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Pentecost 23

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Encourage One Another while Waiting for the Bridegroom”
Text: 1 Thessalonians 4:1-13; Matthew 25:1-13; Amos 5:18-24

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

Therefore encourage one another with these words, St. Paul said.

Need a little encouragement these days? Who doesn't! Right? With the pandemic dragging on and perhaps spiking again. With an election that has again revealed the polarization in our country that shows no signs of improving. And maybe with the struggles in your life that are dragging on, that can so easily discourage, with no end in sight.

Therefore encourage one another with these words.

That's why God put you here. That you would not be alone. That you would have fellow believers to encourage you, and for you to encourage them. For it is not good to be alone. We were not created for aloneness. We were created for fellowship; in the image of God fellowship; trinitarian fellowship - our union with God the cause of our union with one another. So that we are, here, one body. We're not just a bunch of individuals gathered together. We have an inter-connectedness, in Christ. So that when one suffers, we all suffer; when one rejoices, we all rejoice. And Christ, too, with us. We need this.

Therefore encourage one another with these words.

When Paul wrote those words, the Thessalonian Christians were troubled and deeply concerned that those who had died were going to miss out when Jesus returned; that they were lost. Not so! Paul tells them. For while death seems so awful and final to us, it is exactly death that Jesus came to overcome. And He did, and He will. So those who had already died aren't going to miss anything. In fact, they will be raised first. They may be dead, but they are not dead to our Lord - just sleeping. He knows them. Just as He knows you. We will be together again, with the Lord. So don't be discouraged. And don't let your fellow believers get discouraged. *Encourage one another with these words.* Encourage one another **with the Word of God.**

That's the key. The Word of God. Don't encourage with just happy thoughts or wishful thinking, but with the Word of God that is living and active, powerful and trustworthy, and makes things happen. The Word that in the beginning said "Let there be" and there was. The

Word that told dead people to rise and they did. The Word that absolves you of your sin and you are. This Word is the Word of encouragement that we need. That we need to hear and are privileged to speak.

Now, sometimes that word of encouragement will be the encouragement to **believe**, like Paul spoke to the Thessalonians. But sometimes it may also be the encouragement to **repent**, like the prophet Amos spoke. We need both. But whether a word of Law or Gospel, they will be words that point us to Christ and the hope we have in Him alone. That in these gray and latter days, as the Scriptures call them, we know the Lord is still upon His throne and still ruling all things for the good of His Church and His Christians. You. Even if it doesn't seem like it.

For He has seen it all before. Pandemics? Yup. And worse ones than this. Political divisions? Yup. World Wars, in fact. Rampant sin and rebellion? Sounds like Old Testament Israel! Disease? He cured them all. Really bad sinners? He forgave. Really hardened persecutors? He turned them to Him. Like Paul himself. Kingdoms rising, kingdoms falling, and through it all - through it all! - the Church has remained. The Word still preached, the Sacraments still given, sins still forgiven, and believers taken home.

Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Four years ago, on the night after election night, I was sitting in the Food Court at George Mason University. We were supposed to be having a Bible Study, but I spent most of the time talking some of the students "off the ledge," so to speak. They were sure the world was going to end because their candidate lost the election. I'm sure there are some who will wind up thinking that way this year.

They were right . . . but in one sense only. The world is going to end. But it won't be because of an election. It won't be because of a pandemic. It won't be because of global warming or anything else in this world. **It will be when Jesus comes again.** On the day that God set long ago. The day, as Saint Matthew described it - and as we prayed in the Collect - when the Bridegroom comes to take home His Bride, the Church.

Not that all those other things aren't important. They are. We should vote as wisely as we can. We should take precautions for our health and the health of others. We need to be good stewards of God's creation. These are the vocations that God has given us, among others. These are our loving service to our neighbor. But God is the one in control. Always has been. Always will be. ***Encourage one another with these words.***

Encourage one another in Christ. Encourage one another not only for this life, but for eternal life. For if this life, this world, is all there is, then it is hard to be encouraged. There's *always* something going wrong, always something falling apart, always bad news of one kind or another. But if this life, this world, is not all there is - and it's not, of course! - then

there is encouragement. **Namely this: that the Bridegroom is coming for His Bride.** That Jesus died and rose again not for Himself, but for you. That the day is coming when the pandemics, divisions, and death of this world is going to be over, and there will be only life. So we have a sure and certain hope and future in Christ, that gives us hope and encouragement now. To persevere, and to help others to. To be ready when the Bridegroom comes.

