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Pentecost 3
VA

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna,

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“By the Word of God”

Text: Mark 3:20-35; Genesis 3:8-15; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

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

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible.

That’s what we confess together every week in the Nicene Creed. That there are things in this world that we can see, and things in this world that we cannot see. Things visible and invisible.

Sometimes what is invisible becomes visible. The Hubble Space Telescope is enabling us to see things far out in the universe that we’ve never seen before. Electron microscopes make things too tiny to see big enough to be seen by our eyes. And, the Scriptures tell us, that even angels - normally invisible beings - have sometimes been seen with human eyes.

But this much is sure: there’s a lot more going on around us all the time than meets the eye. More than we can see and know. And not just in the physical realm, but especially in the spiritual realm. There are good angels, the angels of God, protecting and fighting for us. And there are evil angels, demons, tempting us and fighting against us. That’s the reality in which we live.

So now here’s the question: How do we understand and interpret this reality? What does it mean? Is it good or bad?

Scientists, when looking at and evaluating things in the physical world, often disagree on a question like this. They take what can be seen, gather the data about it, and try to understand it and interpret what it means - and that can be very difficult to do. In fact, they often come to different conclusions even though they’re using the same data.

Well how much more, then, for the spiritual world. How do we understand and interpret what cannot be seen? Or, when something happens that cannot be explained, how do we judge what is happening? Is it good or evil? Is it godly or demonic? Or is it neither - just a grand, cosmic accident? Perhaps we think we can know, that we can judge and interpret

rightly - but *can* we? Do we?

Adam and Eve could not. Even with their perfect minds, untainted yet by sin, they got it wrong. Or as we heard Eve say in the Old Testament reading earlier: ***she was deceived***. They made a judgment, that eating this fruit would be good. And perhaps, based upon physical characteristics alone, it was. The fruit was *good for food* and *a delight to the eyes*, we are told (Genesis 3:6). But the invisible reality, the spiritual reality, was quite different, and they got that quite wrong. This eating was not good, and it made for a whole lot *more* not good, as not only were Adam and Eve plunged into sin and death with this eating, but so was every generation born after them. From now on there would not be peace, but enmity and strife. They got it wrong, and it was a disaster.

This is also what we heard in the Holy Gospel today. Things were happening that could not be explained. Jesus was saying and doing things that could not be explained. *So what's going on?* How do we understand and interpret these things? the people wondered. Is this godly or is it demonic? Is it good or is it evil? Well some, perhaps many, judged wrongly. ***He is out of His mind***, some said. And others judged that ***He is possessed by Beelzebul; by the prince of demons He is casting out demons***. What we *cannot* see, what is behind these things we *can* see but cannot explain, is not good, they thought. It is evil. It is demonic.

In our world today, actually, I think many tend to have the opposite problem. When there are things in our world today that cannot be explained - supernatural, spiritual things - I think the judgment most often made is that these things are good; that they are godly and of God. Messages from God. Visions of heaven. A divine helping hand. And maybe they are. *But maybe they're not*. And how do we know? If Adam and Eve got it wrong, and the people in Jesus' day got it wrong, how do we know we haven't got it wrong? That what cannot be explained but seems good really is good? And what cannot be explained but seems bad really is bad?

In fact, I would suggest to you that this is exactly what satan wants and what he is trying to get you to do - interpret things wrongly. To see the good things of God as demonic (like with Jesus), and to see the evil things that he is doing (like with Adam and Eve) as good. He wants to confuse you, deceive you. *He has designed your fall*, as we just sang (LSB #668 v. 1). Yes, satan's got plans for you; big plans! And maybe this is how he is doing it. Or at least, one of the ways he is doing it.

And so it was with the folks in Jesus' hometown. They got it wrong. They were deceived, by the master deceiver.

