

23 August 2026
Pentecost 13

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Depths of the Sea”

Text: Romans 11:33-12:8; Matthew 16:13-20; Isaiah 51:1-6

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

One of the more amazing things science has done lately is send unmanned vehicles down into the depths of the sea. Deeper than we've ever been before and maybe deeper than we even knew the sea to be! And those probes have sent back pictures of things never before seen - weird and unusual creatures. Things no one could imagine or even think real, had we not seen the images.

But there is something even deeper and more amazing, unsearchable, and inscrutable than that. We heard it from St. Paul today. He said, ***Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*** So if we could plunge the depths of God's mind, the depths of God's wisdom and knowledge, what we would discover? Things unimaginable, I'm sure! Things beyond our wildest imagination. Things perhaps, to us, weird and unusual.

Things like . . . using the horrific death of the cross to save. Using suffering to help us. Using the devil and evil for good. Using water to wash our hearts and bread and wine to feed our souls. Things no one could imagine and even think real - not because we have *seen* these things (like with the ocean), but because we have been *told* them. Because they have been revealed to us by God Himself.

A device that lets you see underwater and reveals that world is called a *bathyscope*. What reveals to us ***the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God*** and reveals to us His mind is His Word.

So when Jesus asked His disciples, ***Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*** and Peter responded for them all, ***You are the Christ, the Son of the living God***, Jesus called Peter blessed - not blessed *because* of the answer he gave, but blessed *in order to give* the answer he gave. Because this had been *revealed* to him and the others. Revealed ***by the Father*** in the Scriptures that Jesus was teaching and fulfilling. Otherwise, making the connection of this guy Jesus from Nazareth and the very Son of God would never have entered their minds. Just like those weird and unusual

creatures in the depth of the sea we could never have imagined, were they not revealed to us.

This is the rock, the rock of God's Word, of God revealing this truth to us and our confessing this truth, the rock of the forgiveness of sins - the forgiveness that Peter and the others are then told to go *give* just as they have *received* - this is the rock upon which the Church is built. The rock on which it can never be moved. Not even by ***the gates of hell*** - no matter how close, dark, and fearsomely looming they may be.

And sometimes they seem pretty close, don't they! And fearsome. And seem to be winning. We see the evil in the world and the evil in our lives and the sin and wickedness that sometimes spews from us, and that rock on which the Church is built can seem like a little pebble *that ain't much!*

So this is where we need the *bathyscope* of God's Word - so that we can see below the surface, below just what we can see happening in the world to the depths of God's wisdom and knowledge and work. Because there's stuff going on beneath the surface that we could never imagine and would never think true were it not revealed to us.

And one of those Scriptures revealing this to us is the Old Testament reading we heard today from Isaiah, who tells us to ***look to Abraham and Sarah***. God says, ***he was but one when I called him, so that I might bless him and multiply him***. And we know how God did that, but don't forget *how* He did that through a lot of hardship, pain, difficulties, and ways Abraham could never have imagined! (And frankly, didn't want!) Like, when God told him to sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt offering. *Unimaginable! Inscrutable!* Right? And yet, God blessed. And then the stories of what happened to Jacob and Joseph and David . . . the Word of God revealing to us ***the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God***. Showing us that, as Paul went on to say, that ***from him and through him and to him are all things***. ALL things. Things that seem to us good and things that seem to us evil. There is nothing that is not *from* Him, nothing that is not *used* by Him, and nothing that is not *for* Him. ***To His glory forever. AMEN!***

Now wait a second, Pastor! ALL things? Even evil things? How can that be? God isn't evil or cause evil! True. But He *can* and does use it for good. And imagine how frustrating that must be for the devil! When God turns around his evil and wicked ways for His own good! Like, when the devil tempts us into sin, and then drives us to despair because of that sin, but God then turns that and uses that to drive us to confess our sins and find refuge and hope in Jesus! Or when evil drives us to prayer, confusion drives us to the Word, our hunger and thirst for something better drives

us to the altar. And like Abraham, God blesses us through such hardship, pain, and difficulty . . . which we frankly don't want! But God knows that we need. Not to punish us, but in order to bless us.

And, of course, the example *par excellence* of God using evil for good is His own cross. The cross on which He - the Son of God, God Himself - hung. The hatred and evil of men putting Him there, but then every drop of blood from His head, His hands, His feet, His back, and His side, providing life and forgiveness and blessing. And then His resurrection breaking open death and the grave - a depth even greater and more foreboding than the depths of the sea - but conquered by Jesus for you. So that, as one of our hymns says (LSB #883 v.3), we can *fear the grave as little as our bed*.

Those probes that have revealed to us the depths of the sea - and other discoveries of science - have caused us to rethink what we thought we knew. And so it is also with God's Word. When ***the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God*** are revealed to us, our hearts and minds and lives are ***transformed***. It's not just that we rethink what we thought we knew (although we do), but that the Spirit of God ***transforms*** us. That's the word Paul used today. And it is the same word used of Jesus in His transfiguration! That's how God wants to bless and transform us! From *this* to *that*. From cross to glory. From the earthly to the eternal. And it is His Word and Sacraments that do that. That both *reveal* that to us and *work* that in us.

For, as God said through the prophet Isaiah, ***my righteousness draws near, my salvation has gone out, and my arms will judge the peoples***. Now it's hard, perhaps, to wrap your mind around that, because the world we live in doesn't seem to have righteousness anywhere near! And because righteousness and salvation are abstract things. But God's Word then plumbs the depths of that for us and reveals to us what He means and makes it concrete for us. That these words of Isaiah are talking about Jesus. That He is the righteous one who drew near us. That He is the saving one who has come down from heaven to us. And that His arms took the judgment of God against the sin of the world on the cross. Bringing a salvation and a righteousness that ***will be forever*** because His resurrection is forever.

And when that is yours, when you can *fear the grave as little as your bed*, when you know your life and future are secure in Jesus, when you are baptized by His hand and fed with His Body and Blood, because Jesus offered His body as a dead sacrifice (though now risen!), you can now, as Paul said, ***present your bodies as a living sacrifice***. You can entrust your life to Him. And not in an abstract way - but just as the righteousness and salvation of God came down in a concrete way in Jesus, so you entrust your life to God in concrete ways as well. Husbands laying down your life for your wife. Wives honoring and respecting your husband. Children honoring, serving, obeying, loving, and cherishing your parents. By forgiving as you have been

forgiven. By serving, giving, encouraging. Not that any of that will now be easy! I don't know if it ever will be! But knowing ***the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God***, of all that He has done for you and has promised you, of His Word transforming your heart and mind and life . . . you now can. And you know that though hard, God is using it to bless - both you and those you serve.

And even though the gates of hell might seem like they are your next door neighbor, or even in your own home, they cannot win. They cannot put Jesus back in the grave or back on the cross or send Him back into heaven. He is here for you. And He's not leaving. He's going to keep washing you and feeding you and lifting you up and through His Word revealing to you the depths of His love for you. Love that is beyond what you could imagine or ever think real. Yet there it is. On the cross, in the font, and on the altar for you. Weird and unusual . . . maybe. But life *changing* and life *giving*.

So now I'm going to ask our organist to play hymn #611 during the offering after the prayers, and as she does, I want you to read along. It kind of sums up what I've said here today. And maybe during those tough times in your life - those Abraham times! - it can remind you of the depth of God love for you that is *deeper than the depths of the sea, and lasting to eternity*. The love that found you, the love revealed to you, the love that you confess, and the love that saves you.

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.