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Lent 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“No Substitutes. Just Repentance and Forgiveness”

Text: Luke 13:31-35; Jeremiah 26:8-15; Philippians 3:17-4:1

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

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!

Why? Why did Jerusalem stone and kill the prophets God sent to them? It's simple, really. They didn't like the message, so they would kill the messenger. Being a prophet may sound like a cool job, but not really. Life was rough. You were sent by God to speak tough words. And if they had life insurance back then and you listed prophet as your job, you would probably be declined for a policy. Very few were the prophets who died of old age.

We heard an example of this today from the book of Jeremiah. God sent Jeremiah to call the people to repentance, but also to tell them that since they had refused to repent, God was going to discipline them. An enemy was going to come in, defeat them in battle, and leave the city of Jerusalem ***desolate, without inhabitant***. So the people in the Temple who heard him speak those words surrounded Jeremiah and were going to kill him. Don't like the message, kill the messenger. And this is just one example. There were countless others.

For then, as now, no one really likes to be called to repentance. No one likes to be told they're wrong, or living wrongly, or thinking wrongly. *I don't!* And when that happens, what often happens next? We dig in our heels. Strike back. Try to accuse the one accusing us. Defend ourselves. Justify ourselves. But repent? Change? No thank you. I'd really rather not do that.

So you might think, then, that Lent must be a really unpopular season, with its strong call to repentance. *But its not*. There are many people who, though not very religious, will still give up something for Lent. Which seems odd, doesn't it? If we don't like to repent? Ah, but you see, that's exactly why so many do it - they're not repenting, they're using Lent to atone for their own sins by giving something up *rather than* repenting. It's a substitute. But a rather poor one.

The same thing, I think, is true when folks make promises to God to get better, do better. I'll pray more, give more, help more, love more, hug more, read the Bible more, volunteer more . . . but repent more usually isn't on that list. Because that's what we're trying to avoid. This is another poor kind of substitute for repenting - to try to atone for your sins not by giving something up, but by doing good things. But this doesn't work either.

And then there are those who are publicly apologizing for all kinds of things. For what our country has done, for the way they were raised, for oppression, for slavery, for inequality, for . . . what else? But this, too, is *usually* not repentance. When this is an apology for what others have done, or a general situation, or how we wish things might be different. This, too, is part of Jesus' ***and you would not***. You would not repent.

For repentance, rather, is to say: I am a poor, miserable sinner. It's not anyone else's fault. I cannot give up my way out of it. I cannot good my way out of it. There is, in fact, nothing I can do about it. And for my sins against God and against others, I deserve to die. Now and forever. Period.

That's rough. But there's no substitute for this. Not because we have a God who is a mean tyrant who just wants to humiliate us and subjugate us, **but because we have a loving God who wants to forgive us**. Who wants to gather us together under His wings of forgiveness and give us life. And so God sent His prophets to call people - to call us! - to repentance. For a loving God will do no less. Not just to make you do something you really don't want to do, but so that you will receive what you really need to receive: **forgiveness**. If there was any other way, you can be sure we'd try - and we do! We'll run all over the barnyard, trying this, trying that, ignoring the call of the mother hen to hide under her wings . . . while the satanic hawk circles above, with sharp and ready talons, looking for a tasty meal. The chicks oblivious to the danger until it is too late.

So it was with the people in Jeremiah's day, and the people in Jesus' day. Things are going just fine, Jeremiah. We were doing just fine without you, Jesus. We've got it. We're handling it. In fact, the only trouble is since you've come along and upset the apple cart! You're the problem, not us! Yet with each call they refuse, with each warning they ignore, with each messenger they stone and kill, the satanic hawk gets closer and closer . . . Refusing to repent is only hurting yourself.

Jesus sees the danger though. Everything's not fine. That's why He sent prophets. That's why He's there. That's why His words of sadness today for the people of Jerusalem. And how about you and your life? Your old sins, your new sins, your stubborn sins, your don't-like-God's-Word-and-so-go-your-own-way sins. Do you strike back, accuse, deny? Try to defend and justify what you do? You don't even see the satanic hawk, do you? Or maybe you do, but think: *he won't get me*. He'll snatch somebody else. I'll be fine.

