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Pentecost 6

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Great is *His* Faithfulness”

Text: Lamentations 3:22-33; Mark 5:21-24a, 35-43; 2 Cor 8:1-9, 13-14

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

“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”

Those words from Lamentations were not easy to write. They are words of faith. The prophet Jeremiah penned them even as he sat amidst the rubble of what had once been the majestic city of Jerusalem. King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians had just sacked and looted the city, leveled the Temple, and had dragged many of God’s people off into exile. It was a dark day for Jerusalem. They had fallen so far. And to the naked eye, it must have seemed as if God had either abandoned His people, or turned against them.

But not so, says Jeremiah. ***“For the Lord will not cast off forever, but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men.”***

Jerusalem would rise again. They had turned against the Lord, yes; but their exile would not last forever. God would bring His people back. And He would once again dwell with them. *But not in the same way.* Things would no longer be the same. **They would actually be better.** For the compassion and steadfast love of the Lord would not be seen in the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the restoration of the kingdom of Israel. God was going to do a new thing. And so Israel would be resurrected, yes, but not in a city of stone, but in a man of flesh and bone. Israel would rise again in the person and work of God’s chosen Saviour; in the person and work of Jesus Christ. He is the compassion and steadfast love of God come to us in the flesh, to establish and build a *new* Israel and a *new* kingdom. A kingdom not of this world. A kingdom not dependent on the faithfulness of men, but solely on the faithfulness of God. And therefore a kingdom which cannot fail. For if God does the building, it is good. You can be sure.

And so the death of Jerusalem is Jeremiah’s opportunity to proclaim our hope. The destruction of Jerusalem would be a dark day for God’s people, but a new day would

soon dawn, and prove God's love and mercy, His compassion and faithfulness. And amidst the rubble of a once great city, and by the rivers of Babylon in a strange and lonely exile, the people would listen. And believe. God had brought them low, in order to raise them up. God would bring life from death.

Now notice that order! And so notice how God works. He does not give us life by letting us continue in our sin, catering to our every desire, or by spoiling us and giving us what our hearts crave. That is the way of the world and what many today are looking for in a god. *But that is not the way of the Lord* – not for Jerusalem then, nor for us today. For what our hearts crave and desire is not good. No, His way is to give life from death. And so if God must first bring us low in order to raise us up; if He must first make us nothing in order to make us something; if He must first, in fact, kill us to our sin in order to make alive – then that is what He, *in His compassion*, will do. Stripping us of our false sense of security, of our false gods, of our pet sins, of all that we seek to hang onto in this life, that we find our rest and life in Him alone. That He might raise us and recreate us to be everything that He is, and to restore us – not back to our old life, but to a new life in Him.

Thus it was that day when Jesus was called by the synagogue official to the bedside of his dying daughter, that when that young girl died while Jesus was on His way to see her, *that she was just as Jesus needed her to be – dead*. She was the perfect patient for the Great Physician of body and soul. For God's compassion. For if Jesus came not for the healthy but for the sick, then above all, He came for the dead. To give life from death.

And so it is for us. In the raising of Jairus' daughter, Jesus gives us a picture of what He has come to do for us. For make no mistake about it, we are the dead ones. Dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1) – as dead as a city in ruins; as dead as a little girl whose heart and breathing have stopped. For though we may put up a good appearance and look alive on the outside – maybe even some of us look like a great and thriving city! – on the inside it is not so. On the inside we are dead. Our thoughts and desires captive to sin and death.

For the truth is, if the thoughts of our minds and the desires of our hearts were projected onto this screen back here, would you not hide your face in shame? And if you doubt that, just remember the last time someone stepped on your toes, or got in your way, or cut you off in traffic! Or when someone else got what you thought you deserved, or when you didn't get your way, or someone inconvenienced you! Or when your love was repaid with selfishness, your care with callousness, and your generosity with greed? What of your life and heart and thoughts and desires then? How holy, how pure? Or how ugly, how deadly?

Sometimes we think we can change all this. That if we just try hard enough and push the right buttons, then all will be well. But no. There is only one way to a new life, and that through death and resurrection. To die to ourselves and acknowledge our sin. To join Jeremiah in the rubble, and the little girl on her death bed, and confess the truth. It is not easy to do so, but *to deny now is to die later*. **To die now is to live.** For as Jesus went to the house of the synagogue ruler to do something about death, so He has come to this house to do something about *your* death! To take *you* by the hand and say to *you*, **arise**. I forgive you. And by Him, in Him, your sin and death are gone. You do arise and live again – not the same old life, but a new life. The life of Christ. The life of the One who took all of your sins into Himself to die for you; the One who (as Jeremiah wrote) took the cross in silence, put His mouth in the dust, and gave His cheek to the one who strikes; who took all that you deserve, that dying your death, you would also rise with Him. Or as St. Paul would later write: ***“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”***

And so you are rich. Perhaps not in the things of this world, although maybe God has so chosen to bless you. But to be rich in Christ is to be rich in life, to be rich in forgiveness, to be content with little or much, knowing that your life and riches are not in the visible things of this world, which come and go – but are hidden in Christ. In His kingdom not of stone, but of resurrection. *Built by His hands*. His hands which touched lepers and made them clean, that touched the blind and made them see, and the deaf and made them hear. His hands that gave speech to the speechless, and strong legs to the lame. And His hands which reached out to a little girl one day in Capernaum, and said to her, ***“Little girl, I say to you, arise,”*** and so gave life from the dead. His hands that were nailed to the cross, so that yours would never be.

Those are the hands that are here this day to give *you* life. Cross hands, resurrected hands. Hands to baptize, hands to forgive, hands to feed. Hand which reach out to sinners and say, **arise**. And it is so. The world may not think there is life here. They may even laugh, just as they did at Jesus that day; just as they probably did at Jeremiah. But that there is life here cannot be denied. Life as Paul wrote of the Macedonians in the Epistle – having joy in affliction, generosity in poverty, and overflowing in grace and love. Life that cannot be taken away by the things of this world. That is what you have received. It is what you now give. And you are blessed in both. Dying to live and living to die, knowing that in all things, in death *and* in life, ***“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”***

For in the raising of Jairus’ daughter, Jesus gives you a picture of what He has come to do

for you. For compassion means you don't have to do it yourself. Compassion means there is another one on your side, to stand by you, to assist you, to carry you, to save you. And when that compassion is from the Lord, it doesn't just float around, and you hope it lands on you! It is personal. It has hands and feet, flesh and bone, voice and body. It is the One who embraced your humanity as a baby, your sins on the cross, and your life in His resurrection. It is the One who takes you by the hand and will not let you go . . . even if it means bringing you low, in order to raise you up and give you life. It is the compassion of the One who lived and died and now lives forever, and so His mercy, His love, His compassion, His forgiveness, His promise, and His kingdom, never end . . . and never change.

So ***“do not fear, only believe.”*** And having been raised, as Jesus said: come get something to eat!

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.