

**Feast of Saint Margaret of Antioch in Pisidia, Virgin & Martyr / Pentecost 10 (A), 20.vii.2008
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle, Brogue, Pennsylvania
Holy Eucharist, 08:30 (Spoken Order), 10:00 (ELW Setting 5)
Isaiah 44:6-8; Psalm 86:11-17; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30,36-43**

J. J. !

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was
and Who is to come! ☩ Amen.

Jesus answered His Disciples: “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the Kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels.”

--Matthew 13:37-39

The Church remembers that, in the year 304, in a remote and mountainous part of the world then called ‘Pisidia,’ a teen-aged princess died a solitary and horrible death because her father, the king, was deeply embarrassed,

offended, and irritated by his daughter's conversion to Christianity, the faith that had just become the official religion of neighboring Armenia only three years before. Princess Margaret's conversion was a spiritual act, but also an act with profound political implications. Pisidia had borders with both Armenia and Persia, and has historically been allied with the Persia. How could Margaret's father maintain his alliance with the Persians if she accepted the faith of the Armenians, their perennial adversaries? She was an embarrassment, an irritant and an obstacle to peace, prosperity, and power, as her father saw matters. She was no longer his child.

The ancient hagiographers and iconographers tried to convey to us the full depth of Margaret's death and birth to eternal life by narrating what seems to most a fantastic story. Margaret was thrown into an arena to be devoured a

wild beast— standard operating procedure throughout the Roman world and the ancient Near East. But this was no ordinary beast. It was a dragon who at first stalked her and then gobbled her up, and that dragon was, according to the ancient writers of words and holy pictures, none other than the devil himself.

Here the story takes a
decidedly Biblical turn. Just
as in the story of Jonah and
the great sea creature that

swallowed him alive, Margaret proves an irritant to the devil's innards. Just as Jonah's singing of a hymn to the LORD caused the sea creature to vomit Jonah up on the beach outside Nineveh, so, too, a little cross Margaret kept with her proved useful in getting the devil to throw up the morsel he had just devoured. Seeing his daughter standing

before him alive again, the pagan king ordered her to be dispatched without further ado. The world has forgotten his name. The Church remembers hers.

Devotion to Saint Margaret and her example of courageous faith spread throughout the whole ancient Church. An early Pope, Gelasius, had her stricken from the Roman Church Calendar because that story about Margaret poking the devil in the ribs with the Cross seemed just too fanciful. I'm not sure he quite got the point, but millions of other Christians did, and they went on telling their problems to Margaret and asking for her prayers just as though no one had said anything to the contrary. Margaret was eventually included by the people among a group of saints known as the 'Fourteen Holy Helpers,' to whom some splendid pilgrimage churches in Germany and elsewhere in Europe were dedicated, churches which still

receive pilgrims in need of help. This girl child, who never lived to marry and have children of her own, is known as a helper to mothers in childbirth. Please don't ask me why. You'll have to ask the mothers who called on her about that. Like Saint Christopher, patron of travelers and also one of the Fourteen Holy Helpers, specializing in deliverance from sudden death and plague, Margaret was a victim of the Second Vatican Council in its boorish zeal to remove all Saints from the Church Calendar for whom sufficient documentation was thought to be lacking, never mind the millions of travelers who had arrived safely home or the millions of mothers who had passed through the travail of childbirth alive and able to raise the children they had conceived and carried, never mind the countless children of God who have and who will stand alone before a terror indescribable.

I wonder, if we lacked the technology of photography and if most of us lacked the ability to read, let alone write, how *we* would describe a horror like Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen, like any number of horrors of the last or present century, in which, though in masses, countless individual sons and daughters of the Kingdom of God entered the belly of the beast of evil with only the Hymn of the reluctant Prophet, Jonah, or the Cross of the child-martyr, Margaret? Surely, nothing so irritates the attempted reign of evil in this world than the song and sign of faith, even if the chosen victim of the power of death is marked for destruction, no matter what. The irritant remains, and evil, is put on notice by the little Princess Margarets and the Anne Franks who belong to their Heavenly Father, notice that the devil's time of destruction is measured and is running out.

**“ . . . the harvest is the end of the age,
and the reapers are angels.”**

Princess Margaret of Antioch in Pisidia and the daughter of Israel, Anne Frank, suffered and died most definitely in the world and from causes outside the fellowship of faith. But what of suffering and conflict *within* that household, within the House of Israel, within the Church? Few if any of us have been made to suffer for our faith out in the world, so to speak. For suffering on account of our faith, we more commonly have to come to Church. Why? Because ‘the *Angels* are the reapers,’ as Our Lord says, and not we ourselves, because those whose hearts and minds have been overwhelmed by the love of God and neighbor lives and serve and pray and commune and hear the Word of God cheek by jowl with those whose hearts and minds belong to some other god and lord, and

because—it was the genius of Luther reading and truly understanding Paul to make clear to us—*that conflict and tension between good and evil, between godly and ungodly goes on right inside each one of us!*

Some there are who look forward to a Church in which there are no irritants, a Church in which all will be to their liking, once air-conditioning is installed, once difficult social questions stop coming up, once this or that member or pastor leaves, and so on, and so forth. Such hopes are based on an illusion. Until the Holy Spirit develops some new ‘Roundup-ready’ hybrid strain of Christian, our congregations and we ourselves will remain a mixed field of wheat and weeds. Where there is irritation and friction, let it be that of that little Cross of Christ that Saint Margaret used to poke the devil in the ribs, in your life together and as we each must live and walk the path of life and death

alone. God grant us all time to find our correct way on that path, and then the final joy as little Margaret and all the Saints take us each by the hand to lead us together through that last barrier of death and into the light of Christ and the vision of the Triune God forever and ever. Glory be to Jesus Christ! ✠ Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion both now and forever! ✠ Amen.

