

19 February 2006
Epiphany 7

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A New Thing; A New Life”

Text: Mark 2:1-12; Isaiah 43:18-25; 2 Corinthians 1:18-22

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

The man is lowered down to Jesus on his bed, through the roof, and Jesus says, ***“My son, your sins are forgiven.”***

Today a baby girl was lowered into the water at this font, and Jesus said, ***“My daughter, your sins are forgiven.”***

And today you lowered your hearts and heads in confession, and heard this called and ordained servant of the Word say, ***“In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins.”***

After which the paralyzed man still couldn't walk, the baby still cries and demands and messes her diaper, and you raise your heads the same people you were before. With the same family issues, the same job problems, the same troubles and struggles, the same *old* life. . . . *Or is it?*

We heard from the prophet Isaiah: ***“Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”*** But we don't perceive it, do we? That's exactly the problem! After this baptism, after these words, after church, everything looks the same. Everyone is acting the same. I don't *feel* any different. *Is* anything really different? . . . Maybe we find ourselves thinking like the Scribes – that because everything seems the same, Jesus' words of forgiveness are empty words. Or maybe we're even *worse* than the Scribes – believing these words of forgiveness, *but then thinking that they're not enough!* They're just not enough for my life. I need more. I need my problems solved: my family fixed, a better job, a healthier body, more money, the new house I've been looking for, a better church, a happier life, a baby who will sleep through the night! These are the things I need. **I need Jesus to get me back on my own two feet!** Forgiveness is nice and all, but

. . . well . . . not very practical.

“And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that you thus question within yourselves, says to you: ‘Why do you question these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to you ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to solve these problems of yours?’ ”

Now don’t try to answer that question. It wasn’t designed or asked for an answer. It was spoken to produce only one result: that you repent. That you stop putting Jesus to the test. For Jesus sees more clearly than you. The paralytic’s problem was *not his legs*, but his heart. For legs that work will simply take him back where he does not belong; back into the sin his heart desires. And if Jesus had simply healed this man and sent him on his way, he would have been worse off than if he had never come. Using new legs for old sin, and plunging himself deeper into the darkness.

And the same is true for you and me. Jesus sees what you need more clearly than you do. Your problem is not your family, your marriage, your job, your house, your finances, your health, or whatever else you think it is. It is your heart. It is your unbelief. It is your love of sin. It is doubting God’s love for you. It is taking forgiveness for granted. It is using your new life for old sin. Jesus could solve all your problems in an instant, certainly! But to what result? Would your life be perfect then? Or would old sins just pop up in new places? . . .

Well that’s not good enough for Jesus. He loves you too much for that. Jesus has come to do a *new* thing. Not to fix and patch up the old – the old, sinful man in you; to fix your problems and heal your hurts. He came to raise you – *not just back onto your own two sinful feet* – but to a new life in the forgiveness of your sins. To fix your heart. To give you faith and right belief. That we stop putting Jesus to the test, to prove His work and His love for us – but instead believe that what He is working in your life is exactly right. That His forgiveness is all that you need. That if you have His forgiveness, then you have what you need to face the problems of this life – whether Jesus heals them or takes them away, or not.

For, in fact, when Jesus earned for us the forgiveness of our sins, He did prove His work and His love for us – *by doing a new thing*: by not simply raising us back onto our own two feet, as if sin is simply something that has tripped us up and has knocked the legs out from under us, and we just need someone to help us back up again. That’s the *old* way of thinking. That’s the old Adam in us, thinking we can just tie some fig leaves together and make everything right again. . . .

But the New Adam sees more clearly than we do. Our sin is much more serious than that. Our problem is that sin has killed us, and therefore we're not spiritual invalids, just needing a helping hand – we're spiritual corpses. (Eph 2:1) Born spiritually dead. You, me, even little Annalise – all of us. And you can prop up and fix up a corpse all you like; you can operate on it, fix it, change it, dress it up, put make-up on it, and make it look all nice – and you know what you have? *A nice looking corpse!* . . . No, the paralytic needed more than his legs back. The bed that he picked up and carried home he was going to need again. For sooner or later, he would again lie down, this time in the dust of death. And us too. The problems of this life never go away, they simply change with age, until we find ourselves facing death, looking at the corpse in the mirror.

