

7 July 2002  
Pentecost 7

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Alexandria, VA

## Jesu Juva

“Our King Has Come to Set Us Free!”

Text: Zechariah 9:9-12; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:25-30

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Word of God that will serve as the basis for the sermon this evening is all three of the readings appointed for this day, highlighted by the gracious words of Jesus in the Holy Gospel, where He says: ***“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”*** Thus far the Word of God.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

Back in the time of Samuel the prophet, the people of God had an idea, and made a decision. They wanted a king. An earthly king, so that they could be like all the other nations around them. A king to judge them, and to go out before them and lead them into battle. The people had this idea, and they wouldn't take no for an answer. . . . So Samuel took their demand to God, and God told Samuel to go ahead and give them what they wanted, but – warn them first. Warn them what kings do. Warn them what was going to happen and what their lives would now be like. And so Samuel told the people these words of the Lord. And this is what he said:

***“These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots. And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you in that day.”*** (1 Samuel 8:11-18)

And remember, God wasn't talking about enemy kings here! This is what their own kings were going to be like! Taking, demanding, oppressing and burdening. . . . But the people wouldn't listen. They demanded a king. They knew what they wanted! And it was a sad day for Israel, because they got what they wanted. They rejected God as their king, choosing instead to be like all the other nations around them. And if they would have to bear the yoke of this king – even though it might be *somewhat* heavier – then so be it!

Now, was their rejection of God as their King justified? What kind of God and King had He been? Well, He had rescued His people from their slavery in Egypt. He led them through the wilderness to the Promised Land. He established His covenant with them, gave them the Tabernacle and His gracious presence with them. He fought for them and delivered them. He endured their rebellion through the time of the Judges. And always He was there for them – not taking, demanding, oppressing and burdening His people, but giving, and forgiving, and rescuing His people. Fighting for them, and remaining faithful even when His people were unfaithful. He was a good King. A very good King! A King whose yoke was easy, and His burden was light.

But in rejecting God as their King, the people of Israel had no idea how **heavy** this new yoke they had asked for would be. And all through the kings of Israel, both in the North and in the South, the Word of the Lord spoken through Samuel came true. The people often struggled and suffered. They were placed under oppressive burdens, and then when their earthly kings failed them, they were forced to live in exile under foreign kings who would be even worse than their own!

But even as their true and good and gracious King had remained faithful from the beginning, so He did not forget His people now. He knew the yoke and burden they were struggling under – the burden of slavery and oppression – and even though they had rejected Him as their King, He did not reject them. He was still their King, their true and rightful King, and He was going to help His people. And so God sent His prophet Zechariah with His good news, that their true King had not forgotten them, but, in fact, was coming to them! As we heard earlier,

***“Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Behold your King is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is He, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”***

And how opposite their true King was to their earthly kings! As He here talks to them tenderly, as to a daughter. Coming not to take, with burdens, taxation, and demands, but coming in humility and gentleness; coming with salvation; coming to give and to ***“set the prisoners free,”*** and to ***“restore to them double.”*** . . . And imagine the rejoicing such an announcement would cause among the people! Their King was coming, and in fact, was

very close! Almost here! The time of their captivity was almost at an end. Their heavy burdens and yoke of slavery were going to be broken. They would be restored and raised up and forgiven.

And so in Matthew chapter 11, this is what we hear. That this King has come, in the person of Jesus Christ! For as Jesus said,

***“All things have been handed over to me by my Father . . . [So] Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”***

Now, this is not new! This is who the King was from the very beginning. A good and gracious King, always faithful, whose yoke was easy and whose burden was light. And yet He was a rejected King. Rejected by His own who had an idea and thought they knew better. And He will again be rejected, as Jesus is rejected by His own, by those who “know better,” who know what they want, the Scribes and Pharisees and Jewish leaders. . . . But even in the face of such opposition, Jesus has come to reveal the Father. To reveal the good and gracious King through Word and deed. Teaching and healing and forgiving. Releasing prisoners and captives, lifting up the downtrodden, and giving life.

And this He accomplished when He rode into Jerusalem on the donkey of which Zechariah prophesied. Riding in humility and gentleness, with the burden and yoke of our sin upon His own shoulders, the King entering the capital city of Jerusalem on that Palm Sunday, to ascend the cross and die for His subjects. To die for our sin. To die for our rebellion. To die for our rejection of our King. To die for when we “know better.” To die, because if He didn’t, we would. We would die eternally, for the yoke of our slavery to sin is too heavy and crushing a burden for us to bear.

And in fact, isn’t this is the burden that St. Paul was speaking of in the Epistle from Romans? For is he not describing a yoke in those verses? A yoke which is compelling him to do what he doesn’t want to do. A yoke driving him into the sin he doesn’t want. A yoke enslaving him under its burden and power? . . . It is the yoke that we too bear. The yoke of sin that we inherit, that we follow, that compels us to sin and do what we know we ought not do. And it is a struggle within each of us – you know full well what Paul is talking about here! Until you cry out with Paul, ***“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”***

***“Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Behold your King is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is He, [and] humble . . .”***

Rejoice, for your King has come, and is still coming for you! Your good and gracious King,

coming not to enslave, but to free. Coming not to oppress, but to relieve. Coming not to condemn, but to forgive. Coming to remove the yoke and heavy burden of your sin, and give you His easy and gentle yoke. And so He still comes gently and in the most humble of ways, no longer on a donkey, but in water and word and bread and wine. Coming to reveal to us our King, our good and gracious Father. Teaching and healing and forgiving. Releasing us prisoners and captives, lifting up us downtrodden, and giving us life. Even though we do still rebel. Even though we do still think we know better. Even though we still follow the kings of our own making and devising, thinking that *their* burdens won't be so bad! . . . Yet still, as always, our King remains faithful, and humbly comes to us. Still He is our King. And still He invites us to come and receive His gifts, and promises us refreshment and rest for our souls.

And only then can we live the life that God has intended for us. A life not burdened with sin and guilt, but a life set free from slavery to sin. A life not free to do whatever we want – as so many misunderstand this weekend to be all about – but free to live in our Saviour. A life not filled with worry about the future, but filled with *confidence* in the future – the future made certain and secure in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. . . . This is the life that the prophets knew, that enabled them to prophesy even in the face of rebellion and opposition. This is the life that St. Paul knew, that enabled him to proclaim God's Word even in the face of physical hardship, persecution, and pain. And this is the life that the apostles and martyrs in the early church knew, that enabled them to rejoice even as their lives were being taken from them. . . . And this is the life now given to you through Holy Baptism. A life set apart. A life of freedom under your good and gracious King. The life that your God and King has given you and wants you to live and enjoy.

And so come and receive this life! Come, as often as you can, and repent, and receive the refreshment of His forgiveness. Come, as often as you can, and ***“learn of Him”*** – hear His truthful Word and learn the truth of your good and gracious King. Come, as often as you can, to His Table, to receive *“all the treasures He brought from heaven for us,”* given to us here in His true body and blood. Come, for nowhere else is there rest for your souls. Come, for His yoke is easy and His burden is light. Come, for your King has come and is here for you.

For the question is not whether or not you will bear a yoke, but which yoke are you going to bear?

***“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”***

Rejoice! For your King has come to deliver you!

***“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”***

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.