

14 March 2021
The Fourth Sunday in Lent

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Great in Mercy; Rich in Love”

Text: Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21; Ephesians 2:1-10

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

If you didn't realize it on your own, I'm sure you've all heard by now that this week marked the one year anniversary of the declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic. I don't know if congratulations or commiserations are in order for having gotten through this time. Much changed in our lives and how we live them. Many things were missed - celebrations, anniversaries, trips, and even church itself. For many of you, it's been a year now since you've stepped through our doors. It's been quite the year.

And so lots of reflection has begun, and I'm sure will continue. The histories are already starting to be written. What happened, how did it happen, when did it happen, where did it happen, and why did it happen? What was done too late and what too soon? What was too much and what was too little? What was too lax and what was too strict? There was good information and bad information, and sometimes it was hard to tell the difference. People had different opinions and answers about all that, sometimes resulting in fighting and division, people turning against one another, even neighbors and friends.

Then, of course, as if that weren't enough, there was the politics of it all. What authority did the Federal Government have, and what could only the states do? And different states did different things, which makes sense actually, since the virus hit differently in differently places. Churches, too. Who closed, who didn't. Who changed completely and who kept things somewhat normal. And how did our Synod respond? Was that helpful or not? And our own congregation - what did we do well and what could we have done better? I'm sure that pretty much across the board, some things were done well and some things could have been improved. The reflection has begun and will continue.

But that's not really what I want you to think about today. Instead, I want you to look at yourself. **How did YOU do?** When the news of this virus broke, when it became a pandemic, when things started locking down, when death counts started climbing, how did YOU respond? Was it in fear or in faith? Did you *fear, love, and trust in God above all things*, or did it seem that this virus eclipsed your faith at times? Perhaps when your history is written, there will be some of both. Things that were good, and things that could have been better.

But it's good to look back at this past year and reflect. That we can learn from it and

grow. Luther once wrote that all the trials and struggles we go through in this life, all our *anfechtungen*, is to prepare us for the biggest trial any of us will ever face - when we face death. Some people faced that final exam in this pandemic. For others of us, it was just a tiny quiz. But how did you do? And no grading on a curve! Don't compare yourself with others, but take a good, honest look at your answers . . .

Israel faced such an exam in the wilderness. They had been wandering in the wilderness for 40 years - thank goodness our pandemic didn't last that long, right? But 40 years because they failed their exam the first time they got to the Promised Land. They did not *fear, love, and trust in God above all things* - they were more afraid of the people who were living in the land, how big and strong they were! Never mind that God had rescued them from powerful Egypt - the ten plagues, dividing the Red Sea, destroying Pharaoh and his army, and all that. These people were different! They were big and strong!

<sigh>

So God gave His people some more time to learn. 40 years in the wilderness, where He kept them and provided for them. Although they grumbled a lot, they always had food and water, and their clothes never wore out.

Now those 40 years had gone by and they were on their way back to the Promised Land. And - no surprise! - they're grumbling again! So what does God do? He sends a small trial to prepare them for the big test they will face, although I'm sure it didn't seem small at the time. Fiery serpents came among them, so that they would turn to the Lord and look to Him for what they needed. They did, and the Lord provided a vaccine for them - not a shot, but a bronze serpent on a pole. Look to that in faith, believing God's word and promise He put there, that He attached to that, and you will live. *And it was so*. And it's what He wanted them to do when they entered the Promised Land this time. When faced with the enemy, no matter how big and strong; and when filled with doubts and fears, no matter how big and strong, don't rebel! Turn to Him, look to and believe His words and promises, and they would live. *And it was so*.

And according to John, **the same is true for us**. When we are facing our own fiery serpents or deadly viruses. When we are filled with doubts and fears. We have something to look to and believe. Something to remind us of the words and promises of God, and not only that - but to show us all those words and promises fulfilled for us! Not a bronze serpent on a pole, but His Son on the cross. And not just for Israel, but for the world. ***For God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life***. John goes on to say that Jesus did not come to condemn us and our weaknesses, doubts, and fears, but to save us. To give us the assurance we need. To give us the confidence that we need. That no matter how big and bad our foes, our trials and troubles, pandemics or persecutions, we have what saves us from all of it. The Son of God who in His death defeated death and rose to life to give us life. A gift that, like Israel, we do not deserve, but which He gives us in

love. Not because we are so loveable, but because He is so loving.

