

9 February 2003
Epiphany 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Not for Today, but for the Day of Salvation”

Text: Mark 1:29-39 (Job 7:1-7; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23)

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

In the Holy Gospel this evening we heard of Jesus healing many people, from Simon’s mother-in-law who *“lay ill with a fever,”* to *“many who were sick with various diseases,”* to those who were *“oppressed by demons.”* And Jesus healed them, and gladly. These things were all a result of sin in the world, the very problem He had come to deal with. And deal with it He could, for as the very Son of God He was the creator, and having created these people, he could certainly then heal them.

But Jesus did not come primarily to heal – He came to proclaim the arrival of the day of salvation. And this too we heard in the Holy Gospel, as the next morning, when Peter and those who were with him find Jesus out in the countryside, and tell Him *“C’mon! There’s more people looking for you! There’s more healing to do!”* Jesus responds not by returning to do more healing, but by going to the next towns, *“that I may **preach there also.**”* To preach; to proclaim the arrival of the day of salvation in Him.

Now, that seems a little unfair, doesn’t it? For after healing so many people on that first day, why doesn’t He go back and heal the rest? But by simply asking that question, we reveal the very danger in it. That we become earthly-minded. That we turn the gifts of God into His obligations. That what God does for us and gives to us becomes the focus of our devotion instead of God, the Giver, Himself. That His blessings become what we expect and what we think we deserve. . . . And how easy that can happen. We know it from our own lives and experience. We wonder why God gives to some and not to others. Why God heals some and not others. Why some have it so easy while I have it so hard. But with such questions, where is our focus? What exactly are we *accusing* God of? . . . Or maybe a better question would be this: do we know what we’re really asking for?

To help us answer that and give us some perspective, think back to what we heard in the Old Testament reading from Job, where Job, to put it in modern-day terms, is wondering about the old rat race! The cycle so many people feel trapped in: eat, sleep, work, repeat.

(Or some variation thereof.) And his words are words of despair. He is searching for meaning in all that is happening to him in his life. And many today are the same way – living in despair, searching for meaning, and thinking that the answer lies in improving our lot in the rat race. And so many look to Jesus, or to their god, to do just that. To, in effect, “*heal*” them; to improve them; to better them. . . . But is that what Jesus has come to do? Is that what we really want – to keep running in the rat race, only in a better way? And is that what God wants for us?

No! **Jesus did not come primarily to heal** – to just improve our lot in the rat race – **He came to proclaim the arrival of the day of salvation.** He came to break us out of that cycle of hopelessness and despair, to rescue us and proclaim to us the Good News of His salvation. . . . Now, was healing a part of that proclamation? Most certainly! And Jesus, as we heard, healed many people. But the healing was never to be an end in itself. The healing and the proclamation go together. Jesus’ miracles of healing “preached” who He was and led many to know Him, and His preaching led many to seek healing from Him. But the two always went together, and if Jesus’ healing took away from His proclamation, if the two were separated, then Jesus did not heal. His healing has a purpose. His healing must lead to His Word and His Word to faith and salvation. That was the reason Jesus came – not just to *improve*, but to save.

And that is still true for us today. If giving you all you ask for is going to cause you to become earthly minded and separate you from Him, do you think Jesus will give that to you? Or in the same way, if the giving of a cross will strengthen your faith and keep you firm in Him, will He not also do that? And while certainly God wants us to enjoy the things of this world and all that He has given us, He knows that we cannot really do that apart from Him. And so if the things of this world become our gods, what we look to for satisfaction and meaning, the focus of our lives, should we not expect a loving God step in? If temporary, earthly hardship and sorrow meant everlasting life with Him in Heaven?

Jesus didn’t come primarily to heal – He came to proclaim the arrival of the day of salvation. To break out of the old and into the new. To proclaim to us the day of salvation, the day of Heaven, which will never end. To enable us to see our lives not as a rat race, but as a gift from Him – *wherever* you are, *whatever* you are, *however* you are. And to know that through His cross and forgiveness, you have not only a new life, but a life and future of hope and meaning. A life where you see that all you receive – whether it *seems* good or bad – is all a gift from your Father, working for your good.

