

3 February 2013  
Epiphany 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Preaching the Good News”

Text: Luke 4:31-44 (Jeremiah 1:4-10; 1 Cor 12:31b-13:13)

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

***And when it was day, [Jesus] departed and went into a desolate place. And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them, but he said to them, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose.”***

Jesus was about preaching. He came to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to everyone. He didn't want to leave anyone out. He went through all the towns and villages. He was compelled to do so. ***I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God***, He said today.

And when He did, the people were amazed. Last week we heard the people of Jesus' hometown were amazed at His *gracious* words. This week we heard the people in Capernaum they were amazed at the *authority* of His words. Words like these were rare. Words like these were different than what they normally heard.

The thing is . . . *they shouldn't have been different*. What Jesus preached is the same Word of God the people had in the Old Testament. The same word God sent prophets like Jeremiah to proclaim: *Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand*.

But that message wasn't always proclaimed. Because it's hard. That's why Jeremiah tried to wiggle out of God's call. *Go get someone older; someone with more experience; someone who will do a better job*. But God said: *I know what I'm doing, Jeremiah. Just speak my words. Here, I'll even put them in your mouth for you. Just speak my words and leave the rest to me*.

Jeremiah did, but there were many - far too many - who didn't. They didn't preach the Law, exposing men's sin and calling them to repentance. They didn't preach the Gospel, pointing to the gracious forgiveness of God. They preached instead of what men *could* do, of what men *should* do, and that *doing the right things would bring you peace with God*. It's a message we hear far too often in our world still today. Because it's the default message wired into us by sin.

You see, what sin has done is curved us in on ourselves. When God created us, the thoughts and intentions of our hearts were only directed to others - in the home as Adam took care of Eve and Eve took care of Adam; in the world as they were both caretakers of the world God had made and given to them; and in the church as they looked to their Father in faith for every good thing. What Satan did then was turn the thoughts and intentions of their hearts from outward, from others, from God, to inward, to now do for themselves instead of others, and put faith in themselves instead of in God.

And so our now sinful, default wiring is to take, not give. That's why we have to teach our children to share, to say thank you, to do for others. That doesn't come naturally. *Naturally* is finders keepers, I didn't get my share, and, but this is what *I* want. And even as adults, even when we know better, that's still wired into us; we still have those impulses. Wanting what I want, when I want it, how I want it.

But what has done far more damage than that in our world today is when we are curved in on ourselves in our relationship with God. When our relationship with God is focused on what I do. When we therefore put faith in ourselves, thinking that *just doing the right things will bring you peace with God*. That is the false premise that all false religions are built upon, and it is the constant temptation for Christians as well.

And if you doubt that, just think to the last funeral you went to. It doesn't matter if it was Christian or not - the topic of conversation is the same at all of them. What you will hear is what a good person this was; what good things they did; how devoted they were. And I say that because - as most of you (I think) know - I was at a funeral this week. My wife's grandmother died somewhat unexpectedly last Sunday. *Somewhat unexpectedly* because she was 98 and we all knew her time was coming - we just didn't know when or how much longer she had. And at the funeral this week, that is what I heard a lot of. And I understand. I understand why people say only good things - you don't want to be a heel and say bad things about a person now dead.

**But if nothing else is said**, if nothing else is said *even in the sermon*, if that's the only message, then what? Is that our peace? Is that our hope? Sadly, for many people, it is. *Just do the right things and you'll be at peace with God*.

But there's no peace in that, only questions. For what are the right things? People have different opinions and those opinions change over time. And do I do them? Do I do them enough? Do I do them *often* enough? Do I do them *good* enough? And how do you know? Can you know? If enough people say you're good does that make it so? If you think you're good does that make it so?

You see, that's all a self-directed, inward-looking faith can do - create questions. And questions create doubt. And doubt creates fear and then despair. Which is exactly what satan wants. Not faith, not confidence or surety, but questions, doubts, and fears to fill your mind.

**Which brings us back to Jesus.** To His words and preaching. What the people heard was the very opposite of self-directed, inward-looking preaching. They heard someone pointing them *away* from themselves, that the kingdom of God is not what you do, *but what God does*. The kingdom of God was among them because Jesus was among them doing it. *Doing it*. He didn't tell *them* to do it. That's what they'd been hearing. He was telling them that He came to do it. What they *couldn't* do. What the whole word of God was talking about.

*And then they saw it.* Demons cast out. Fevers, sicknesses, and diseases cast out. *What sin had brought into the world Jesus was taking out of the world.* But it wasn't just demons and sicknesses - it was sin. The sin that causes these things. The sin that curves us in on ourselves. The sin that separates us from each other and from God. Not the symptoms but the root of it all Jesus had come to do something about. To bring the kingdom of God to everyone.

So He wouldn't stay there. He had to keep going, to yes, ***preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well.*** To the whole world. And so even more than to the other towns, *He had to keep going until He went to the cross.* For there, on the cross, He preached the loudest sermon of all. The demons in Capernaum shouted "This is the Son of God" when Jesus healed, but Jesus shouted "I AM the Son of God" when He died. For not in healing does the kingdom of God come, but in forgiveness. The healing of bodies was only a sign of the healing of both body and soul that Jesus has come to provide for us.

For on the cross we see our sin. But even more, on the cross we see our Saviour. And in both ways, the cross preaches to us the truth and the love of God. The love that we heard of this morning. The love that won't let us think too little of our sins and so be self-righteous, and the love that won't let us think too much of our sins and so despair. The love that would have us look to Jesus as our peace and our hope. For if He died for my sins, if He died for my forgiveness, then . . . *what else matters?* What is my sin, what are my good deeds compared with that?

And so Jesus wouldn't stay there. He had to keep going. Yes, even after the cross He wouldn't stay in the tomb, but He kept going and in His resurrection continues to proclaim the good news that our sins are forgiven and that the kingdom of God is at hand. For still today, Jesus is bringing the kingdom of God to us. Every time a person is baptized and forgiven, every time a sinner repents and is forgiven, every time we sinners come and receive the Body and Blood of our Lord and are

forgiven. That's all Jesus. That's all the kingdom of God coming to us. The amazing, gracious kingdom of God coming to us.

And so that's what I preached on Friday, as I had the honor of preaching at the funeral. I preached Jesus. I talked about our Oma, but I preached Jesus. Because that is the message we need. Because that is the only message that gives us peace and hope. And like the people in Jesus' day, people were amazed at the gracious words. Gracious not meaning pleasant, but meaning grace-filled; words filled with the love and grace of Jesus. And not because of me or how I preached, but because it is a word unlike any other. The Word of Jesus that gives hope and comfort in the midst of a world of sin and death.

It is the gracious message that, still today, amazes even long-time, die-hard Christians. For even long-time, die-hard Christians (like many of you) still live in this sinful flesh that's wired to look within. And so we need constantly be pointed to this good news. We need constantly to be pointed away from ourselves, away from what we do, away from our sins, away from examining our faith and whether it measures up or not - **and look at the cross**. And see that's how much God loves you. You're not good and not good enough and will never be. But you are forgiven in Christ. For those same words that drove out demons and rebuked fevers do the same for you in your sin-sickness. *I forgive you all your sins* is not a pious wish - it's the truth.

And when your sins are forgiven, there is peace.

When your sins are forgiven, there is faith.

When your sins are forgiven, there is hope.

When your sins are forgiven, there is love.

And the greatest of these is love.

Yes, the love of Christ **for you**.

The loving death and resurrection of Christ that makes all the difference in the world.

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.