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Pentecost 12

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Little Faiths, Gracious God”

Text: Matthew 14:22-33 (1 Kings 19:9-18)

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

O you of little faith, why did you doubt?

Jesus calls Peter a “little faith.” Which doesn’t really seem fair. After all, *all* the disciples in the boat were screaming in fear, when they saw Jesus walking on the water and thought He was a ghost. At least Peter had enough faith to get out of the boat and walk on the water a *little* bit. . . . And what about Elijah? He was hiding in a cave because he was afraid. And what about you and me, when we doubt what God is doing in our lives, and are filled with fear?

Jesus is stating here what is true for all of us: that no matter how strong we may *think* our faith is, we are – in reality – *all* “little faiths.” And all it takes to find that out is a little bit of trouble in our lives. For faith – believing and trusting in God – is easy when things are going well in our lives. When the sailing is smooth, the waters calm, the wind is at our backs, and we’re making good progress. Faith is easy at *those* times – so easy, in fact, that we may even take it for granted, and not really think much about it. . . . But what happens when things go wrong? Maybe horribly wrong? When you feel (like Peter!) that you’re in up to your neck! When you aren’t sure how things are going to turn out? When troubles and pain, heartache and uncertainty, doubts and fears get the better of you, and you feel like you’re going to drown in them? At such times, we find out just how strong (or how *little*) our faith really is, and how true Jesus’ statement here is for all of us: we are “little faiths.” Peter, Elijah, you and I – we’re all in the same boat! (Or maybe I should say, we’re all *out* of the same boat!)

And that’s important to realize – **that our faith is not what it should be.** But I’m not, therefore, going to stand up here and berate you for being a “little faith,” and tell you to get your act together and *get more* faith and *strengthen* your faith and make sure you do better next time! Jesus didn’t do that with Peter, so I’m not going to do that with you. For one very good reason: **you can’t do it!** None of us can. You didn’t give yourself the faith that you have, you didn’t create it, and you can’t strengthen it. The sinful nature that we are born with does not naturally trust God – we naturally trust ourselves. Adam and Eve were

the original “trust-it-yourself-ers,” and they passed that gene on down to us. So that’s our first impulse; that’s how we *naturally* think, both physically and spiritually. And that means we’re sinners, because to trust in yourself is the direct opposite of the very First (and chief) Commandment, which tells us to “*Fear, love, and trust in God above all things.*” So for me to stand here and tell you to strengthen your own faith – won’t do any good. I might as well go outside and yell at an apple tree to start growing oranges!

But all of you do have faith in God – even if it’s little! – that’s why you’re here today! And that you *do* is a miracle, a working of God in your life. Through His Word preached, or through His Word joined to the waters of Holy Baptism, He gave you faith as a gift, and with that faith adopted you – He your Father, and you His child. But that now means that inside all of us – you, me, Peter, Elijah – there is a struggle going on, to trust in ourselves or to trust in God. Our nature pulls us one way, and our faith pulls us the other. That’s why sometimes we’re bold, and sometimes hiding in a cave. Sometimes jumping out of the boat, and sometimes sinking and screaming.

But just because we cannot strengthen our own faith doesn’t mean that it cannot be strengthened! We shouldn’t be satisfied with being “little faiths!” And Jesus does not want us to be so. But only the One who gave us our faith can strengthen it, and this is the very thing our God and Saviour desires to do. And one of the chief ways He does so is (as we heard in the readings today) by sending trials and troubles into our lives – not as punishment, but for our good. To knock out all that I rely on in this world, to strip me of my “do-it-myself” pride, and drive me to cry to Him with Peter: “**Lord, save me!**” For it is in such struggle that faith is strengthened. Because it is in such trials that we are driven back to God and His Word, to cling to His promises. And that is faith. Not clinging, trusting, and relying on myself – but clinging, trusting, and relying in God, my Saviour. And so in such troubles, our Father is working, leading us to Him, to confession; to repent of our sin, and to receive His forgiveness.

