

It’s kind of hard to hear with fruit stuck in your ears. Now, I’m sure you’re thinking, “How does he know that? Has he ever had fruit stuck in his ears? How did the fruit get stuck in his ears? What was he doing with fruit anywhere near his ears anyway?” I imagine you’ve never stuck fruit in your ears. But I assure you it’s in there, and it’s stuck. And it’s kind of hard to hear with fruit stuck in your ears.

The Bible tells us so. Humankind’s had fruit in there for a long time. The serpent said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” (Genesis 3:1). And “she saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, and she took of its fruit” (Genesis 3:6). She stopped up her ears with it so that she couldn’t quite hear the Word of the Lord anymore. He said, “Yes!” “You may surely eat of every tree in the garden! Only of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, and only because in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:16-17). But she heard, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:4-5). “And God’s arrogance needs to keep you in subjection and servitude.” So she gave some also to her husband, and he stuffed fruit in his ears too. The serpent’s suggestion slipped in like an earworm out of an apple and settled in to command their consciousness like a captive audience. That’s why down to this very day their offspring descendants still ask one another, “Did God really say?”

You can see it in Isaiah. You can witness the Israelites with fruit stuck in their ears. Vines and branches full of the things sprouting right out the sides of their heads. Why else would the prophet need to repeat himself for sixty-six chapters? And fifteen other fellows, from Jeremiah to

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Malachi, recited the same simple message for hundreds of years! Eventually they grew so weary they just took to writing it down.

Many folks still haven't noticed the conversation is over. Isaiah's Scripture has remained unchanged for centuries. Yet plenty of voices continue to wonder, “Did God really say?” Did God really say “called me from the womb” (Isaiah 49:1)? Did God really say “knit me together within my mother” (Psalm 139:13)? Did God really say “created in His own image” (Genesis 1:27)? Probably He meant “called me a parasite, tumor, clump of cells, blob of tissue.” Probably He meant “my body, my choice, private medical decision,” didn't He. Probably He meant “as soon as the baby forms memories, whenever the baby reaches viability,” don't you think? Probably He meant “as long as they planned for the child, as long as they can afford the child,” wouldn't you agree? Probably He meant “except when pregnancy imposes upon anyone else's priorities” or “unless deformities and disabilities show up,” am I right? Because we sure do like this fruit they call self-expression. This fruit known as sexual revolution sure tastes sweet. We just can't get enough of this fruit named comfort and control.

And did God really say “a light for the nations” (Isaiah 49:6)? Perhaps He means “a light for most of the nations” or “a light for some of the nations” or “a light for the nations properly defined.” Perhaps He means “for the pretty ones; the popular, prosperous ones; the powerful, productive ones.” Perhaps He means “for the politically comfortable, the culturally acceptable, the emotionally uncontroversial, the judicially precedented, the publicly approved.” Perhaps He means “a light for those who can communicate, who don't cost us too much, who manage their own hygiene and nutrition.” Perhaps He means “the nations aside from any merely fertilized eggs, uterine contents, or products of conception. Perhaps He means “not including those

considered terminal or categorized as persistent vegetative states.” Because we’ve already got the fruits of convenience and vanity shoved several generations deep into our minds. We’ve already filled every available space in our consciousness with the fruits of indulgence and luxury. We’ve already jammed our heads up for numerous millennia with the fruits of accumulating and uniformity.

It seems the fruit has made its way into our veins. In fact, you could say it’s slowly choking our very hearts. Did God really say, “I will be glorified” (Isaiah 49:3)? Did God really say, “My salvation shall reach to the end of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6)? Did God really say, “No man has power to retain the spirit or power over the day of death” (Ecclesiastes 8:8)? Did God really say, “I am the one who puts to death and brings to life” (Deuteronomy 32:39)? You see, what we hear is “we can use death as a solution to difficulty and distress.” What makes more sense to us is “don’t legislate your morality; keep your religion to yourself.” What we prefer is “as long as you’re not hurting anyone, do whatever comes naturally and makes you happy.” What we want to hear is “subject, of course, to opinions about dignity and quality.” What He should have said is “love yourself, take care of yourself, accept yourself as you are.”

And did God really say, “All have sinned and fall short” (Romans 3:23)? Did God really say, “Surely I was sinful from birth and from when my mother conceived me” (Psalm 51:5)? Did God really say, “If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves” (1 John 1:8)? But the problem is education. The problem is ignorance and inequality. The problem is privilege, patriarchy, toxic masculinity! The real problem is outdated doctrines, primitive superstitions! The real problem is policies, agencies, media! Did God really say, “All our righteous acts are filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6)? Did God really say, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5)? Did God really

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say, “slaves to sin” (John 8:34), “dead in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1), “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23)?

