

18 February 2018  
The First Sunday in Lent

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church

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“Our True and Faithful Father”

Text: Mark 1:9-15; James 1:12-18; Genesis 22:1-18

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

There are lots of fathers these days. There are not very many fathers these days.

Are those two statements contradictory? No. It depends on the word father - how you mean it.

There are lots of men *fathering* children these days. Completing the biological act necessary to be a father to a little boy or little girl.

But at the same time, it must be said, there are many men who father children who are not being fathers at all. Not the ones who die or who for others reasons cannot be fathers for their children, but the ones who are willfully not carrying out the responsibilities that come after the act of fathering; the ones who just aren't interested. We call them “deadbeat dads.”

Historically, to be a father meant, really, three things:

- (1.) That you would feed your child; provide what your child needed for life.
- (2.) That you protect your child; protect her from harm and danger.
- (3.) That you would provide your child an inheritance.

So the abdication of men from being fathers has meant that someone else must provide these things - or that they are not provided at all. In some parts of the world, we see them not provided at all. There are orphans, street children, foraging in dumps for food, living in boxes, and certainly having no inheritance. But this too - having very little hope for the future.

In our part of the world, we don't see this so much. What we see is the government stepping in to be the father men will not be. But that's not the government's job, and it doesn't do it as well. And so children are harmed and suffer. Fathers not wanting them, mothers afraid to have them and struggling to provide for them, and so many dying; and many before they're even born.

It's a mess. It was never meant to be this way. But it's what sin does, to us and to our

world. Sin makes messes, it doesn't clean them up. Sin, which comes as a result of satan convincing us **that our heavenly Father is a father who does not father**. That your heavenly Father has given you life, but now isn't giving you what you need for that life. Or in other words, that your heavenly Father is, in fact, a deadbeat dad. A father you cannot count on. And that he, satan, would be a much better father for you.

That's how he tempted Jesus.

Mark doesn't give us the details of the temptations that Matthew and Luke do, but he does tell us that right after Jesus is baptized - while He still has water dripping off His head and the words from heaven still ringing in His ears, that ***you are my beloved Son*** - the Spirit drives Him out into the wilderness, where He is tempted, harassed by satan, for forty days. Forty long days.

You know how that is. For he tempts and harasses you too. And not just to do something wrong here or there, this sin or that sin - but really, tempting you to think Your Father in heaven is letting you down, is not providing for you, is not taking care of you. For if He was, wouldn't things be going better? Wouldn't you have what you wanted? Wouldn't you not be enduring such struggles and trials?

And this week, another school shooting, see? If God is such a good and loving Father, why is there so much evil in the world? That's such a rich and ironic question, which we hear all the time. Satan, who put such evil into the world, asking us why there is so much evil in the world and using it against God! See? See what kind of Father you have? A Father who is no father at all, is He? But I'll be your father, satan hisses. I'll provide what you want. Take it from me. Take my word for it.

And how often we do. Doubt our Father, doubt His love, doubt His faithfulness, and so take matters into our own hands. And this doubt, this unbelief, is the source of every sin, and makes our lives less than what God has for us. Our unbelief, or our belief that satan is right! (Although we'd never say it that way.) That my heavenly Father isn't providing, and won't provide, so I have to get it myself, do it myself.

And what does that look like in my life? I despair because I do not believe in my Father. I fear because I do not believe in my Father. I take because I do not believe in my Father. I hurt others before they can hurt me because I do not believe in my Father. I do not pray, praise, and give thanks as I should because I do not believe. I do not believe that my Father is really my father; will really be my father; is acting like my father. Look at your life - what is it for you? *How* is it for you?

But Jesus does what we do not; can not. He trusts. He trusts His Father completely. No matter what He sees, no matter what He feels, no matter what He experiences, no matter what He hears satan hissing into His ear, He clings to, He believes, only the Word of His

Father. Who is truly Father. Who is faithful and consistent. ***Jesus is His beloved Son. With Jesus He is well pleased.*** Jesus will not let go of those words.

