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Advent 2 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Manifested in Weakness”

Text: Philippians 2:5-7

Bigger is better. This is a truth we are taught early on in our lives to believe. It is why Christmas seems to keep getting bigger every year. Because every year (many people believe) we have to *out do* the previous year, or else Christmas just won't be Christmas. It will be a disappointment. Not moving forward means moving back. And so the music starts earlier and earlier. The stores start selling earlier and earlier. People keep spending more and more. Gotta keep grasping, keep progressing, keep getting bigger . . . and therefore getting better.

So we shouldn't be surprised when the baby in the manger gets left behind. He is the very opposite, the very *antithesis* to this kind of thinking. His is a wholly different way. A wholly different *mind*. And so a way and a mind we cannot learn from the world. It is a *mystery* which must be *revealed* to us. And so we heard tonight:

“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men . . .”

And so as *last week* we considered and meditated upon the surprising fact that we cannot know God if we do not know Him in the flesh, *tonight* we consider an equally surprising truth: *that we cannot know God if we do not know Him in weakness*. And to a world which thinks bigger is better, strong is good and weak is bad, this is a mysterious and difficult truth to accept.

Yet this is the mystery made manifest to us at Christmas. That God does not demand bigger and better from us, but lowers Himself to us. The King of the Universe becomes the servant of sinners. The One who gave the Law puts Himself under the Law. The Lord of all becomes a child *for* all. The Almighty becomes a weak and helpless baby. *He made Himself nothing*.

And this is much more than simply a “Prince and the Pauper” kind of trading places, of *pretending* to be someone you're not – ***for the Word became flesh.*** (Jn 1:14) He didn't just put our human flesh on, to wear it for awhile and disguise who He really was. The Son of God *became* flesh. And so while never ceasing to be God, the Son of God came down.

He did not hold onto, or grasp, or cling to, His equality with God. He came down, *willingly* not using His power as God, in order to be weak with the weak, poor with the poor, and condemned with the condemned.

And this is how our God and Saviour wants to be known. And so the Epiphany star points not to a King in a palace, but to a child at his mother's breast. John the Baptist points not to a revolutionary, but to a man in line to be baptized with sinners. The centurion at the foot of the cross points not to a warrior, but to a dead man. Yet all three say the same thing: ***this is the Son of God.*** Is this not a wonder?

The Jewish leaders at that time couldn't put up with such a God, and so had to do away with Jesus. All false religions today the same. For a weak God is no God at all, to their thinking. But *here is the mystery made manifest to us at Christmas*: that God is never so strong for us as when He is weak. And if we are to know Him rightly, we must know Him in His willing weakness, that we might see His strength.

And so we heard tonight from John, a reading about Jesus being arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. In those verses are both the strength and weakness of Jesus, put side by side. For in one verse, Jesus speaks the divine name: ***I AM*** – and at the simple speaking of these words, the powerful mob of soldiers and guards is forced to the ground. Like they don't know what hit them! Forced (I like to think!) onto their knees. Their weapons no match for the Word of God. . . . And yet in the next verse, Jesus *speaks the same words*, but withholds His power, making Himself nothing, being weak; so that He be taken, and *those with Him* be saved.

For the god who comes to His creatures as the Almighty, to push them around and tell them what to do, is simply a bully. But the God who comes to His creatures in weakness, to serve and to save, *is a Saviour*. And that is how God wants to be known – so that He would not be obeyed in fear, but that He might be loved in gratitude. That we see that God is no where so strong for as He is in the manger, as He is in His baptism, and as He is on the cross. Strong to save. Strong to forgive. Strong in weakness. Captive, to set us free. Dying that we might live. And if you want to know God, this is how He wants to be known. And you cannot know Him more or better or in any other way than this.

And when you know God in this way, in the *willing weakness* of the manger and the cross, in the *strength* of the manger and the cross – He then calls on you to be the same. ***To have this mind among yourselves.*** A mind which leads to strength in willing weakness. Serving, forgiving, not matching strength with strength, not grasping what is yours so that you might not lose it! No! But living as Christ, making yourself nothing. For what is yours in Christ Jesus cannot be taken away. You don't have to grasp it – He has provided it, is keeping it, and gives it to you. And so you are free to be as Him. And

to know that you are never so strong as when you are.

For the strength of this world may overcome a lot of things, and achieve greatness and wealth, and the honor and glory of many – but only the *willing weakness* of Christ ***destroys the works of the devil***. And that is why He came, why He died and rose, and why He is *still* coming – to destroy these works in the world, **and in us**. To restore His image in us. Lowering Himself to raise us.

And when we know Him in this way, we truly know Him as He is. God manifested in weakness. God for us.

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