. He has opened our blind eyes and minds. He has spoken and revealed Himself to us. He has lived, He has suffered,

He has died and rose again to save us.

The world remains full of blind men, as we once were. Paul writes:

*If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*

This is why we, who have seen God in Jesus Christ are bold to proclaim that no one need remain blind, groping for an unknown God but never knowing who He is. Paul continues:

*For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup>*

*(From Issues, Etc. Journal, Spring 2012 pp. 3-14)*

<sup>1</sup> This story appears to have its roots in Hindu, Buddhist and Jainist traditions.

<sup>2</sup> John Godfrey Saxe, "The Blind Men and the Elephant," The Poems of John Godfrey Saxe, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1881, p. 491.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic. III.12, trans. Ian Johnston

<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche went so far as to deny that there was objective truth that could be known --that there is no elephant to examine. This is why he is considered the philosophical father of Nihilism and Postmodern Relativism.

<sup>5</sup>Romans 1:19-20

<sup>6</sup>John 20:27

<sup>7</sup> Todd Wilken, "Mere Monotheism? Why Christians, Jews and Muslims Do Not Worship the Same God." Issues, Etc. Journal, vol. 3, no. 2, 2004, p. 5. See Romans 1:18-25, 32; Psalm 79:6; Jeremiah 8:3; 10:25; Hosea 4:1; John 8:54-55; 15:21; 1 Corinthians 15:34; Galatians 4: 8; 1 Thessalonians 4: 5; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-8

<sup>8</sup> John 1:18; 5:37-38; 14:6-7, 9

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:9-12

<sup>10</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:3-6

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Trinity Te Deum is published bi-monthly. Deadline for all articles is the 15<sup>th</sup> of the odd months. All articles must be approved by Rev. Paul R. Harris. Articles with no author are written by him.

### August 2012

| Sun                       | Mon                | Tue               | Wed  | Thu | Fri | Sat |
|---------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--|-----|-----|-----|
|                           |                    |                   | 1<br>10 AM Galations<br><br>7:15<br>Revelation II  | 2   | 3   | 4   |
| 5<br>Noon Adult<br>Class  | 6                  | 7                 | 8<br>10 AM Galations<br><br>7:15<br>Revelation II  | 9   | 10  | 11  |
| 12<br>Noon Adult<br>Class | 13                 | 14                | 15<br>10 AM Galations<br><br>7:15<br>Revelation II | 16  | 17  | 18  |
| 19<br><b>Couple's</b>     | 20<br><b>Coast</b> | 21<br><b>Trip</b> | 22   | 23  | 24  | 25  |
|                           |                    |                   |  |     |     |     |
| 26<br>Noon Adult<br>Class | 27                 | 28                | 29<br>10 AM Galations<br><br>7:15<br>Revelation II | 30  | 31  |     |

### September 2012

| Sun                            | Mon | Tue                           | Wed  | Thu | Fri | Sat |
|--------------------------------|-----|-------------------------------|--|-----|-----|-----|
|                                |     |                               |  |     |     | 1   |
| 2<br>Noon Adult<br>Class       | 3   | 4                             | 5<br>10 AM Galations<br><br>7:15<br>Revelation II  | 6   | 7   | 8   |
| 9<br>Noon Jr.<br>Confirmation  | 10  | 11<br>7 PM Voters<br>Assembly | 12<br>10 AM Galations<br><br>7:15<br>Revelation II | 13  | 14  | 15  |
| 16<br>Noon Jr.<br>Confirmation | 17  | 18<br>6:30 Elders<br>Meeting  | 19<br>10 AM Galations<br><br>7:15<br>Revelation II | 20  | 21  | 22  |
| 23                             | 24  | 25                            | 26<br>10 AM Galations<br><br>7:15<br>Revelation II | 27  | 28  | 29  |
| 30                             |     |                               |  |     |     |     |
| Noon Jr.<br>Confirmation       |     |                               |  |     |     |     |