

2 January 2005
Christmas 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Perfect Timing”

Text: Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23; Isaiah 63:7-9; Galatians 4:4-7

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

When there's trouble, sometimes you stand and fight. Sometimes you run away.

When Jesus came into our world it was at *just the right time*, the Epistle from Galatians told us this morning. ***“When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son.”*** Now that doesn't mean that Jesus came into a world free from trouble. Actually the very opposite. He came into a world *filled* with the trouble of sin and death. For they are the very enemies He came to do battle with. And so He came into enemy territory, to confront the enemies that seek to devour us and divide us from our God. And as we heard in Galatians, *when* Jesus came and *how* Jesus came was *exactly* as God planned. The plan that He had set forth from eternity.

But against these enemies, it was *not yet* time to fight. The time for fighting would come. It would come for Jesus in another 30 years or so. He would begin this fight the day He would step into the Jordan River to be baptized. And this fight would take Him into the wilderness of temptation, into the cities of rejection, among the tax collectors, lepers, and sinners, and finally to the cross. It is a battle Jesus would not run away from, but the very battle He came to fight. . . . *But not yet*. It was not yet the time to fight. Now it was the time for flight. And so the angel tells Joseph, and Joseph fulfills his fatherly duties to protect his family and flees into Egypt.

It was not the first time God's children had fled into Egypt, Matthew reminds us. Jacob and his sons had also taken refuge in Egypt, after Jacob's son Joseph had arisen to second in command, in order to save their lives from famine. Now with Jesus, Egypt would again harbor God's Son. . . . But if you asked an Israelite what was the first thing they thought of when you mention Egypt, it would not be this life-saving role Egypt played, it would be slavery. For Egypt soon turned against Israel, and enslaved her . . . for over 400 years! Until the hand of God brought His children out of Egypt in the Exodus, and led them to the Promised Land.

And so too of Jesus. He goes to Egypt not just for refuge, but as Matthew tells us by quoting the prophet Hosea, He goes there to join us. To retrace the steps that His people had taken. And so His going to Egypt is a small picture of what He has now come to do – to join us in our world, our land of slavery to sin, and lead us out into the Promised Land of Heaven. Or as we heard from the prophet Isaiah: ***“In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them; in His love and in His pity He redeemed them; He lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.”*** And not just the days of old, but even now. He is lifting us, carrying us, saving us. For that is why He came. At just the right time He came; at just the right time He fought; and at just the right time He works in your life and in mine. Giving faith, giving forgiveness, giving all that we need for salvation.

Fight or flight. God chose perfectly. We do not always. Both in and out of the Church. Sometimes we fight when we shouldn't. Sometimes we run when we should stay and fight. Sometimes instead of fleeing temptation we think we can fight it and wind up losing. Sometimes like Adam and Eve, we do neither and cave to the devil's seductions.

But what about those times *when you can do neither?* When neither fighting nor fleeing is an option? Like with what happened last Sunday, with the tsunamis that afflicted Asia and Africa. Those people could have used an angel (like Joseph's!) to come and tell them to flee to the high country. To warn them of the impending danger. . . . And there are the tsunamis that come into our lives as well. Faith-shaking events, disasters, temptations, confusion – and they can come like a flood, all at once, with no warning. And they can be overwhelming. What do we do then? When it seems as if we are going to be swept away – either physically, or spiritually, or both?

At such times, we do the only thing we can do: take refuge in Christ. There may be no other refuge or escape in this world available to us, but Christ and His wounds are always available. For our Saviour, who came at just the right time, who joined us in our Egypt, and who died and rose for us, is with us. Through all the difficulties of life. The life-threatening ones, the frightening ones, the confusing ones, and the crushing ones. He is with us with His grace, with His forgiveness, and with His love. And with His steadfastness. That we know that He does not change, or change His mind about us. And that although there are times to both fight and to flee, that He has already fought for us and won the battle for us. And so against us our enemies are powerful; against Him they are impotent. Against us they are wise and wily; against Him they are foolish and ignorant. Against us they seem like tsunamis; against Him they are but a ripple.

