Sermon Text (2 Chronicles 33:1–13 ESV)

1 Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem. **2** And he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel. **3** For he rebuilt the high places that his father Hezekiah had broken down, and he erected altars to the Baals, and made Asheroth, and worshiped all the host of heaven and served them. **4** And he built altars in the house of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, "In Jerusalem shall my name be forever." **5** And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD. **6** And he burned his sons as an offering in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, and used fortune-telling and omens and sorcery, and dealt with mediums and with necromancers. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger. **7** And the carved image of the idol that he had made he set in the house of God, of which God said to David and to Solomon his son, "In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever, **8** and I will no more remove the foot of Israel from the land that I appointed for your fathers, if only they will be careful to do all that I have commanded them, all the law, the statutes, and the rules given through Moses." **9** Manasseh led Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem astray, to do more evil than the nations whom the LORD destroyed before the people of Israel.

10 The LORD spoke to Manasseh and to his people, but they paid no attention. **11** Therefore the LORD brought upon them the commanders of the army of the king of Assyria, who captured Manasseh with hooks and bound him with chains of bronze and brought him to Babylon. **12** And when he was in distress, he entreated the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. **13** He prayed to him, and God was moved by his entreaty and heard his plea and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD was God.

Jesus Was Led to the Cross for You

A few weeks ago, we heard about how Emperor Charles V, who had a break in his many wars, summoned many of the Lutheran leaders to the city of Augsburg, where he promised to hear them and weigh their opinions. There, the Lutherans presented the Augsburg Confession. While the document was signed by all of the Lutheran leaders who were present in Augsburg, the one who penned the Augsburg Confession was Philip Melanchthon, who Martin Luther thought would one day succeed him. In response to the Augsburg Confession, the Papal Confutation was written and presented by the Roman Catholic theologians. Emperor Charles V demanded that the Lutherans accept the Confutation and return to Roman Catholic Church. However, Philip Melanchthon instead wrote a response to the Confutation called the Apology to the Augsburg

Confession that defended their original document. Like the Augsburg Confession, the Apology is included among our Lutheran Confessions. Just like Martin Luther, who had brought the gospel back to prominence during a time when the gospel was not the predominant message, Philip Melanchthon and the Lutheran leaders stood firm on Scripture alone, and it looked as if these Lutherans were never going falter. However, that was not the case.

Many years had passed. Martin Luther was now dead, and, after making a truce with the Turks, Emperor Charles V, once again, had time to deal with the Lutherans. Shortly after presenting the Augsburg Confession, the Lutheran leaders had put together a united force called the Smalcald League, fearing that they may need more than just words to defend themselves. However, Charles V put together a united army of his own and shattered the Smalcald League. Things were now looking dire for the Lutherans, and so, when Charles V essentially demanded that the Lutherans return to the Roman Catholic Church or else, many of the Lutherans went along with his demands. Even Philip Melanchthon, who feared that Lutheranism would be wiped out and that the University of Wittenberg would be shut down forever, encouraged the Lutherans to enter into a temporary compromise with the Roman Catholics. Within the German territories, the only city that remained a stronghold for Lutheranism was Magdeburg. The pastors of Magdeburg even went so far as to say that the higher magistrates were trying to force idolatry onto them and oppress the true worship of God, as well as the worshippers themselves. Refusing to compromise, Magdeburg was put under siege for a little over a year. At the end of the siege, Magdeburg came to terms with Duke Maurice, the leader of the army that put them under siege. Even though things looked grim, Lutheranism lived to see another day in Germany. It's hard to believe that things got so bad so soon after the death of Martin Luther. In the same way, it's hard to believe that things got so bad so soon after Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, became king in our reading for today.

When Hezekiah was king, he put Judah back on the right path after the wicked reign of his father, Ahaz. “He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah. And he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it” (2 Kings 18:4 ESV). He also commanded the priests and the Levites to cleanse the temple of all uncleanness, for it had been defiled by everything from vessels to the remains of idolatrous offerings. Right worship was reintroduced, and Hezekiah encouraged everyone to trust in God, even when they were faced with the Assyrian army that had defeated so many other nations, including the northern kingdom of Israel.