They were deceived, for the reality was exactly the opposite of what they thought, of how they judged. As Jesus then taught them, what was happening was not of satan; it was not satan against satan - it was, in fact, the very Son of God in human flesh showing His

dominion over the forces of evil, and foreshadowing what would be His greatest victory over those forces: when He would destroy the power of death and the grave through His death and resurrection.

Interestingly, the people at that time got that wrong too. The disciples saw the cross and Jesus on it and thought that the greatest evil and the most horrible wrong that ever could be. And yet the reality was exactly the opposite. This is how God was working His greatest good and the salvation of the world. This was God fulfilling His Word to Adam and Eve and inflicting upon the serpent a greater injury (a bruised head) than He Himself was enduring (a bruised heel). Even though it looked exactly the opposite.

And so Jesus is not possessed by, but *binding* the forces of evil. He is binding the one who is stronger than us but not stronger than He. And this too: creating for us a new reality, a new family. Not an unclean one with unclean spirits (like what we got from Adam and Eve), but a new family of those cleansed by water and the Word. Not a family just here below, but a new family born from above by the Spirit. A family of faith. Not to replace our earthly families, but to give us even more. Our earthly families - *our blood ties* - are gifts and precious and are to be cherished, but they do last last forever. Parents die, children sometimes die. Families are sometimes ripped apart. But the family of faith we are given here - *our water ties* - will not end, but last forever. This, too, is a family to be cherished. This family where water is thicker than blood.

Of course, what Jesus said here, too, about this new family seemed *crazy*; more evidence that He must be out of His mind. All these people are His ***brothers and sisters and mother***? But He was simply expressing a reality that though it cannot be seen, is nevertheless very real. And, in fact, *more* real than what we can see.

For as Paul said: it is what we cannot see, the unseen, that is greater; that is *eternal*. What we can see, our outer nature, is wasting away. Our bodies getting older, wearing out, dying. The world coming apart at the seams. Our culture tearing itself apart. Kingdoms and nations rise and fall, come and go. History books and cemeteries are good reality checks for anyone who thinks it not so.

But we do not fear. For there is another reality that we cannot see. And this reality, Paul says, is not wasting away or falling apart, but is ***being renewed day by day***. And we are being prepared for a future which is both glorious and eternal.

But that brings us back to our original question: How do we know? How *can* we know? What is real? How do we interpret and understand what we see? And how can we judge what we cannot see? How do we get it *right*?

Well, only by the word of the One who knows. The One who not only *sees* the visible and the invisible, but is the *maker of all things visible and invisible*. The One who knows

more than us and reveals to us what we cannot see and what we do not know. We know only by the Word of God. Only by the Word of God can we sit by a hospice bed or stand in a cemetery and know death is not the end. Only by the Word of God can we know the cross as instrument of God for good - both Jesus' cross and the ones He lays on you. Only by the Word of God can we know the bread and wine laid upon this altar become the Body and Blood of our Lord upon His Word, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins.

It is only by the Word of God that we can interpret - correctly - the things of this world and life. That, just maybe, what the world calls good isn't; and what we think is bad might instead actually be, as Paul said, a *slight momentary affliction [that] is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.*

Some might scoff at that, at us, just like they scoffed at Jesus. That's okay. We will continue to confess, that is, to say the same thing as God. What He has told us is true. We will speak His Word, and trust when we cannot. When there is no answer, or we have no answer, to what is happening. When sometimes, things remain a mystery to us.

But this we know. That the Jesus who drove our demons is driving them out still. That the Jesus who defeated death is defeating it still. That the Jesus who forgave sins is forgiving them still. That the Jesus who created all things good is working good still. And that the Jesus who created all things is creating for Himself a new family still . . . which includes you. And that, as Paul tells us, when *our earthly home is destroyed* - whether that be our bodies or our world - *we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.* For as we live in Christ and in His house here, not despising the Spirit, but washed and fed and absolved by Him here - so will we live forever. For the kingdom that will last is of the One who rose from the dead. Your brother, who rose for you, and will raise you, too. To life. With your family. 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.