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Pentecost 21

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Alexandria, VA

Jesu Juva

“Peace in Trying Times”
Text: Philippians 4:5b-7

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

“The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

These are very important verses for us to hear, especially in these days when peace is once again so hard to find. If 9/11 made us afraid of airplanes being used as bombs, and anthrax made us afraid of the mail, now many are afraid to go to the mall, to the supermarket, or even to put gas in their cars. Extra precautions are being taken by officials, events are cancelled . . . and think about it – all because of one man. One man who strikes at random. One man with a rifle and a high-powered scope, who delights in fear and death. One man who has taken away our peace and security. And so for many, these verses that we heard from St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians are folly! For how can we not be anxious? At least until this sniper is caught and taken off our streets?

But you know what? Even when that happens – and I pray that it is soon – even when that happens, there will be another. We don’t know where and we don’t know how or why, but there will be others. And the peace and relief that we may feel at the capture of this one man will again be replaced with fear and uncertainty. It is almost as if we are on a roller coaster! Riding the ups and downs of fear and peace, of anxiety and security, of the known and the unknown. And with their highs and lows, their twists and turns, and even the upside-downs, roller coasters can be very scary – and for many, so can life. Not knowing what’s going to happen around the next turn. Not knowing what attack, what sniper, what germ is coming our way next.

But in these verses, Paul is saying that there is a way off of this roller coaster. There is a refuge and peace that will guard our hearts and minds, so that whatever next comes our way, we do not need be filled with the fear and anxiety and uncertainty that plagues so many. And that is the refuge and peace of God given to us in Christ Jesus. In Him, we can face an uncertain future with confidence, and know that even if we find ourselves in

the crosshairs, that the peace of the cross and the love of God that numbers the hairs on our heads, is greater than whatever we face in this life.

Because as frightening as events in the past year and a half have been, they are only outward manifestations of the same problem that has been plaguing us from the very beginning. The problem of sin and evil in this world. And even though some would say that the problem is worse for us now because it is moving closer and closer, and it is now on our shores and in our land, that's really not true! It really has been here all along, and it has been close to us also all along. Very close. For the sin and evil that produces snipers and terrorists is the same sin and evil that lives and lurks in our hearts. Yours and mine. It is the same sin and evil that cause us to act out in sin, and to hate, and to murder – maybe not in deed, but in the thoughts of our minds and the desires of our hearts.

But as frightening as recent events may be, we must remember that ultimately, we are not battling flesh and blood, but ***“against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil.”*** And so while some, in response to recent event, are calling for more gun control, tougher immigration laws, more security at airports, and broader powers for police and government, ultimately those things are not the answer. For while they can control our outward actions and curb the gross outbreaks of sin and violence in our world, they can do nothing about the sin and evil within us. Peace without does not mean peace within. . . . And so even after this sniper is caught, or Osama Bin Laden is killed, or Saddam is overthrown, many will continue to live in fear, with troubled hearts, and with anxious minds. Their sin will still accuse them and other fears will arise and take their place. For while outward conditions will have changed, the same problem of sin and evil will remain.

But in his letter to the Christians at the Church in Philippi, Paul paints a different picture. ***“Rejoice always . . . do not be anxious about anything . . . the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding . . .”*** Notice that there are no conditions placed on these things. These all display outwardly a different condition of the heart. These all do not take into account what is happening around us – either good or bad – because they have their source not in the things of this world, but in God. There is a different outlook here, placing our hope not in the things or people or ways or wisdom or solutions of this world, but in God. . . . Now, on the one hand, you know that – that that is where our hope lies. But on the other hand, we need to be told that and reminded of that over and over again. Because the messages we receive from the world all around us draw us away from God and the peace that is available only in Him. For the world is telling us that our hope is in all of us getting together, that our *unity* can overcome. The world is telling us that our hope lies in improving ourselves and rising above all obstacles and challenges. The world is telling us to each look within ourselves and bring out the best that lies in each of

us. . . . But you know what? The world has been saying that from the beginning, and it hasn't worked, and it doesn't work. And that's not because we haven't tried hard enough or done it long enough or because we simply need new and better methods! Its because that's not where the answer is.

