

30 August 2026
Pentecost 14

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Jesus’ Life Preserver”

Text: Matthew 16:21-28; Romans 12:9-21; Jeremiah 15:15-21

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

Three weeks ago, we heard the story of Peter walking on the water with Jesus. He boldly stepped out of the boat and was actually doing it, until he got frightened by the storm and started sinking.

Now, it’s happening again. Only worse.

Last week, Peter was bold - boldly confessing that *Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God*. But in the words of the Holy Gospel we heard today, *he is sinking*. Because once again, he is frightened. This time, frightened not by a storm, but filled with fear when confronted with the cross.

For Jesus explains to his disciples what it means that He is the Christ: ***that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised***. There is no option for Him. If this does not happen, He is not, cannot be, the Christ.

Now perhaps Peter had seen crucifixions before. The Romans were famous for them, after all. The most horrid death devised by men. The perfect deterrence and disincentive to rebel against Rome. The pain and suffering and shame. It was so bad even the Roman people didn’t want to look at it!

So Peter is frightened. Understandably so! To see his friend, his rabbi, his master, his Lord, *the Christ, the Son of the living God*, hung up there, like that? ***Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.***

When he was sinking in the water, Jesus’ rebuke of Peter was gentle: *O you of little faith, why did you doubt?* Now it is far worse, far stronger: ***Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me.*** Or in other words: You’re not protecting me, Peter, even if you think you are. You’re being anti-Christ! You’re getting in the way. And nothing is going to get in My way. This must be, and it will be. This is the mind of God, that Jesus is talking about - to use the greatest evil for the greatest good. To use

sin to defeat sin and death to defeat death.

And then to this frightened, sinking, drowning, gasping-for-breath disciple, as well as the others, **Jesus doesn't toss a life preserver, but a rock!** He says: And this is true for you as well! That ***if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.***

The cross is what it means **for Me** to be the Christ.
The cross is what it means **for you** to be My disciples.

Then what hope do we have? Only one: stop trying to save yourself and your life and rely on Jesus. He's the only one. He's the only way.

But then Jesus gives them some hope at the end . . . ***Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.*** And then, Matthew tells us in the very next verse of his Gospel, right after the reading we heard today, that *six days later*, some of them, three of them, Peter, James, and John, witnessed Jesus' transfiguration. They saw the Son of Man in His glory with Moses and Elijah, who just maybe was John the Baptist, since Scripture calls him *the Elijah who was to come*, who had just been beheaded. If it was, there He is, *with his head*, in glory, with Jesus. John, who fulfilled the words of Jesus we heard today, that ***whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.***

And now it's our turn to be frightened. Because we don't want to lose our life! It's the only one we got! So make the most of it. You only live once. Seize the day. Life is short.

But all those bumper sticker sayings about life are how we ***do not set our minds on the things of God, but on the things of man.*** Because God doesn't say any of that. God says not that your life is short, but your life is eternal. Not that you have to make the most of it, but that God is. That though you die, you will live. And instead of seizing the day, take hold of Christ.

When we *don't*, that's when we *don't* live as Paul described in the Epistle today. That was a pretty good description of the Christian life. I won't read through the whole thing again here . . . but you should later. But when we don't live that way, as Paul described, why not? Simple. *Because I'm frightened. I'm frightened that if I do, I'll lose my life.* I won't get what I want. I won't get ahead. I'll lose out. I'll be taken advantage of. But that is ***setting our minds on the things of man***, as if this life and my brief happiness here and what I get and what I have is all there is. So I *must* do this, I *must* do that, I *can't* do what Paul says . . . if I am to survive and not sink and drown.

But that's not Jesus' *must*. His *must* is the cross. His bearing the cross for us, and our bearing the cross for others.

And that's why Jesus tossed Peter a rock and doubled down on the cross when Peter was frightened and sinking again. **Because that's what Jesus' life preserver look like! *It looks like a rock.*** Because, as Jesus said, only when we lose our life will we find it. And how do we lose our life? By drowning. By Baptism. For there [the Font] is Jesus' cross for us. I can't go back some two thousand years and halfway around the world to a cross that isn't even there anymore, or to a so-called tiny splinter-relic of the cross which may or may not really be it anyway! And so Jesus brings His cross to us. In Baptism is where Jesus grabs you, and where you die and rise with Him. In Baptism is where Jesus grabs you, and first He pulls you under the water to drown you and your old sinful nature, and then He pulls you up - raises you up - to a new life. A new life with sins forgiven. A new life with a new heart and a new mind. A new life . . . for Baptism "christ" you. For the word "christ" means *anointed one*. And in Baptism, you have been anointed with the Holy Spirit to live a new life, a Christ life, a life that will not end.

And then risen from those waters, you begin to live that new life. Not easily, to be sure. And not perfectly - not even close! Which is why we take up our cross here, *and daily*, in repentance, returning to our Baptism, drowning that old sinful man again, and rising anew again in our Lord's abundant and lavish forgiveness. Forgiveness for our fear, forgiveness for our stubbornness, forgiveness for our rebellion, for our weakness, for our wrong thinking, for all our failures. To live no longer according to the mind of man, but as we really are, as children of God with the mind of God.

And as you do, a funny thing happens. As you do those things Paul listed out today, that good description of the Christian life, **you really do *find your life!*** And not just after you die, in the resurrection, but now, in the resurrection that is your Baptism. That those things you don't do because you thought that by doing them you would *lose your life . . . the opposite actually happens!* Loving, serving, giving . . . these things *give* you life, fulfill your life, give meaning to your life. You realize there's more to life than me, myself, and I, and that that kind of life is actually rather lonely and empty. And if your life is eternal (and it is!), then why not start living that way, that life, now? In fact, you *must!* Not because you *have to*, but because that's who you are. Someone who has been "christed." Anointed to a new life. A Christian.

Now you might struggle with that. No, not might - you will! As Luther said, that old sinful man in you is a really good swimmer! But don't think you're the only one who struggles - even a quick read through the Bible shows ALL the saints of old

struggling with this! We heard about Jeremiah today in the Old Testament reading. When he was struggling and pouring out his heart to God, God made him a promise: those who are against you are not going to win. I will save you and deliver you. *You* repent, remain faithful to My Word and who you are, and I will do the rest. The Gradual we've been singing this season says the same thing.

And He did. God saved Jeremiah. He *did* the rest . . . finally, ultimately, when Jesus ascended the cross and died for Jeremiah, and died for you, and died for all. As Jesus said, there is nothing you can give in return for your life, but Jesus can - and gave His life to give you life. And now He gives you that same Body and Blood to feed that life. To strengthen you with His forgiveness and life so that you live a new life - His life in you. A life not of fear but of confidence. A life that not even death can now end.

So if you feel like you're drowning, going under, struggling to keep your head above water, because life is too much, and you can't do it . . . *good!* Here's a rock! Drown! In Christ. Look to Him. Don't try to save yourself. You'll fail. Look to Him. Rejoice in Him. Rely on Him. And you will find your life. You will find your life *in Him*.

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.