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Pentecost 6

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Best Fruit”

Text: Romans 7:14-25a; Zechariah 9:9-12; Matthew 11:25-30

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

We have blueberry bushes in my backyard; three of them. And we've learned that if we want to be able to enjoy any of the blueberries they produce - actually *eat* them and not just enjoy *seeing* them going on the bushes! - we have to keep the birds out. We have to put a net up and make sure there aren't any openings. Because if there are, the birds will find them. They're very good at that, we've learned.

But every once in a while, despite our best efforts, a bird will get in. He (or she) will be delighted at first, as she gets one of those nice, ripe, berries in her beak . . . but then she can't get out. These birds . . . as good as they are at finding a way *in*, can't seem to remember where the opening was, so they just keep trying to get out by flying into the net. And they panic, which just makes it worse.

So we see this, and then have to go out and create an opening and try to chase the bird out. We come in mercy. We come to help. We come to provide a way out. But the bird doesn't know that, but instead sees me as a threat. Eventually we get the bird out, and then we put the net back, hopefully more secure this time. But that bird will be back. And often times that bird will get back in and get trapped again. And we think: *stupid bird! Just stay out!* But those blueberries are just too good looking, just too tasty . . . He just has to go back in. And once in a while, sadly, if we don't notice in time, the bird can get tangled in the netting and . . . well, I hope that blueberry was worth it!

But it's not just birds that get trapped . . . or critters, or animals . . . we can, too. People get trapped in their homes when there is a fire, or sometimes when there is a flood and the water rose too fast. Remember that soccer team in Asia that got stuck in an underwater cave a few years ago? We can get trapped in a traffic jam - last January one of our senators (along with many others) was trapped on I-95 for over 24 hours! Or maybe you feel trapped in a job you really don't want to do, or in a conversation you really don't want to be having. Now sometimes these are a mere inconvenience, but others are far more serious. Sometimes the bird gets out, but sometimes . . .

Today, in the reading we heard from Romans, Saint Paul talks about being trapped. But this is a far more serious kind of trapped than the others, bad as they may be. He is

trapped in his sin. It *sounds* as if he feels trapped in his body, as some are saying today (though today in a different way and for a different reason). What he is describing *sounds* as if his mind and his body are at odds - his body doing one thing while his mind wants to do another. But that's not quite it. The struggle for Paul is not between his mind and his body, but between his Old Man and his New Man. It is between sinner and saint. It is between the sinful nature he was born with, and the new, spiritual, Christian nature he was born *again* with, in Jesus. He wants to be that! The New Man, the Christian, the saint! But his old, sinful man isn't dead yet, and keeps dragging him down. Or, maybe better to say, keeps taking him back inside the net. He knows it's not good, he knows there's trouble there, he knows last time he was in there he got trapped . . . but darn it, that sin, those blueberries, are just too good looking, just too tasty to resist!

Now, Paul was once a Pharisee, and then, the answer to this was simple: just do better! Keep the Law! Try harder! And maybe you've tried that, too. To escape your own sins, and the sins you keep falling back into. What are they for you? Hurtful, careless, thoughtless words? Sexual sins, with your eyes, your thoughts, your heart, your body? Being too busy for God, for prayer, for His Word? Stealing? Greed? Laziness? Apathy? Pride? Resentment? Rebellion? What are the sins you like Paul, keep falling back into? That you cannot escape?

But then Paul saw the light - literally! When Jesus came him in that bright, blinding, shining light from heaven when he was on his way to Damascus! And Paul was born *again* . . . Once Paul saw the light, he realized that to simply do better and try harder doesn't work. He just couldn't do it. And there are just far too many tempting blueberries and trapping nets. And the harder he tried to get himself out, the worse it got, the more tangled he became. Until finally he cries out: Argh! ***Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me*** - rescue me, save me - ***from this*** net - ***from this body of death?*** Because he couldn't. He was trapped.

But that's what we do, isn't it? If we can't not sin, avoid sin, then when we're trapped by our sin, we try to save ourselves. We try to get out. Maybe we'll lie, maybe we'll cheat, and maybe if we're successful once or twice, we'll improve our methods so we don't get caught again. Remember when Adam and Eve got caught, and God asked Adam *what happened?* It was her! Remember when Cain killed his brother Abel, and God asked, *where Abel?* Beats me! Remember when Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery? They showed their father his coat covered with goat blood. How about when David committed adultery with Bathsheba and then found out she was pregnant? Uh-oh! First he tried to make it seem that her husband was responsible when he came home on leave, but when that didn't work, he bumped him off! And maybe it works . . . at first. But then the lying, the cheating, *itself becomes a net* . . . and we have to lie more, cheat more . . . and the more we struggle, the worse it gets, the more tangled we become . . . How are we going to escape?

So we also heard the words of the prophet Zechariah today. Words that were preached some 550 years before Paul's, but which give us the answer.