Rather, just as **one man** has taken away the peace and security of so many in these last days – whether that man be an unknown sniper, or Osama, or Saddam, or the next guy that will come along, or even the accusations of your own heart – just as one evil being seeks to take away your peace and life, so also **one man** has provided for you all that you need: the change of heart, the peace and security that we hunger for. And that man is Jesus. For into this world of sin and evil came the perfect and sinless Son of God, to be born a man; to be born one of us. In the wilderness He faced the same old, evil foe that we face every day. On the cross He took the fire of all of our enemies, as He hung there, exposed and defenseless, in the crosshairs. But in this one man, sin, death, and Satan were defeated. In Him our sin has been defeated and we have forgiveness. In Him Satan has been defeated and we have protection. In Him death has been defeated and we have the promise of resurrection and eternal life. In Him, all that threatens us both from within and without has been overcome! And so there is nothing left in this world that can truly harm us, or that can ***“separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”***

And that's why Paul can write these words: ***“The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”***

Now notice that all of the promises written there by Paul are dependent on that one little phrase at the beginning: ***“The Lord is at hand.”*** That is what calms our fears and anxieties; that is what enables us to come to God in prayer; that is what gives us peace and guards our hearts and minds. It is His presence. The fact that He is ***“at hand.”*** And not ***“at hand”*** just because He is everywhere – but ***“at hand”*** graciously, with a purpose and a promise. That He is at hand to help, to forgive, to cleanse, to uphold, to defend and guard and protect, and to give. . . . And what a wonderful and comforting picture that is, to know that our God and Saviour is not far away or that we're not really sure where He is, but that He is ***“at hand.”*** That He has made Himself available to us where we can reach Him, and touch Him. And so He is ***“at hand”*** in His Word, where if we are anxious, He speaks to our hearts and we learn of His faithfulness. We hear of His sure and certain promises and salvation, and know that He is greater than whatever is making us afraid. He is here, ***“at hand,”*** for us. . . . He is also ***“at hand”*** here in Holy Baptism, because baptism is not just something that happened to us a long time ago and really has no relevance for our lives today. No, here is where God's “hand” first touched most of us, and gave us a clean heart and faith. Here we became His children. And as we

remember our baptism and return to Him in repentance, He is still **“at hand”** here, forgiving us and restoring us, for if our hearts accuse us, He is greater than our hearts. He is also here, **“at hand,”** for us. . . . And then He is also here, **“at hand,”** most literally, in Holy Communion, as our hands and tongues touch and eat and drink His life-giving, sin-forgiving, death-defeating, body and blood. But not only our hands and tongues, but also our hearts and minds, as we live in Him and He in us.

But in all these ways, it is not only the Lord at hand, but also His cross is at hand. His cross which is both a tree of death and a tree of life. His cross which kills, but also makes alive. For that is why the Son of God came – to ascend the cross, and to apply the cross to our lives. And so where our Lord is at hand, His cross is at hand. His death and resurrection become our death and resurrection, and His victory, our victory. . . . And so accordingly, where **“the Lord is at hand”** there is not the promise of the avoidance or absence of troubles, but the promise of peace in the midst of those troubles. There is not the promise of glory or an easy life, but the promise of deliverance.

This past week the media released information about the so-called “calling card” of the sniper that was found near one of the scenes. A tarot card with the words, *“Dear Mr. Policemen, I am God.”* And evidently, if this card is authentic, this sniper not only thinks of Himself as God, but thinks of God as the one who arbitrarily takes life and deals in death. . . . But you know, the truth is exactly the opposite! For in Jesus, God came down to us and took death through His death on the cross, so that He now deals in life! And that is the life that He has given to us, and now guards in our hearts and minds with the Spirit who lives in us.

And so we have nothing to fear. For the One who took death has also taken our death, and the One who rose to life again has given us His life. And so no matter how death comes to us, whether soon or far into the future, whether by age or by violence, whether sudden or slow – we have life, and we have peace. **“The Lord is at hand.”** So **“Rejoice in the Lord always;**” – and not *even* in uncertain times, but *especially* in uncertain times! – **“again I will say, Rejoice.”**

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.