And it is Mark’s Gospel that shows us this in a wonderful way – this dawning of a new day, the day of salvation. For in his first two chapters, Mark tells us not only about Jesus’

arrival on the scene but about so many of His healing miracles. And there seem to be so many, and if you read quickly through these first two chapters, they all seem to happen . . . on the *Sabbath Day*. And that's not by accident or chance. For in Jesus there is a new day dawning, a new Sabbath Day of God, a day of rest where we will rest in Him forever. And Jesus' work, His healing and teaching, is ushering in this new day of salvation. . . . Now this, in fact, causes no small problem for Jesus, for it greatly upsets the Jewish leaders of His day. And so by the end of Mark's second chapter, these Jewish leaders finally confront Jesus and ask Him why He is doing all of this on the Sabbath Day! Because they don't get it. Even though they see these wonderful things happening, they don't get it. They have become earthly minded and have lost sight of the greater reality the Sabbath Day was supposed to point them too. . . . And how true for many today . . . even at times we ourselves. We don't get it because we lose sight of the greater reality. We may think things are pretty good as they are, and that we don't need anything else, and that we don't want to break out of the old rat race because my life is pretty nice right now! But all it takes is a stock market crash or two, a tragedy or two, a terrorist or two, a hard-hitting medical diagnosis or two . . . and then where are we?

Jesus didn't come primarily to heal – He came to proclaim the arrival of the day of salvation. And if anybody knew this, it was the Apostle Paul. For there was a time when he had just about everything he wanted – he was very knowledgeable, had a position of power and prestige, and was looked up to and feared by many. He didn't need healing, he had it all! No, he needed something much more – for that old man in him to be put to death, so that a new man could arise and live not just for today, but forever! And that is exactly what happened, when Paul was knocked off his horse, struck blind, and then baptized into Jesus. He was given that new life, and then went to everyone just like him, to tell them of this new life. To tell them that having everything is not all there is. To proclaim, as Jesus proclaimed, the arrival of the day of salvation.

And that's what we read about in the Epistle from First Corinthians, where Paul eventually says, ***"I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some."*** Now, a lot of mischief has been caused in the church by people who misunderstand those words, thinking that we should change the Church to be more like the world in order to save those in the world. But that's not what Paul is saying here at all! For is that not to focus on the wrong things? . . . No, what Paul is saying is that he knows exactly where these people are coming from, because he was once there too. He was captive to the same kind of thinking. But now he has been sent to show them the way things really are. And so He goes to them where they are, to show them a different way. **To proclaim the arrival of the day of salvation** and break the cycle that has enslaved so many.

And so too you and I. What enslaves others is what enslaves us. The worldliness and lust that is in others is in our hearts as well. We too can get caught in the rat race and the despair and hopelessness and futility that burdens so many. And like Paul, what we need is not healing so that we can run the rat race better – we need that old man to be put to death, so that a new man can arise and live in the new day, the day of salvation, and the life that will never end. And that is exactly what Jesus has come to give – to the people He met that day in Capernaum, and to all of us today. He has come to give life. Real life. New life. Everlasting life.

+ And so He has given us the gift of Holy Baptism, where we are joined with Christ in His death and resurrection, so that the old man is put to death, and a new man rises to live a new life.

+ He has given us the gift of Holy Communion, where Christ feeds us with His body and blood, the fruits of His cross, for the forgiveness of our sins and to strengthen the new man and His new life.

+ He has given us the gift of Holy Absolution, to return to our baptism every day and, as Luther said, daily drown that old man and his old loves and desires, so that the new man may daily emerge and rise, to live in the new day, the day of salvation.

+ And He has given us the gift of His Holy Word, that His Spirit guide us and lead us back to Him, that we rely not on our own wisdom, but on His wisdom; not on our own thoughts, but on His thoughts; not on our own will, but on His will.

And *these gifts* are what Jesus has come to bring in His healing and His teaching. You may or may not have a lot of nice things in this world. You may or may not receive healing from your struggles and diseases. You may or may not be blessed with children, with a spouse, with long life, with wealth, or anything else you ask for. So does that mean that God is unfair? Or that He does not love you? By no means! For He has given to us the greater gifts. He has given to us His Son. He has given to us His life and forgiveness. So that when one day this world – and all that is in it – passes away, we will not perish with it, but will continue to live in the new day that has already been given to us, and in which we are already now living. The day of salvation.

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

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