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. . . .

As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double.

The people in Zechariah's day were feeling pretty hopeless. The 70 years of captivity in Babylon were over and people were returning to Jerusalem, but there was no city, no wall, no temple. That had all been torn down and destroyed when the nation was conquered. Life was difficult. They had doubts and fears within, and enemies without. **They were trapped in a prison without walls.** A prison of fear and hopelessness and despair.

So God sent Zechariah to them with a word of encouragement and hope. And part of that hope was that their ***king was coming to them***. They would not be ruled by a foreign king forever. Their own king was coming to them, a good king, and righteous king, *with salvation*, to deliver them, save them, rescue them. And He would not only restore them, but ***double*** it. Even more, even better, than before.

And you know when that happened. You know because we hear these words twice a year, every year: on the first Sunday of Advent, the first Sunday of a new church year, and on Palm Sunday, the first day of Holy Week. Our king came to us in the flesh and blood of Jesus (that's Advent), and our king then came to Jerusalem to die on the cross (that's Palm Sunday). And notice: He comes, Zechariah said, ***humble and mounted on a donkey***. When I go to set the birds free from the net covering my blueberries, they see me as a threat and get more scared. But the Son of God comes in a most non-threatening way, as a man, on a donkey, so that we not fear Him, but instead ***rejoice*** and ***shout aloud*** at His coming. That we see Him as the Saviour He is.

Now some don't! Some mistake humility for weakness, and lowliness for foolishness. They see Jesus as He comes to us today in water, and words, and bread and wine, and think: *Nah! Can't be. This is nothing. I'll do it myself. I have to do it myself.* Or, they don't want to be rescued. Those blueberries are just too good! But you know what happens? Blueberries only grow for a month or so. And then the harvest is over. There are no more blueberries to be had . . . that sin . . . not so much pleasure anymore . . . but you're still stuck in the net. You're still stuck in your sin. And then what? Maybe there's a better way . . .

Paul finally learned that. And so after crying out: ***Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this net - from this body of death?*** He then says: ***Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!***

How 'bout you and I? Maybe we're still learning? Oh, we know, right? We know the answer. We know what the answer is. We know the facts. We've been catechized. But how often are you still going after the blueberries? How often do we still get stuck in the nets of sin? How often are we like Paul, knowing what's right, knowing what we want to do, but still being stupid! Still doing what we know isn't right, isn't good? If we were a bird, maybe we deserve to be left in the net. You want to keep going back in there? Fine. Stay there.

But we're not just birds. Just a few chapters before the Gospel we heard today from Matthew, Jesus talked about how much more valuable you are than birds (6:26). You are His children. He came in your flesh and blood. He came to be your brother and to lay down His life for you! So when you get stuck, when you get caught - each and every time! - He cares. And so as we heard today, He speaks of a better way: ***Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.***

Instead of going for the blueberries, ***come to Me***, Jesus says. Instead of laboring so to get away with your sins, ***I will give you rest***. Don't get tangled in the net of sin and death, ***take My yoke upon you***, a yoke that is ***easy*** and ***light***. And instead of being stupid and going back to your sin, ***learn from Me***, who comes to you ***gentle and lowly in heart***, not to punish you or frighten you, but that you find ***rest for your souls***. Which sounds good, doesn't it? To be children again; children of God. To be in His house, under His care, to learn from Him. Children who know their Father and love their brother. Who know how good they have it in this house.

And He will do it. He said that today, and He does it here every Sunday. He sets us free - I forgive you all your sins. He reminds us who we are - His baptized children. And He feeds us with the fruit that is sweeter than any blueberries, any good-looking sins in this world - the fruit of His cross, His very Body and Blood. Because that fruit gives we who are trapped and laboring and dying, rest and freedom and eternal life. That we be no longer prisoners of sin, but prisoners of hope. Which is really a strange phrase, isn't it? Prisoners of hope . . . That we be captive not to sin, but *to hope*. Always abounding not in sin, but *in hope*. Living always not in sin, but *in hope*. And when that hope is in Jesus, it is hope that does not disappoint. Not a *if* we'll be set free, but that we already have. Not a *if* I'll be forgiven, but that I am! Not a *if* Jesus will be here for me, but that He is. And not a *if* He'll accept me, but that He already has a seat for me here at His Table. And if here at His Table, then also at His heavenly Table, at the Feast that has no end.

So next time those blueberries look too good to resist, come here to eat instead. Next time you're stuck in the net, come to confession and be set free. And next time you think God doesn't care, and that you're just a bird to be left behind, remember that you are baptized; you are worth far more than any bird. For you Jesus came, humble and mounted on a donkey. For you Jesus laid down his life. For you He rose from the dead. For you Jesus is here - *with salvation*. That you have hope. That you be free. No longer trapped, but free to be the child of God you are.

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.