And so Jesus has come *to do a new thing*. He became the paralytic. He became the unbeliever. He became the doubter. He became . . . the sinner. Not that He did all these things – He took all these things from us. In coming down from Heaven, the Son of God lowered Himself down into the midst of our sin – and not just down to our level, down to our sin, but all the way down to the cross and the grave. And if there were different levels of dead, He would be the deadest of the dead! For He didn't just have my death-causing sins, but yours too. And not just yours, but the world's. And not just the world's of today, but of all time. And if just my sins could cause death, what kind of death would all those sins cause? Certainly worse than any we have seen here!

But then that takes us back to the words of Isaiah: ***“Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”*** And what sprung forth is Jesus! In His resurrection! Springing forth from the death and condemnation of our sin, to a new life. A new life that's not just a fixed up old life, but a new life. A back-to-Paradise-before-sin life. For when Jesus rose back onto His feet again, His foot didn't just hit the ground – it came down on Satan's head. And therefore His is a life that is not just for now, for a time, but new, for eternity.

And when you hear those words of Jesus spoken to you, ***“I forgive you all your sins,”*** that is what you are receiving: not a fixed up old life, but a new life. A resurrection life. If we cannot perceive it, it is because this new life is here hidden under the cross. Hidden under the sin and suffering of this world. But that doesn't make it any less real. For we see the truth not with our eyes, but with our ears. It is Jesus that tells us what is true. His Word, not our perception. And His Word of forgiveness tells us the way it is – that ***“in Him it is always Yes.”*** Yes, you are my child. Yes, you are forgiven. Yes, I am with you always. Yes, you will be with me in Paradise. Do not trust what you see or feel. Trust

the one who sees more clearly than you do, who knows what you need, and has given it to you – the forgiveness given to you, Annalise, today, in Holy Baptism; the forgiveness given to us, today, in Holy Absolution; and the forgiveness given to us, soon, in the *New Testament* in Jesus' body and blood.

And far from being not very practical, I would argue that this is, in fact, the most practical gift in the world. And maybe here, an example. Most of you know that I was in Philadelphia this past week, with my father, for it was the first anniversary of my mother's death. She battled cancer for seven years. We prayed that God would heal her – both here in church, and as a family. And God could have – certainly! But to what end? For how many more years? Until something else happened, and she closed her eyes in death. But He who sees more clearly than us saw that her problem was not cancer, but sin. And so rather than telling her: *My daughter, your cancer is healed*, He said to her, *My daughter, your sins are forgiven*. For the first may bring comfort for a few years, but the second brings comfort forever. And not just to her, but to me. To know that she will be raised; that her life is not done; and that we will see her again. For forgiveness means that Christ's empty grave is her empty grave; His life, her life; and His kingdom, her kingdom.

And the same is now true for Annalise. Chris and Elspeth, you have brought your daughter here to receive the greatest gift she will ever receive. You will give her many things in her life, many gifts, but none so great as this. Today, Annalise has heard those same words that were spoken to my mother: *My daughter, your sins are forgiven*. And they are true. And so you know, and she knows, that whatever comes upon her in this life, whatever problems and struggles, when death comes – whether she is young or old – her life is safe. For our Saviour has here done a new thing, a resurrection thing, and Annalise, born dead in her sin, has been raised to a new life. You may not perceive it tonight when she keeps you up again! But it is true. For our Saviour – who joined her in her death, that He might raise her to His life – *said it*.

And after all, “*which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise?’*” Well know that because our Saviour spoke the first today, Annalise will also hear the second, on the last day. And so will we. And does that make anything different? It, in fact, makes *everything* different! It is all that we need.

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 Christ Jesus our Lord unto everlasting life. Amen.