Even with fruit in our ears we can hear the hearts breaking. Our eyes still can clearly behold the grief and the guilt. Abortion access hasn’t solved any problems. Instead it has multiplied suffering. Assisted suicide hasn’t made pain go away. Rather it has rearranged it like the Titanic’s deck chairs. Embryo engineering has sentenced innumerable multitudes to death by dismemberment and left hundreds of thousands incarcerated in frozen prisons. The violence has increased infertility, miscarriages, breast cancer. The trauma has raised rates of depression, chemical dependency, domestic violence, relationship breakdown, and suicide. It has left dead some one million human beings worldwide, sixty million of them our own countrymen. Untold others walk among us wounded and haunted. None of these acts has spared one single soul from the misery and mortality that besets us all. Isn’t it time to take the fruit out, let the fruit just fall out, and listen?

Lord God Almighty has the perfect implement for it. Our Heavenly Father has sharpened and polished just the surgical implement for such a procedure. You can see it in Isaiah. He comes carrying an arrow of sorts—a sword, if you will. Like the tip of the spear, Jesus Christ authoritatively verifies the image and honor of God once and for all. Like the head of a pin, Jesus Christ validates, vindicates, and reverberates how humankind reflects and embodies His likeness. Jesus turns up the volume of what His fingers formed and His heart’s will brought forth.

God really did say “in and from the mother’s womb.” He Himself inhabited the belly of the virgin Mary. He put on embryo and peasant, manger and stable, hamlet and hometown and manual laborer. He means God’s work of creating proclaims every genetic member of our race

special, the whole Homo sapiens species. He means the least of these, the weakened and little ones, the broken and lowly as well. And He means age, appearance, ability, and history can neither improve nor impair this worth and purpose.

And God really did say "in your place." God really did say "for your sakes." God really did say "reconciling the world, the ends of the earth, entire universe, all creation, and whole of humankind." He was "made like His brothers in every respect...to make propitiation for the sins of the people" (Hebrews 2:17). He humbled Himself into the form a servant and our human likeness, subject to death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:7-8). Jesus means replaced, exchanged, fulfilled, and forgiven, beginning to end. Jesus means atoned for, suffered for, punished for, settled, biggest to littlest. He really means bled for, died for, paid for, and perfect, best to worst. He really means crucified, justified, resurrected, redeemed, embryo to elderly. He really means declared righteous, priceless, innocent, and holy. He really means Lord of death and life, every circumstance entirely under control. Jesus really means self-made solutions, short-sighted sham salvations like abortion, assisted suicide, and exploiting embryos are neither necessary nor even effective. He means Savior of not only your soul but also of your situation. Jesus really means His labor of redeeming proves every entity with human flesh precious.

And God really did say "by grace, not by works" (Ephesians 2:8-9). God really did say "by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). He means promise, and He means hope. He means takes on our sins and our diseases in His own time that raised Christ from the dead. He means takes away our iniquities and our sicknesses according to His good and gracious will that exalted humanity to the throne. Jesus means chosen and claimed, no matter how low or how loathed. Jesus means beloved and belonging even in suffering, sorrow, and the very valley of the shadow

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of death itself. Jesus means abundant, everlasting life though all experiences appear quite to the contrary. Jesus means mysterious but miraculous, invisible but undeniable purpose for the deepest pains and predicaments. Jesus means security and unconditional, wait upon Him and trust in Him. His words and His ways prevail however our efforts and faculties fail.

This Gospel puts the good fruit where it belongs. Fruit doesn't belong stuck in our ears or even bottled and closeted in your heart. Fruit belongs in the mouth. Truth tastes sweetest when it gets ingested and when it gets exhaled. So take and drink deeply. Fill your identity and activity with how God loves and saves His sinful human creatures. Feel it rinse your ears with Baptism's assurances and irrigate your very being with the Holy Communion's affirmations. Swallow and savor this comfort, this hope, this joy, like fine wine—all the better having aged its way through history's gauntlet. Its strength may seem bitter and burning at first, but it finishes pleasant and nourishes plenty.

The Lord of the harvest includes you in the fruit-removal crew. Having heard the more clearly, you speak the clearest. Jesus Christ has made you Lutherans For Life. Give voice to this truth and love with us, that He creates, redeems, and calls every human being to be His everlasting treasure. Proclaim and perform this grace with us, respecting and protecting especially the least of these, our frightened and threatened neighbors. Borrow our words and lend us your lips. You have our library of resources and our nationwide network at your disposal and by your side. What privilege we have and what delight—to partake with God in the fruit that moves the children of men from deaf to life! Amen.