Now that doesn't mean it's easy! As St. Paul would say, with one of his favorite expressions: ***“By no means!”*** It's often hard to trust when the tsunamis come. And we

ask why? Why did God allow that tragedy last Sunday? Why does He allow the tragedies in our lives? Faith *doesn't* mean *not* asking those questions – it means trusting when we do. Trusting that the God who is love, and who loves us, and who **“wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”** (1 Tim 2:4) is working for exactly that. Even if we do not understand the means or the methods. For who among us would have picked a baby in a manger, a family fleeing into Egypt, and a man convicted as a criminal and hanging on a cross as the means of our salvation? Not one of us could have ever imagined that! And yet at just the right times, all that happened. Fight and flight. Justice and mercy. Death and resurrection. *Our rescue*. . . . And so can God not do the same things today? Through tsunamis, through tragedies; through what seems to us to be the very opposite of His love and work? He can, and He does. In the world, and in you and me.

Now when these things happen, we are sad and mourn. So did Jesus. We heard it in the Holy Gospel last week, when Jesus mourned over Jerusalem. **“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem. . . How often I would have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!”** (Mt 23:37) . . . Yet when tragedies and tsunamis happen, we do not just mourn but have an opportunity to exercise our priestly vocations, as Jesus did. To care for others as Jesus has cared for us. To be with them as Jesus is with us. Serving Him by serving them. Speaking, reaching out, helping. For **“as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”** (Mt 25:40) There is never any shortage of times to do this. In “tsunamis” both big and small. And praying that in these tragedies and events of life that God would open the hearts of many to seek His face and find comfort in His grace. And so instead of running away from these opportunities, perhaps it is in just these ways that we fight the good fight and thwart the enemy most of all!

And also, when these things happen, *to repent of our sin*. Not to measure our sin against theirs, as if somehow they deserved it and we do not. No, to repent of our tsunami-deserving sin and take refuge in our Saviour who took that punishment for us. To repent of our failures, our cowardice, our wrong decisions, **and our unbelief and doubt**. To repent and take refuge in the wounds of our Saviour. To take refuge in the waters of our Baptism, where we were made children of God. To take refuge in the Body and Blood of Holy Communion, where the forgiveness of the cross and the life of the resurrection are given to us. To take refuge in His Word, and to believe it – *more* than our feelings, *more* than what we see, *more* than what others are telling us. To believe Him who is the Truth and never lies. To believe Him who is the Life and laid down His life for us. To believe Him who is the Way and is the way for us, out of our Egypt of slavery to sin, and into the Promised Land of Heaven.

And when we do these things, we are truly celebrating Christmas. For we are celebrating the God in the flesh who came to be with us in our suffering, and is with us still. Who came to fight for us, at just the right time. And who at just the right time, will come and take each of us home to be with Him. . . . And that fits in with something that I noticed again this past week. Did you ever notice that in the Church, we *begin* our celebration of Christmas when the world is *ending* theirs? This week I saw Christmas trees out in the trash, Christmas music is no longer on the radio, and many Christmas lights have been darkened. For the world, Christmas Day was the end of the holiday. **But not here ! Not for us!** In fact, it's just the opposite! In the Church, Christmas Day is just the beginning of our celebration. All through Advent we prepared, and now we are celebrating. And although we too will soon pack up the lights and decorations for another year, we won't stop celebrating. For Christmas never really ends. For God in the flesh is still with us. Still feeding, still washing, still forgiving, still rescuing. Still giving faith, forgiveness, and working salvation. Still all for us, and all at just the right time! For that is Christmas. Not an escape from reality – but the reality that we live in every day. The reality that gets us through the tsunamis. The reality that will see us home to the end.

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.