

6 September 2009
Pentecost 14

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“He Does All Things Well”

Text: Isaiah 35:4-7a; Mark 7:31-37; James 2:1-10, 14-18

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

We hear from the prophet Isaiah today: **“Say to those who have an anxious heart . . .”** That’s you, isn’t it? For like the people in Isaiah’s day, who among us does *not* have an anxious heart?

Anxious about what has happened in the past, or anxious about what is going to happen in the future.

Anxious about what we have done, or what we have not done.

Anxious for others, and anxious for ourselves.

Anxious about what we know, and anxious about what we don’t know.

Anxious as our minds are filled with “what ifs,” with “shouldas, wouldas, and couldas,” and with fears of all shapes and sizes.

Anxious as the sin and evil in our world - and in us! - seems so big and powerful and threatening, and the church and what is good - in the world and in us! - seems so small and so weak.

Yes, we are those with anxious hearts.

Anxious . . . like the people in California whose homes are threatened by the wildfires there. The firefighters are fighting the flames, but they are so big and powerful and threatening . . .

Anxious . . . like the people who watch hurricanes form and draw near. They sandbag and seal up and prepare, but they are so big and powerful and threatening . . .

So it is so often with you and me - we see the fires of evil, the storms of hell, and the attacks of doubt rising up against us in our world, in our lives, even in our own hearts, and we grow anxious, worried, and filled with fear. It is all so big and powerful and threatening . . . and we are so small and weak.

But to those who have an anxious heart, Isaiah has a Word of God for us. A Word of hope. **“Say to those who have an anxious heart, “Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.”** With those words, Isaiah would take our eyes *off* of the threats that cause us such anxiety, and off of ourselves who can’t do anything about them. For when we focus on the threats or on ourselves, we just wind up increasing our

anxiety. But with his words, *Isaiah focuses us on the One who is greater* - greater than whatever is causing us anxiety, and greater than ourselves. And not only the One who is greater, but who has *promised* to come in vengeance and recompense, or pay-back, against the sin and evil that has afflicted His creation. Who has promised to come and save *you*. For as long as you live in this world and life, you will have many anxiety-causing afflictions; you will have no shortage of troubles; you will not be immune. But you do have this promise: that they will not win, and you will not be alone. ***He will come and save you.***

Now, to be sure, there are times when it seems as if the sin and evil in this world *are* winning, and as if you *are* alone, and that God is very far away from coming and saving. At such times we are like the deaf and mute man in the Holy Gospel today. *Our eyes work*, and we see the fires and storms of sin and evil wreaking havoc in the world. *And our hearts work*, our consciences convicting us of the sin and evil in us and in our lives. And so attacked from without and attacked from within we are anxious and filled with fear and worry . . . ***because our ears aren't working.*** Our ears, to hear the promises of God. To hear the forgiveness of God. To hear of our hope. And because we do not hear, we too have a *speech impediment* - something impeding, or blocking, our speech: namely, the anxiety of our hearts that hinders our prayers and praise and seeks to drive us to despair and unbelief.

But today Mark shows us that the One Isaiah pointed us to, the hope for anxious hearts, has come! For when He comes, Isaiah says, ***“the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.”***

“And taking him aside from the crowd privately, [Jesus] put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.”

And not for this man only, but *for you* has Jesus done this. For you, it was not the spit of His tongue, but the water of the font. And the word that was spoken was not ***Ephphatha***, but *I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.* **But the result was the same.** When you were baptized, Jesus took you aside and made you His own. When you were baptized, Jesus opened your ears to His Word and gave you His Spirit and faith. When you were baptized, Jesus released your tongue to speak in prayer and praise. When you were baptized, the words of Isaiah the prophet became yours: ***He came and saved you.***

And that is true because in, with, and under the water of Holy Baptism is the power and life of Jesus' cross. His cross, where the vengeance and recompense of God was poured out upon the sin that has oppressed us. His cross, where the fires of evil

were quenched by His blood and the storms of hell silenced with His forgiveness. His cross, where the Son of God hung as your substitute - that condemned in your place and dying your death, you may have His life. Eternal life. And that is now exactly what is given to you in Holy Baptism - the life of Christ and His victory. For He who rose from the dead and victoriously opened the grave, now opens deaf ears and looses mute tongues; forgives sins and gives peace; gives hope and raises you to life as a child of God. Life, even in the midst of many afflictions. For while the afflictions of this world seek to rob you of *this* life, they cannot rob you of *His* life.

And so the antidote to our anxiety is Christ.

When we focus on ourselves - or on the faith which we're supposed to have! - anxiety is sure to come, because we are so weak and powerless; we succumb so often to temptation; we are so easily frightened and bewildered. But it is exactly to us, in such a helpless state, that Christ has come. And still comes. For as Isaiah saw and proclaimed, Christ is not the greater one far away in heaven, but the greater one *here for you*. Here, in your life. Here in your suffering. Here in your despair. Here in your aloneness. Here in your struggle. Here in your dying days. For He who has overcome all these things has *not* promised that you will *not* have them, but that He will be with you and overcome them for you too.

Perhaps you wish that victory would come a bit sooner - I'm sure the people in Isaiah's day did too! But it is not your victory, but His. And He will do it. You have His promise.

And that promise is what enables us to live. To live securely in an insecure world. To live the life that James was talking about today - a life of faith and good works. Apart from Christ and His promise anxiety is our daily bread. But in Christ and His promise we are fed by His life, and so can live His life. Faith receiving His life and love and gifts, and then good works giving His life and love and gifts. Not because we *have to*, but because with His life and victory, we *can*. The bottom line is that all that we have is gift from Him. Gifts to help us in our anxiety, and gifts to help others in theirs. Gifts to live out the good vocations you have been given. Gifts which give us hope and peace.

For they are gifts from ***our Lord [who] does all things well***. Who is working in you and through you according to His good will. Even if now, for a time, you are struggling; and even if your struggling - perhaps like the deaf man - has gone on all your life. The struggle is not pointless or meaningless or hopeless. From it your Lord will bring good. He will do well. He will have compassion. He will save.

And for this He has come and is here for you today - here in His body and blood for you to eat and to drink. To save you. To give you the forgiveness, faith, strength,

and peace that you need. That you so desperately need. So repent of yourself and come. Come, receive Him, and find rest for your anxious heart. Come, dear child of God, for the giver of ears, the looser of tongues, the forgiver of sins, the opener of graves, and the giver of life is here for you. Come and rest in Him.

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.