

16 March 2003  
Lent 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

## Jesu Juva

“A Relentless Love”

Text: Mark 8:31-39 (Genesis 28:10-22; Romans 5:1-11)

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

We hear these words so often that they’ve kind of lost their impact, haven’t they? We’re used to them. They’ve become commonplace. **“The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected . . . and be killed.”** After all, we hear that every Sunday! You hear it perhaps every day in your personal devotions. We sang in one of our hymns on Thursday night, *“Do we pass that cross unheeding?”* Well, yes. Sadly, yes.

But put yourself in Peter’s shoes. It’s always good to walk a mile in someone else’s shoes, right? So put yourself in Peter’s shoes for a moment, and imagine if you were hearing those words *for the very first time*. . . . In the verses right before the Holy Gospel that we heard this evening, Peter made the great confession of who Jesus really was: **“You are the Christ!”** You’re it! You’re the long-awaited and long-promised Messiah! The One who was promised to Adam and Eve in the Garden after they sinned. The promised prophet greater than Moses. The promised Seed of Abraham who is going to bless all nations. The Redeemer, the King, the One who is going to get us out of this mess! Why, you are God Himself! In the flesh! Peter knew. . . . But then talk about getting hit with a ton of bricks! **“And [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things . . . and be rejected . . . and be killed.”** There’s a kick in the gut!

And so Peter objects! Of course he objects! So would you and I if we had been there! And he rebukes Jesus, with the goal – according to the original Greek word used there – with the goal *of preventing it!* Of preventing it all. . . . And so Jesus in turn has to rebuke him. **“Get behind me, Satan!”** . . . Now that shocks some people, that Jesus would call Peter Satan. But think about it, and think about the Holy Gospel that we heard last Sunday. *It is Satan’s goal to stop the atonement from happening.* It is Satan’s goal to stop Jesus from doing the work He has come to accomplish. Last week, we heard that Satan tried to accomplish that goal by tempting Jesus in the wilderness. But he failed. And so now Satan tries again, but this time using Peter. This time, through a friend, a close associate, someone Jesus would surely listen to, right? Satan wants Jesus to “Just

say no!” No to the cross. No to suffering and dying in our place. No, because well, now that you mention it Satan, there must be a better way!

Now, I’m sure that Peter had good intentions – he was just trying to look out for Jesus! But what is sometimes said about the road to hell? It is paved with . . . good intentions!

But Jesus sees through it all. He knows whose really behind this rebuking, and so He says, **“Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of men.”** Because this is the way it had to be. There was no other way, no better way. The Son of God came into this world and took on our human nature with the full intention of going to the cross. To take our place and die for us, as we heard from Romans, **“while we were still sinners.”** And, you know, perhaps that was part of what was going through Peter’s head – that he was not worth dying for, especially for *the Son of God* to die for! Or to paraphrase what we heard from Romans, **“Maybe for a righteous person someone would die, and maybe there’s even a better chance someone might die for a person considered good and who does a lot of good in this world.”** But we’re not righteous or good! We’re failures, we’re selfish and smug, we’re impetuous, we’re stubborn and obstinate, we’re rebellious – *we’re sinners!* Why would God die for garbage like you and me? We, who destroy His world, who go against His will, who mess up our marriages and our friendships, who take advantage of others, who break our word, who fail to help those in need, who take Him for granted, who – who just like Peter – rebuke Him, thinking that we know better than Him. Trying to stop and prevent what’s happening in our lives so we can have something we think is better. . . . Why would God die for us? **“No Lord, this shall never happen to you.”**

But it will, and it did! **“For while we were still weak . . . while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”** For you. Not because you deserve it, but because He loves you. Because you could never do it yourself, and so He did it for you. *He wanted to!* Seeing us in our slavery to sin pained Him much more than nails ever could. Seeing us lost and helpless stung Him much more than any amount of rejection. The prospect of eternal separation from Him caused Him to come down to us, as one of us, and come into our world, to rescue us. And when He was hanging on the cross, suffering and bleeding and dying for our sins, and the chief priests and the scribes mocked Him, saying **“He saved others, [but] He cannot save Himself.”** They were wrong. It wasn’t because He couldn’t save Himself – He most certainly could have! But He wasn’t there to save Himself. He was there to save us. And that kept Him there on that cross – His great love and compassion for sinners like you and I.