And make no mistake about it - these were real temptations that Jesus faced; it wasn't just a sham. The reading from James today said that ***God cannot be tempted with evil*** - and that's true. But Jesus wasn't sitting out there in the wilderness for forty days just as God, impervious to temptation. He was there as a man, as our brother. Willingly not using His divine power, in order to be tempted as we are. Enduring the lies just like us, as one of us, in order to do what we do not; can not. Overcome the lies, overcome the temptations, overcome satan Himself. And not just to show us how to do it - but to **WIN**. To win the battle for us. The battle begun in the manger, ramped up in the wilderness, and finally finished on the cross. On the cross, where even in His darkest moment, forsaken and bearing the weight of the guilt of the whole world, Jesus trusts, believes in His Father to the end. In that moment when it seemed as if all was lost, He says instead: **Father.** *Father, into your hands I commit my spirit* (Luke 23:46).

I don't know if Isaac spoke those words or not, *but it's what he did*. Did you ever think about that? That story we heard today from the Old Testament, when God told Abraham to do the unthinkable - to sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt offering - what do you think Isaac thought as his father bound him, laid him on the wood that he himself had carried up the mountain, and then as his father brandished that knife over him, ready to plunge it down into him? *Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.*

How could Abraham do that, how could Isaac do that, if not for the Word and promise of God that through Isaac all the families of the earth would be blessed? Or in other words, that through Isaac, the Saviour of the world would come? In that darkest of moments, they, father and son, clung to that promise. So that the book of Hebrews could say that Abraham believed that even if God made him go through with it, that even so, God was able to raise Isaac from the dead - from the ashes! - and fulfill His promise (Hebrews 11:19). And that's also why Abraham said to his servants: ***I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.*** Abraham believed he would not come back alone.

***Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.***

That man who remained steadfast under trial and received the crown of life was not Abraham or Isaac or you or I - it was the one who remained steadfast in the wilderness, who was faithful at all times and in all places, and who even in His darkest moment uttered that word: **Father.** *Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.* And the sinless Jesus received the crown of life. But not for Himself, but for you. For since the grave could not hold the one who had no sin, since Jesus was the one raised from the dead, the crown of life He received He won for you and me. To give it to us.

And with that, God - true Father, Son, and Spirit - provides us with exactly those things that a true father provides, that I listed at the beginning of the sermon today.

(1.) A true father feeds his child - and we are now fed with the Body and Blood of Jesus; the food that nourishes to everlasting life.

(2.) A true father protects his child - and the blood of Jesus protects us from the condemnation of sin and His resurrection breaks the bonds of the grave.

(3.) And a true father provides his child an inheritance - and as Jesus took our place in death, so He now gives us His place in life, an eternal inheritance in heaven.

But does that mean the same for all the things we need in *this* world and life? Not just spiritual things but physical realities? That's *exactly* what that means, Paul says. For he wrote to the Christians at Rome: *He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things* (Romans 8:32)? Or in other words, compared to the cross, all the stuff we need in this world and life is small potatoes compared to that.

So after those forty days in the wilderness were over, Jesus begins to preach: ***The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.*** In your Father. And it's His preaching for us today. Repent and believe in the gospel. Repent of your unbelief and believe - in your true and faithful Father, in His Son who laid down His life for you, and in His Spirit that He gives to you to give you the faith and life you need.

And even if now, for a while, like Isaac, it looks like your heavenly Father has a knife ready to plunge down into you, that He's not being fatherly at all . . . remember that knife didn't sink into Isaac, and it won't sink into you. Jesus took your place. And because He did, you are unbound, free, and living. And so you, too, can say with confidence - even in the wilderness, even attacked, even in the darkest moments - ***Father, into your hands I commit my spirit, my life, my all.*** For He has given His all for you.

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.