

31 January 2010
Epiphany 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“The Hope of the Afflicted”

Text: Luke 4:31:44; Psalm 10:12, 17;
1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13; Jeremiah 1:4-10, 17-19

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

***Arise, O Lord; O God, lift up your hand;
forget not the afflicted.
O Lord, you hear the desire of the afflicted;
you will strengthen their heart.***

We sang those verses from Psalm 10 in the Introit this morning. *The prayer of the afflicted.*

We heard about some of the afflicted in the Holy Gospel today. The man who had the spirit of an unclean demon. Simon’s mother-in-law, who had a high fever. And then when the Sabbath was over and the restriction on traveling and carrying was lifted, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to Jesus.

And there is certainly no shortage of the afflicted here and in our world today. Those who are sick and diseased, those who are haunted by demons of the present or of the past, those who are afflicted by disasters both natural and man-made, those whom satan has in his crosshairs and will not leave alone. And for those people, and sometimes for ourselves, we pray this prayer. *Lord, forget not the afflicted. Help them. Help me.*

And our Lord did, and still does. Although we attribute most help and healing today to medicine, doctors, technology, and science, there is no healing that is not from His hand. Now, that is not to deny the importance of medicine, doctors, technology, and science - but what we often fail to see today is our Lord’s hand *behind* these things and working through these vocations. That our Lord is still with us - He has not left. And He is still working.

But then the question arises: *Why am I not healed? Why, then, am I still afflicted?* That is the question many ask - maybe also you. And any lack of healing or help is often seen as God’s punishment or condemnation. That He does not see and does

not care. But is that true? Is that the case?

The Holy Gospel we heard can help us answer that, for there's one more part that we haven't gotten to yet - and that is when Jesus left. When the next morning, even though many more were coming to Him for help and healing, He continues on His way. Which doesn't seem quite fair, does it? And His answer seems kind of cold and calloused. He simply says: *I have others I have to preach to. **For I was sent for this purpose.*** So, healing for some but not all?

No. That's not what this means. Rather, it means that Jesus is looking at things a bit differently than we do. For when we look at ourselves and look at the world, we see the afflictions, the problems, the troubles. Jesus sees them too, but more. He sees the cause, the root of it all, which is sin. The sin that attacks us in body and soul. The sin that beats us down and beats us up. The sin that attacks from without, and the sin that attacks from within. The sin that causes pain, and also disappointment. The sin which ultimately leads to death.

That is our real problem. And so that is what Jesus has come to save us from. The healings and the exorcisms are signs, or pointers, to this greater work that Jesus has come to do. The work of forgiveness. The work of the cross. For the cross was not just an appendix on the end of all His other work and miracles - the cross is His work. His work that is not just for a time, but for eternity.

And this is what Jesus means in the last part of the Gospel when He leaves to do that for which He was sent. He must continue preaching - in word and deed - not just healing and release, **but the cross**. That is why He will not let the demons speak - they know who He is, yes, but they do not know of the cross. And so they preach a false Gospel. For what they say is true, but not the whole truth. And a partial truth can obscure the whole truth. Just look today at those who preach a Jesus of health and wealth and happiness and healing, but speak nothing of cross and forgiveness. In the end, what good will that do? Health will give way again eventually, wealth will be left and passed onto others, and we will be shown for what we have really been all along - beggars. Men and women burdened and afflicted by sin.

But the Lord has not forgotten us. He has heard our cry. And so He has come. To stay not in Galilee and provide healing and release just for some, but to go to the cross and provide healing and release for all. For by the cross, Jesus crushes satan's head. By the cross, Jesus releases us who are afflicted and captive to sin. By the cross, Jesus gives life to the dead. What we see happen in Galilee that day was just the beginning. And Jesus *left* so that He could bring true healing to *all* - both to those He healed that day, and those He did not. **For He was sent for this purpose.**

And so He continues on, so great His love. *His* love of which St. Paul spoke today. We hear those words and look for such love in the world today. Couples hear those words read often at their weddings. But such love is not in this world - or in us - apart from Christ. Only His is a love which never ends. Only His is a love which bears all things. Only His is the love of the cross, the most excellent way. And so in love He came for us, to be afflicted with our affliction, with our sin, and to lay down His life for us. That joining us in our death, we may join Him in His life. His life that no sickness, disease, poverty, or death can take away.

And He has left Galilee and has come here - to this time and place - to preach this Good News to you as well. Saying "I love you" when He baptized you. Saying "I love you" every time He says to you *I forgive you all your sins*. Saying "I love you" when He gives you His body to eat and his blood to drink. For truly in those ways He is giving you His love. Giving you the fruits of His cross. Giving you His life. That *whether or not* the afflictions of this world and life go away or are increased, you have what is greater and cannot be taken away.

And so we today confess Jesus. Like with Jeremiah, our Lord has put His words into our mouths, and so we confess: *I believe*. Not in Christ the miracle worker, but in Christ the crucified. The Son of God who traded His life for mine. The Holy One of God who made you His own. And His own you are, *for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish*, in a union that death cannot part.

So what of now? Now, perhaps you are among those who were healed in Galilee. Or perhaps you are among those who were not healed. Does that reflect whether Jesus loves you or not? Whether Jesus has come for you or not? No - that is shown us by the cross. For *there* He is for you. *There* He forgets you not. *There* He hears you cry. As we prayed in the Collect earlier, *He knows we live in the midst of so many dangers*. Yes, He knows. He knows better than we do. And He knows our weakness better than we do. And so like Jeremiah, He is our strength. We say with Paul that He is our love. And we say with Luke that He is our life. And we need look no where else. For whatever comes in this world and life, we have all we need in Him.

And if we have all we need in Him, then His strength, love, and life we can now give to others in their need. And show them a love, forgiveness, and life not of this world. The love, forgiveness, and life of the cross.

So come now and receive Him who laid down His life for you, and then go and give. You are not alone. Never alone. For Epiphany shows us that Jesus the Christ is your God, your Saviour. The helper of the afflicted. The hope of all. Your help and your hope. Not just for now, but forever.

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.