Such are the wonderful gifts of God. We don’t deserve them, and yet He gives them to us in abundance. His Son, His cross, His forgiveness, His Word, His Baptism, His Holy

Communion, His Holy Spirit, His guidance, His protection, His angels, His blessings, His ear to hear our prayers, His Fatherly divine goodness and mercy, His grace, His call to follow Him, His Church, His resurrection, His life, His compassion, His love, His cleansing, His patience, His inheritance of Heaven. What do we need that He has not given? What do we have that does not come from him? As sinners, we deserve nothing; yet as our Father, in love, He gives us everything!

And if you need further convincing, if your sins still burden you and you think all this could not possibly be for you – because even though we're Christians that still does sometimes happen to us; Satan is pretty good at accusing us – consider the wonderful example of Jacob, who we heard about in the Old Testament reading from Genesis. Jacob, whose very name means “cheater” or “deceiver,” and who lived up to that name! He talked his brother into selling him his birthright for a pot of stew. He tricked his poor, old, blind father into giving him his brother's blessing. This made his brother kind of mad, as you can imagine, and so Jacob has to run away from home and sneak off to the land of his mother's relative to wait for the smoke to clear! Jacob's not exactly an icon of holiness, and we think, “Well, he certainly got what's coming to him!” . . . And so as we join Jacob in his adventure, he's out in the middle of nowhere with a rock under his head. And you wonder, which rock was harder? Jacob's head, or his pillow of stone?

Yet it is to this Jacob, deceiver, sinner, run away, that God comes. He appears to Jacob in a dream, as the God of his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham. There is a ladder that stretches from earth to heaven. The angels of God are ascending and descending on this heavenly stairway, from God to earth and back to God again. And the Lord of all creation speaks to this homeless and hopeless man – perhaps the *last* man we would have picked for such an honor! And He says, ***“Jacob, you're my man, and I'm your God.”***

And that's the way it is for you and me as well. We're just as homeless and hopeless and helpless as Jacob. And just as sinful and deceptive and unworthy. And yet God comes to us, not in a dream, but in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, and He speaks to you and me, ***“You're my son; you're my daughter; and I'm your God.”*** He spoke those words first to us in Holy Baptism, coming to us and washing us clean from the filth of our sins. He speaks those words to us in the Absolution, coming to us and releasing us from the guilt of our sins. He speaks those words to us in His Supper, coming to us and feeding us with His holy food, raising us to our feet and filling us with hope. . . . Not that we deserve it, no just the opposite, we don't. But our God of grace is not an abandoning God, but a seeking Shepherd who never rests until He finds His lost sheep. And there that night at Bethel, out in the middle of nowhere, our Good Shepherd found His lost lamb named Jacob, and put him on His shoulders to carry him to the green pastures of His heavenly home.

And that is what Jesus has come to do for you – and nothing would stop this Good Shepherd. Nothing. Not the temptation of Satan, not the rebuking of His closest disciple, not the thoughts of the suffering and rejection and crucifixion He was going to undergo. Nothing. Not even death itself, He tells Peter, ***“for after three days He will rise again.”*** And that happened too, just as surely as the suffering, rejection, and crucifixion. . . . And though for now He calls us to ***“take up our cross and follow Him.”*** And even though this life we live is not yet a life of glory, but a life lived under the cross, you can be sure that He whose hands and feet were pierced for you does not forget you in your struggles, but is still here for you, and still sending His angels down to serve you. . . . So repent, turn from the sins that have sent you down the path that Jacob trod, and take your place next to Jacob and Peter and the rest of us sinners at the Table of our Lord. And consider the cross, and the gifts, and your Saviour, who did this all *for you!*

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.