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Pentecost 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Rest in His Promise”

Text: Ezekiel 17:22-24; 2 Corinthians 5:1-17; Mark 4:26-34

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

St. Paul wanted to leave this world. Life wasn't easy for him, and the thought of leaving all this pain and trouble behind sure sounded good. He was tired of the opposition, the persecution, of being in prison. Yes, even the man most people call the greatest missionary of all time, was at times frustrated and disappointed. And like many of the patriarchs and prophets who came before him, he looked to God and to heaven and thought that looked pretty good, compared to what he was going through here.

You know what he meant. You have probably felt the same way, at some point, maybe even now. You look around at all that is going on in the world, you look around at all that is going on in your life, you look around at all that is going on in the church - all the fighting, all the problems, all the pain and trouble - and the thought of leaving all this behind sure sounds good. Its *tempting*, isn't it?

Yes, *tempting* is exactly what it is. A temptation from the devil, dressed in pious white wishes. For while you may think that wanting to leave this world and go to heaven shows your faith, in reality it doesn't so much show your faith as much as it reveals your doubt - your doubt about what God is doing **now**, even in the midst of frustration and disappointment. Uncertainty about His promises and care. Questions about what He is doing in you and through you. We must be careful what we wish for. Our wishes are not always good. But God and His promises are.

That's why St. Paul, after talking about *his* groaning and longing then says: ***we are of good courage***. Courage born of faith in the promises of God. That though we are tired, though we are weak, though we are frustrated and disappointed, none of those things nullify the promises of God. And so not to what we see, but to those promises, we cling. Those promises which give us the courage and strength to go on. Or as someone once said: "*Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, "I will try again tomorrow."*"

One of those promises is contained in the parables told by Jesus today. Jesus didn't use the word "promise" in those verses, but the promise is there. And the promise is

this: that the Word of God, scattered as seed on the ground, will grow. Though we may not see it, or know how, and it may take longer than we want, it will grow. And even the smallest seed of God's Word can grow into the largest and strongest of trees. The seed that has been sown into your heart, and the seed that is scattered through your mouths, carries with it this promise.

And if you need an example of this, look no farther than *Jesus Himself*. Was there ever a smaller seed planted in this world than He? Planted in a young virgin who nobody knew or cared about, who lived in a backwater town, who lived and grew up as a carpenter's son, and who even when He began His public ministry didn't seem to be very successful. His twelve closest followers were not very educated or steadfast, the religious establishment was against Him, and for all His efforts He just wound up on the wrong side of the Roman government and so hung up on a cross. And yet from such a small beginning, the Church has grown to survive threat and persecution and our own sinful stupidity, and envelope the world! Just as Jesus said, the tree of the cross has become the largest of trees, and people from every nation, race, and language have made their home in its shade.

Now, I know what you're thinking . . . *that's Jesus!* Of course He grew and what He did grew! But, O Christian, do you not know that it is the same Jesus working now? The Word of God made flesh and planted in Bethlehem is the same Word of God which now comes and is planted in you in Holy Baptism. The same Spirit that descended on Jesus at His baptism descended on you at your baptism. And so the Word of God is growing in you. It may be small, it may be slow, you may not even feel it or realize it - but it is growing. Growing and producing the fruits of faith in your life. *Yes, it's Jesus!* And just as sure and inevitable as His death and resurrection **for you**, is now His death and resurrection **in you**. Or as St. Paul put it: **"We regard no one according to the flesh"** - that is, according to outward appearance; which includes how you regard yourself. For **"if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away [death]; behold, the new has come [resurrection]."** So, perhaps we could say, that as much as you may want to leave this life and go to heaven, you have something even better: for in Jesus, *heaven has come down to you!*

Now, the devil does not want you to know that, of course, and so is constantly seeking to blind you to the work of God in the world and in you; to blind you to His Word and promises; to blind you so that he can lead you into despair. To think that you are useless and no good, and that there is nothing you can do. You are too weak and doubt-filled and sorry.

But you know what? He's been whispering that same lie into the ears of Christians for thousands of years. To Moses and Abraham, to Elijah and Jeremiah, to Paul and Luther. And in a sense, he's right. The kernel of truth to his lie is that yes, *on our*

*own*, we can do nothing. Quite right. But we are not on our own. The Word of God which has been given to you and is working in you and through you is powerful and active and living and growing. And it is not dependent upon you and your eloquence and abilities - but on the One whose Word it is. On the One who inhabits that Word and promised to be in that Word. Our Saviour, who is working that all may come to the knowledge of the truth and be saved.

We heard that assurance and promise from God through the prophet Ezekiel this morning as well. He, too, spoke of the great tree that God would plant and grow - which we have already said is Christ and His cross and His Church. And then these words of promise at the end: ***“I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it.”***

Armed with that promise: ***“I will do it”***, we have the courage to face each day. To rest in the shadow of the cross. Rest, which does not mean doing nothing! But living the lives and callings our gracious Father has given to us in the confidence and trust that He is working through us. In ways seen and unseen. In ways both big and small. You need not worry or despair when you have His promise.

And armed with that promise, ***the love of Christ*** [then] ***controls us***. Which is good news! For with those words, Paul is not burdening you, telling you: Make sure the love of Christ controls you! No, he is telling you a reality - a reality anchored in the death and resurrection of Jesus. For what is the love of Christ? It is the love that caused Him to come down from heaven and to live and die for you, and the love that causes Him still to come down from heaven and to feed you here with His body and blood, to forgive your sins, and to strengthen your faith. That love given to you is the love that now controls you; the love that causes you to get up and go out each day to live and die for others. To serve them in your callings. To scatter the seed of the Word with your mouth. And to rest under the cross all through the day, knowing that our Lord has promised to work through you and through His Word. We need not know how, or when. We simply cling to His promise, and rest in it.

Until the day when Jesus keeps His promise to come one last time for you, to harvest you and take you to heaven. We don't know when that day will come for any of us - maybe for you, not soon enough! But until He does, we simply cling to His promise, and rest in it. For while its not wrong to want to be in heaven, know, as St. Paul said, that you are *already* a new creation. You don't have to wait! Christ is with you even now. His Word is sure and true. His ***I forgive you*** means you are forgiven. His ***I am with you*** means you are never alone. And His ***you are mine***, well, means just that. Even in the midst of this world of sorrow and tears.

You may be only a small seed in this great big world, but what great things God is doing in you and through you. So do not despair, but rest in His promise: ***“I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it.”***

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.