But there's only one safe place to be, and that is under the wings of Jesus' forgiveness. Only His forgiveness can pardon the condemnation of our sin. Only His resurrection can overcome the death that will overcome each of us. And only by Him allowing the satanic hawk to sink His talons into Him are we safe. For as we sang into the Introit today: ***the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me***. Your reproach, your condemnation, your death, given to Him, that His praise, His victory, His life, be given to you. You who hide under His forgiving wings.

Jeremiah told the people that if they killed him, they would ***bring innocent blood upon themselves***. They would be called to account. But when the Son of God laid down His life on the cross, it was exactly so His innocent blood would be put on us. Blood not of condemnation, but blood of atonement. So when ***we would not***, when we avoid repentance, we are really avoiding the blood that washes away our sins, the forgiveness we need. The forgiveness the Father wants to give so much that He would send His Son to die on that cross. And the forgiveness Jesus wants for you so much that He would come and do that for you.

And you would not? It makes no sense, does it?

So the Apostle Paul said: Remember this - remember that ***your citizenship is in heaven***. If you forget that and think you belong here, in this world and life, then you'll live like it; you'll live with your mind set on earthly things. You'll try to guard and protect your stuff *here*, your life and honor *here*, and find your joy and satisfaction *here*. And instead of repenting, you'll do whatever advances that for you *here*.

But what if it's not all about *here*? What if there's more? What if Jesus really did rise from the dead and promise us the same? And what if that's yours when you hide under the wings of Jesus' forgiveness? Then our stuff here, our life and honor here, isn't as important. And our joy and satisfaction comes not from *here* but from Jesus and the citizenship He has provided for us, in a kingdom that has no end. Well, that's a different perspective, isn't it? One, it seems to me, that makes repentance easier. Not easy, but easier.

Or, think of it this way: if ***your citizenship is in heaven***, then *the church is a colony of heaven*. An outpost of forgiveness and life in the midst of a world of sin and death. That's means we shouldn't expect life to be easy. We're surrounded by sin and the consequences of sin; by pain and suffering and evil; by sadness and death. Yet in the midst of all this - not immune from all this, but in the midst of it - we are protected under the refuge of our Saviour's wings. We are hurt but not harmed. We are killed but our life not taken away. We are sad yet still joyful. Because this is not all there is. We are a colony here and now, but ***our citizenship is in heaven***.

And from it, Paul says, from heaven, ***we await a Saviour***, and the transformation that will

take place on the Last Day, when our lowly bodies, our hurting bodies, our rebellious bodies, our diseased and dying bodies, are transformed *to be like His glorious body*.

The people in Jeremiah's day and in Jesus' day, too, thought of the Temple as their sanctuary and Jerusalem as their sanctuary city. That in those, nothing could harm them! But not so, both Jeremiah and Jesus proclaim. Rather, **Jesus is the sanctuary**. In Him, under His wings, we are safe. You see, what made the Temple a sanctuary, and Jerusalem a sanctuary city, was not the building or the city, but the one who was in them. The gracious God who was there to forgive. The gracious God who had now come in the flesh and blood of Jesus. And so in Him, we are safe. No matter the city, no matter the country, no matter whether alive or dead. Jesus' reign and power and authority are over all.

So baptized into Christ, you are a citizen of heaven, though living in this colony now. The Spirit given to you in those waters working in you, to repent and rely not on yourself, or what you give up, or what you do, but on the protecting wings of Jesus' forgiveness. And He leads you here, to this altar, to receive that innocent blood shed for you, to give you the life you need. And so here, at this altar, you sing: *Blesséd is he who comes in the name of the Lord!* For you see Him here, by faith. His Body and Blood in this bread and wine.

And so also, given all this, you will give. For rather than try to guard and protect your stuff *here*, and your life and honor *here*, and find your joy and satisfaction *here*, and do whatever advances you *here*, you'll give this for others. Because . . . why not? Because you have something more than just this, that really, makes all this pale in comparison. For you have a glorious Saviour, who is going to glorify you.

So repent. That's a good thing. Yes, that's exactly what I'd like to do, and need to do. For that is the truth, and that is my life, receiving my life from my Jesus. No substitutes! Just forgiveness.

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.