And how we do that, how we are ready for when the Bridegroom comes, **is by waiting where the Bridegroom is already coming.** Makes sense, doesn't it? If you're waiting for a ballgame to start, you do so at the field. If you're waiting for the waitress to serve your meal, you do so (or at least we used to do so, before Covid!) in a restaurant. So if you're waiting for the Bridegroom to come, you do so where He comes now - here. Here, where He comes and speaks. Here, where He comes and washes. Here, where He comes and adopts children for His own. Here, where He comes and feeds us with His own Body and Blood. Here, where He forgives sins. Here, **where every Sunday is a little rehearsal for the Last Day.** So here is where you fill up with the oil of faith and forgiveness you need.

And then we take the encouragement we have received here, *the Lord* we have received here, out into the world to encourage others. To give the forgiveness, to give the love, to give the mercy, to give the truth, to give the life we have received here to those in need. To those who need a word of encouragement. To those who need the Lord. So that when the Bridegroom returns, they too have the oil of faith and forgiveness they need.

Because sadly, not all will. In Jesus' parable, there were not only five wise virgins, but five foolish ones. Five who were not ready.

Perhaps we should blame the Bridegroom, for taking so long to come. But He delays not so some will run out, but so that more will be ready. He delays in mercy. Like He did in the days of Noah, when finally the Day came and another door was shut - the door of the ark. God didn't send the flood immediately. He waited 120 years! And not because Noah needed that long to build it. But that people repent and turn to Him. He is merciful. Every Bride and Bridegroom look forward to the day of their marriage, and you can be sure the Lord is looking forward to the day as well. But He will not speed it along. He will wait. For He wants there to be **ten wise virgins**, not just five. He wants all to be saved.

Therefore encourage one another with these words.

It doesn't matter how foolish you've been in the past. It doesn't matter how foolish you are now. The Bridegroom is coming now with His gifts for you, so that when the Day of the wedding feast comes, you will be ready. Ready to enter with joy into the unending feast of heaven. Ready to enter not just as a guest, **but as the Bride.** For truly that is who you are. All of you, the Bride of Christ. All one body. Together as one here, and together as one forever.

Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Encourage one another to **repent** and see their sins on Jesus. Paid for in full.

Encourage one another to **forgive** and see the sins *of others* on Jesus. Paid for in full.

Encourage one another in their **baptism**, that they are a dearly loved child of God, as you are. And if they are not, their Saviour wants them to be.

Encourage one another with the **Word** of the Lord. That Jesus is the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end. The one who is greater than all the trials and troubles of this world and life.

Encourage one another that Jesus is able to use **suffering** for good - just look at the cross for proof of that!

Encourage one another and **share** their sorrows and burdens, making them just a little less heavy.

Encourage one another to **faithfulness** and perseverance, for we all grow tired and weary and need the strength of others.

Encourage one another that they have a Father in heaven, a brother in Jesus, and you as a brother or sister in Christ, and so they are not alone.

Encourage one another with these words.

The word in Greek for encourage is *parakaleo*. You might recognize that word. It sounds like *Paraclete* - a word used for the Holy Spirit. And that's instructive. For how does the Holy Spirit do His work? How does He comfort and encourage us? Through the Word. And through the Word, connecting us to Jesus. So when you ***encourage one another with these words***, the words of God, the Spirit is working. Through you. For others. To give them Jesus. To give them what they need. Just as He does for you.

So ***encourage one another with these words***. That is, **Spirit them** with these words! For so has your brother Jesus Spirited you. To be ready. To be His Bride, *without spot or wrinkle or any such thing . . . holy and without blemish* (Ephesians 5:27). That you dwell in the house of the Lord and feast with Him 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.