It really seemed as though true worship as well as faith in God had returned to Judah and that it was there to stay. However, what do we hear in our reading for today? We hear that Manasseh, the son of Hezekiah, “did much evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger” (2 Chronicles 33:6 ESV). Hezekiah “removed the high places” (2 Kings 18:4 ESV), but Manasseh “rebuilt the high places that his father Hezekiah had broken down” (2 Chronicles 33:3 ESV) in order to make them sanctuaries of idolatry. Hezekiah “broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah” (2 Kings 18:4 ESV), but Manasseh “erected altars to the Baals, and made Asheroth, and worshiped all the host of heaven [that is, the sun, moon, planets, and stars] and served them” (2 Chronicles 33:3 ESV). Hezekiah had cleansed the temple, the house of the LORD, of all its uncleanness, but Manasseh “built altars in the house of the LORD. . . . And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD. . . . And the carved image of the idol that he had made [which was probably an Asherah pole] he set in the house of God” (2 Chronicles 33:4–5, 7 ESV). And, as if all of that wasn’t enough, Manasseh “burned his sons as an offering in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom [like Ahaz had done], and used fortune-telling and omens and sorcery, and dealt with mediums and with necromancers” (2 Chronicles 33:6 ESV). To sum it all up, we hear that

“Manasseh led Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem astray, to do more evil than the nations whom the LORD destroyed before the people of Israel” (2 Chronicles 33:9 ESV). Right after the reforms that Hezekiah put in place, the people of Israel returned to the idolatry that they had abandoned once again and remained in that idolatry for decades. Even after God sent his prophets to warn Manasseh and his people what was going to happen because of the sins that Manasseh committed and that he led Judah in doing, “they paid no attention” (2 Chronicles 33:10 ESV).

We too must be careful that we are not led into idolatry. But is that something that we really have to fear? In the 1500s, many of the Lutherans were willing to make some compromises if it meant the survival of Lutheranism, but would we really do the same thing, especially when our right to religious freedom is protected by the Constitution? We hear that “Manasseh led Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem astray” (2 Chronicles 33:9 ESV), but would we really so easily follow the false doctrine of our political rulers, especially when we are already so reluctant to follow those political rulers that we don’t agree with on other matters? We hear Jesus warn in our gospel lesson for today that “false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect [that is, all of us who believe in Jesus]” (Matthew 24:24 ESV), but would we really believe someone just because they seem to do something miraculous when they are clearly preaching false doctrine?

It can be easy to say that we wouldn’t fall into these types of idolatry when we feel protected from them, but what if we weren’t? What if our Constitutional right to religious freedom was no longer protected? What if a political ruler who we really like says false doctrine that we try to explain away as not actually being false doctrine in order to protect him? What if a miracle is so convincing and accomplishes such a good thing that there is no way that it could be anything but from God? In situations like these, or others like them, we may find ourselves being like the

apostle Peter, who boldly and confidently declared to Jesus, “Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!” (Matthew 26:35 ESV), only to deny even knowing him three times just a few hours later out of fear for his own life.

It is easier to be led into idolatry than we realize. After all, our sinful nature leads us into idolatry every day. Whenever we sin, even if we don’t know that we are sinning, we are committing idolatry, for the object of that sin has become more important to us than God. There are even times when we know that something is a sin, think to ourselves, “I really shouldn’t do this,” and then willingly do it anyway. However, there is one person who never let himself get led into sin, into idolatry: the God-man, Christ Jesus. Instead, where did he let himself be led? He let himself be led all the way to the cross. He could have avoided being led there. He could have made everyone happy by saying what everyone wanted to hear, performing the miracles that everyone wanted him to perform, and becoming the political Messiah that everyone wanted. He could have been a people pleaser to protect his own life, valuing his life above the will of God the Father, but he wasn’t. Instead, he accomplished the will of his Father by willingly laying down his life for all of us and paying the price for all of our sins.

When you look at the severity of your sin or at the sheer number of your sins, you may find yourself wondering if Jesus truly has paid the price for all of your sins and granted you full forgiveness. Perhaps you have gone too far. However, let us look again at Manasseh. Our reading for today says that “Manasseh led Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem astray, to do more evil than the nations whom the LORD destroyed before the people of Israel” (2 Chronicles 33:9 ESV). And yet, despite the amount of evil that he had done, “when he was in distress, he entreated the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. He prayed to him, and God was moved by his entreaty and heard his plea and brought him again to Jerusalem

into his kingdom" (2 Chronicles 33:12–13 ESV). God also hears your cries of sorrow and repentance, and, no matter what you have done, he forgives you for sake of his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, who paid the price for even the most severe sins by his death on the cross. And we know that his sacrifice was accepted because he did not stay dead but rose again on the third day.

Sin now no longer leads you, for Jesus, who is not just your crucified but also your risen Lord, has led you to himself through the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments, and, even though there are dangers on every side, dangers that threaten you and your faith, he continues to lead you safely through this life using those same means of grace until the day that you arrive at the gates of heaven and are lovely welcomed in by him. True, there are still times when you are led astray by people preaching false doctrine or by your own sinful nature, but Jesus is always right there to lead you back onto the right path. Therefore, we join with the hymnist is singing:

Jesus, still lead on
Till our rest be won;
And although the way be cheerless,
We will follow, calm and fearless;
Guide us by Your hand
To our promised land.
(ELH #587:1)