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Pentecost 11

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“He Does All Things Well”

Text: Matthew 14:13-21 (Romans 8:35-39; Isaiah 55:1-5)

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

Our Lord does nothing by accident. Situations don't just “pop up” on Him unexpectedly – like they do with us – and then He has to do something about them! No, our Lord is in control, from the manger to the cross, even when it *seems* as if everything is spinning out of control. And this, we need to learn.

For just before the Holy Gospel that we heard today, it seemed as if things had suddenly turned bad for Jesus. His forerunner and cousin, John the Baptist, had been arrested and left to rot in prison, because King Herod did not appreciate his preaching. And now, as if that weren't bad enough, he had just been beheaded at the request of a seductive dancing girl. This is what Jesus heard, that caused Him (as we heard) to go off by Himself; *to withdraw from there in a boat to a desolate place*. Now, critical scholars will tell us that Jesus was scared; that He needed to regroup; that He fled from a bad situation. But this is hard to accept. It is hard to accept that the Good Shepherd would leave His flock alone and vulnerable like that – exactly at a time when they needed Him most! When they needed Him to rail against King Herod and death and reassure them about John! Why would He leave at such a critical time?

Unless it was for a reason. Unless it was on purpose. Unless it was exactly to do and speak and give those things that His flock needed the most. And so Jesus goes out into the wilderness by Himself, to a desolate place, **to draw out His flock, that He might have compassion on them**. For the sheep know the voice of their Shepherd, and they follow Him . . . giving no thought to preparation; taking no stock of bread and water for the journey – not even for the children. No baggies of Cheerios. No cereal bars or sippy cups. They just went . . . and Jesus knew that they would.

Now that's hard for us to understand, because we are of the generation to “always be prepared!” That's drummed into us as children in the boy scouts and girl scouts, and it's now drummed into us as adults by the Department of Homeland Security, which tells us to have a supply of dry goods and bottled water, batteries and generators, in every basement. . . . But as *self-reliant* as we think we are, as *in control* as we think we may be, and as *ready for anything* as we try to make ourselves – what happens we we're not? When

we get caught unprepared? When no matter how hard we steel ourselves, the unexpected death, disease, or disaster happens? When we're out in the wilderness, unprepared? When we're in that desolate place, with the sun going down, and have no place to go? What then?

Well then, Jesus has compassion. He doesn't lecture the folks on their unpreparedness. No earthly wisdom lecture on the value of thinking ahead and the habits of highly successful people. Perhaps that's what the disciples had in mind, being ready to send the crowds away! But not Jesus. Not the Good Shepherd. He *never* sends His flock away! He doesn't lead His flock into the wilderness unprepared. He doesn't lead His flock anywhere He is not prepared to care for them. And this, they need to learn.

And this, we need to learn! That when we are stuck in the "wilderness" times in our lives; when we are in that desolate place – alone, forsaken, troubled, worried, scared, vulnerable – that our Lord has not left us, and we are not there by accident. No, it is where our Shepherd wants us to be, that we may learn of Him, and His care and compassion. That we might learn to rely not on ourselves, but on Him. That we may trust that wherever our Shepherd leads us, that it is good. That it is what we need. And that our Lord is in control, even when it seems as if everything is spinning out of control.

And so Jesus has compassion. And what at first looked exactly the opposite of green pastures and quiet waters, turned out to be exactly that. Jesus has His flock lie down and recline and rest, and He feeds them. Out there, the troubles of John the Baptist were far behind. Out there, the hustle and bustle of life was a distant memory. Out there, politics and power struggles would not intrude. It was just the Shepherd with His flock. And, five loaves of bread and two fish was more than enough for Him who *opens His hand and satisfies the desires of every living thing*. (Ps 145:16) It was more than enough for Him who fed His people with manna for 40 years in the wilderness. It was more than enough – there were even leftovers! But nothing was wasted.

And the flock is satisfied. Did you notice that sentence? They were satisfied – which I think means much more here than that they got their stomachs filled! For they were filled with more than earthly food, but with the bread of life. They were once again not sheep harassed and helpless, worried about John and Herod and death and what would happen next – but sheep at peace. Sheep at the feet of their Shepherd. Sheep who would rather not be anywhere else than where they were.

You see, sometimes it takes the wilderness, the desolate times and places in our lives, to get us to understand that – that there is no better place to be. For sure, we hear it. You hear it preached from this pulpit, you read it from the Word in your devotions – but do we ever *really* believe that we are helpless until we are? That we can't get ourselves out of a situation until we've tried and failed? Doesn't it take trying to be strong to realize how

weak we really are? Oh, we're just as helpless and weak and vulnerable when everything is going well, and we're tucked into our warm beds, with our bellies and cupboards full – but we might well not know it. In such times, how easy is it to slip back into self-confidence and self-reliance. Looking to ourselves for what we need, instead of our Shepherd.

And so it is in the wilderness, in those desolate times and places, that our Good Shepherd has us – as individuals, as a church, and as a synod – right where He wants us! Not to punish, but that He may have compassion. That having no place else to turn, and no where else to go, we look to Him for all that we need. To turn the wilderness into green pastures, and the desolate times into times of blessing.

And He will, and He does! For our Lord does nothing by accident. Situations don't just “pop up” on Him unexpectedly. Things cannot spin out of His control. No, He is spinning everything for us and for our salvation. If He humbles us, it is so that He may exalt us. If He takes, it is so that He may give. If He kills, it is so that He can make alive. And so He calls us to repentance, that He may do all of that. To repent of our pride; to repent of our taking control; to repent of our feelings of self-sufficiency; to repent of all that we are, for we are nothing without Him. But He who leads us to this place of repentance does not send us away empty or leave us there to fill ourselves – no! He has compassion. Not compassion as the world thinks, but *true* compassion. To give us not what we want, but what we need. And so He who will not leave His flock alone in the wilderness Himself goes alone to the desolation of the cross. Not out of control, but in control. To bear our sin and give His life, that we may live. *That we may live* – with sins forgiven, and death defeated, and with the very same body and blood to feed us in this life. *That we may live*, knowing that we are never alone, but that our Good Shepherd is with us through it all. *That we may live*, not just here, for a while, with bellies filled and wishes granted – but live forever, in Paradise, in a Kingdom which has no end.

And here is satisfaction that the world cannot give. The peace which surpasses all understanding. The rest of sheep who would rather not be anywhere else in all the world than at the feet of their Good Shepherd – *even if that is in the wilderness*. For our Shepherd never leads us where it is not good, but only where He is, that He may care for us. One day, that means that He will lead us through the valley of the shadow of death – but even there He is with us. For He Himself went through death and into life, to lead His sheep from death to life.

And for all this, you do *nothing*. You *can* do nothing. This is the food of which Isaiah spoke – that no money can buy and no labor can earn. It is only given as a gift. Free. To the multitudes of men, women, and children, gathered in this church and throughout all the world. The living water, the body and blood, the Word of life, the forgiveness and salvation that is received only by faith. All is here for you, who come with nothing, but leave with

everything. Satan will try to get you to feast on the trinkets and dirt of this world, and try to convince you that with them you can be satisfied! But ***blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*** (Mt 5:6) And to those things your Saviour, your Shepherd, is calling you, leading you to receive His good and gracious gifts, and having compassion on you. That you may be His own, and be satisfied and rest, knowing that nothing can separate you from His love: ***neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation.*** For you have a Good Shepherd, who does all things well. Thanks be to God!

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.

(Thanks to the Rev. David Petersen of Redeemer Lutheran Church, Ft. Wayne, IN for some of the thoughts and direction in this sermon.)