Or as the apostle Paul put it, when we were *dead in our trespasses and sins*, when we were following the ways of the world, when we were disobedient, when we were carrying out the desires of our minds and flesh, when all there should have been for us is wrath from God - that's when the *rich mercy* and *great love* of God shone forth most brilliantly, and He sent His Son for us. What else could *that* be called but a gift of the greatest measure. Before we cleaned ourselves up, before we turned back, before we did better, before we did *anything* because we weren't able to do anything! - God acted. ***For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing (no kidding!); it is the gift of God.***

A gift sent once, some 2,000 years ago, but a gift still here for you. A gift for you to turn to at all times, and time and time again. In big trials and little trials. When you doubt God's care, to remember your **Baptism** and that *that's* where God gave you the gift of sonship and made you His own. He will provide. And when your doubts and unbelief seem too much, to hear again His **Gospel** and His **Absolution**, where God takes all your sin away and directs your eyes and faith to the cross again - that nothing you do or can do will be bigger than that. And when your weakness and fear seems overwhelming, His **Supper** is here to feed you, our own manna in our wildernesses, to strengthen us with His forgiveness and life, and give us the health of soul we need. Such *rich mercy* and *great love* here for us! Immeasurable riches of His grace.

Which means that in a world that considers the church in all sorts of different ways, the church really is the most essential business of all! If she is true to herself. For only the church has and can provide what we really need, the life that we need, through these gifts that Jesus has for us here. Maybe a good thing that will come out of this year of closures is for churches to reflect and take stock of that and refocus once again. That it is not for coffee shops, entertainment, or activities that they exist - but to give the gifts of God, the forgiveness, life, and salvation we - and the world - so desperately need.

And having received those gifts ourselves, to *walk in them*, as Paul says. To do those good works God has prepared for us to do. Which means to give to others the *rich mercy* and *great love* we have received. What that will look like for you, what that will be for you, depends on your callings in life. But one thing I think for all of us during this past year of pandemic was **to show people how to live without fear**. That as big and bad as this virus was and is or seemed to be, we have the One who is greater. The one who can rescue us from this virus, or, if He decides, to take us from this life to His life because of this virus. Either way, we're in the hands of Him who is *rich in mercy* and *great of love*.

Now that doesn't mean throwing all caution to the wind, not taking precautions, or not following our government's requirements and recommendations. As I said so many times at the beginning of all this: **be safe, be smart, be careful, but do not fear**. It means knowing that whatever comes, we're good, we're safe, in our Saviour's hands. It means

that not what we think or do, or what the government tells us, is the ultimate truth and the be all, end all - but Christ and His Word. It means having a confidence that what God says and promises He will do. And so we can live in that confidence, that faith. This pandemic exposed a lack of that faith in many people, mabe even in us at times. If you see that in your reflection, repent, and rejoice that your Saviour does not hold it against you. Not one little bit. He instead bids you come and receive His forgiveness and strength and care and food and leave now better prepared for the battles still to come. And come they will. So that when the biggest one of all comes, when you are faced with the time of your death, you will be ready, looking to the cross in faith and full confidence that He who did that for you, He who promises life, will provide.

So what a wonderful opportunity we have as we are coming out of this pandemic now, to reflect and to once again, *fix our eyes on Jesus* (Gradual). For as we sang in the Introit earlier,

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear;

though war arise against me, - though a deadly virus arise! -

yet I will be confident. . . .

For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble;

he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will lift me high upon a rock.

He has, and He will. For His *mercy is rich* and His *love is great*. Not just for the world, but **for you**. Look to Him, hear Him, receive Him. And you shall live.

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.