Luther knew and experienced this too, and so wrote that “*prayer, meditation, and suffering make a theologian*” (*Luther’s Works, Preface to the German Writings*, vol. 34, p. 285) – and it is what makes a Christian. The **prayer** of faith that cries out to our Saviour for help and forgiveness; the reading and **meditation** on God’s Word through which the Spirit strengthens faith in the Word and promises of God; and the **suffering** that enables us to see and realize our “little faith” so that we rely not on ourselves, but on Him – for He will not let us down. For (as He has told us) when we are weak, then He is strong.

And so in those moments when your faith is weak and seems so small, and when it seems as if God is the farthest away from you – Luther said, that is when God is closest to you! (*Luther’s Works, Lectures on Galatians*, vol. 27, p 27) For although He may be hidden, and though it may seem as if He has forgotten about us, He is, in reality, right there with us. Hiding in the cave, sinking

in the water, no further than a hand away from us. For such times of trial and struggle are sent not to extinguish our faith (Is 42:3), but to strengthen it. And the strength that God provided, both Elijah and Peter would need in the days and years ahead, to face even greater challenges. But God does not ask from us what He does not first give to us. And the faith they needed, God provided – and for us too; though it may not be easy.

But there is something else to realize about being “little faiths” – and that is that even a little faith is saving faith. Your faith does not need to reach a certain strength or threshold on the “faith-o-meter” in order to save you – for it is not the strength of your faith that saves you, but the strength of the One saving you! Just consider Peter in the water, looking up at Jesus, with terror in his eyes, and crying out ***Hosanna!*** (Which is the Hebrew word for *Lord, save me!*) Jesus didn’t stop to consider whether His faith was strong enough to be saved, and He didn’t tell Him to tread water for a while until his legs got tired and he really meant it! No, the prayer of faith – even a little faith – is pleasing to God and answered by Him. ***“Jesus immediately reached out His hand and took hold of him.”*** Immediately. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. The strength is His, not yours, and the stronger faith is, the more it realizes that.

And the best example I can think of that – which some of you have heard before – is the example of a bodyguard. For suppose I have a bodyguard who is approximately 98 pounds, skinny as a rail, with no muscles, and scared of his own shadow. I could have the strongest faith in all the world in him, but he would not be able protect me very well. But say I have a bodyguard who is huge and burly and strong and not afraid of anything, and yet my faith in him is rather weak. He will still be able to protect me – not because of how strong my faith in him is – but because of how strong He is! And the same is true of our Saviour. He is able to save not because we are strong in faith, but because He is the Son of God. The Son of God who *walks on* what we are afraid of! The Son of God who came down from Heaven and became man, to do for us what we could not do for ourselves: live a life of *perfect* faith, and offer His perfect body and life on the cross as the payment for our sin. And then in His death and resurrection, *walk all over* what we are most afraid of – death – and crush the head of Satan with His heel.

And so we are saved. Not because we are strong, but because He is! So that when we, like Peter, cry out ***“Hosanna! Lord, save me!”*** (which we will sing again in just a few moments, in the liturgy) – His hand of grace and forgiveness is here to do just that. The same hand that created us; the same hand that was nailed to the cross; and the same hand that pulled us up out of the waters of our baptism – that is the hand that is still here for us, that is placed upon our heads in absolution, that places into our mouths His own body and blood to feed and strengthen us, that sends us out from this place with his benediction, and that will one day pull us up out of our graves and into life eternal. Until that day, when we finally arrive safely on the other side, He puts us into the boat, His Church, where we

worship, saying ***“Truly, you are the Son of God.”*** And that is faith. The faith that He desires. The faith that joins us to Him.

And so it is as the Psalmist wrote, and as we sang in the Introit: ***“This poor man called, and the Lord heard him; He saved him out of all His troubles.”*** And we know that we are that poor man. Poor in spirit; poor in faith; poor in steadfastness. But we know also the wonderful promise spoken by our Saviour: ***“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven!”*** (Matthew 5:3) And we are blessed, as the Word of the Lord that came to Elijah, and the Word made flesh that came to Peter, now comes to us. That we “little faiths” may be little faiths no more. And that leaving this place with His grace and forgiveness, His blessing and strength, that our hands become His hands, giving to others what we have received. Reaching out to others who are in need, who are struggling, who are in need of saving . . . but who don’t know where to turn.

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.