

John 6.1-15

*Laetare*

22 March 2020

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Iesu Iuva +

Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Boy, the devil just can't get out of his own way, can he? Just as the fear and worry precipitated by this latest demonic work, COVID-19, have built to a new crescendo. Just as severe economic consequences have come to be seen as just as threatening as the virus is to physical health. And just as all of us have run ourselves ragged in an attempt to provide for the unknowns of tomorrow and make room for the knowns of today—these are the words the Lord gives us today on *Laetare*: "Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad with her! I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go into the house of the Lord.'" And here we are.

Fellow-redeemed, today we gather as the *New Jerusalem*—the Jerusalem whose peace was bought by the blood of God's own Son. *That's* the peace we rejoice in. A peace that the world cannot give. A peace that the world and its prince cannot take away. A peace that's God's first and last Word to you right now against all your fear, dread, anxiety, disease, and death. Let the devil rage with all his death and disease, with all the fear he can arouse, with all the anxiety he conjure up. As for me? Let me speak with the words of the psalmist that conclude the Introit for today: "For the sake of you, my brethren and companions, I will now say, 'Peace be within you.'"

*Oremus: Lord Jesus Christ, You provided food for 5,000 men in the wilderness and their families, foreshowing the far greater gift to Your Church, the meal of Your own Body and Blood for the forgiveness of the sins of Your people, and the very medicine of immortality. Through that Meal and Your Word calm our fears and still our anxieties, and give us the blessed reassurance that nothing in all creation, not even the coronavirus or economic disaster, can separate us from Your love. Amen.*

Beloved in the Lord, the last thing you'd ever expect when you're in the middle of a real pickle is a real solution. That sort of defines what a real predicament is, doesn't it? Back against the wall. Nothing more to be done except to say, "Damned if you do, damned if you don't."

Pretty much exactly where we are today, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 2020.

Do nothing, and the virus threatens to run its course, infect millions, kill, well, slightly *fewer* millions, overrun entire national health systems, and bring nothing but misery and chaos.

But do something—like issue quarantines, close restaurants, schools, and legislatures—and it's not really a solution, either. Nothing but misery and chaos. Of a different sort, to be sure. But misery and chaos nevertheless. Not lives, but livelihoods on the line. Not the threat of death *in* our society, but the threat of the death *of* our society.

A real pickle. A real predicament. No way out of it. Damned if you do, damned if you don't.

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The other Gospel writers give us a better sense of the very real predicament the 5,000 men and their families were in that we read about today. They'd followed Jesus for days on end apparently. And now they were out of food. In the middle of nowhere. Night was falling, and they found themselves in a damned if you do, damned if you don't predicament. Stay where they were, and then what? How were the little ones, so dependent on food for their health and development, to eat? How would they, the next day, have the energy to press on, on foot, to where they could actually find some food? And that's the strong ones. What about the weak? Those who weren't feeling well? How about them?

The only solution was to get to some food. But now it's getting dark. Without flashlights how were they to make their way through the wilderness? And what was lurking out there in the dark? Wolves, lions, who specialize in making the exhausted their prey? Unmarked shepherd's wells that could swallow a man whole, never mind a small child? And even supposing they did come to some small settlement, who's to say there'd be enough food for all of them? And then what? Rioting and bedlam.

Damned if you do, damned if you don't. And no solution in sight.

But, but, but...it practically screams off the page—"Jesus Himself knew what He was going to do."

You see, this whole thing was under Jesus' control. Not because He was some General Patton-like figure, able to devise ingenious plans that aren't obvious to other people. But because He's God. What restrains us is nothing to Him. For He Himself is the constraint on what constrains all of us! Against the evils of this world, we're powerless. But He sets limits to every evil—not just of the soul, but even of the body.

That's something, for sure. God's in control. Jesus is in control.

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But do you believe it? Would you stake your life on it?

Philip didn't.

That's why Jesus had to put him to the test.

Philip's every one of us. Maybe not just right now. But often enough. In the midst of evil days we see no limit to the evil. Faced with uncertainties all around, even our faith in the only One who is certain, the Lord Jesus Christ, wavers. In shock at constant change and "new normal," our hope in Jesus Christ flickers, who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, and whose unchanging thoughts toward you are thoughts of peace and not of evil. Even *that* we find ourselves, often enough, doubting.

Now, I know, you're going to protest. Your faith hasn't wavered a bit. Your hope is still intact. That's what we all tell ourselves. And everyone else. My faith hasn't ever been stronger! we say.

But your worries betray you. If you're worried about where your retirement account stands right now. If you're jumping out of your skin every time you hear someone cough. If you're beset by a general malaise about this whole thing—that's fear, not faith. And the Lord is putting you to the test, as well.

Now, don't hear me wrong. I'm not suggesting being foolish and banishing your fear by running around and touching as many people as you can. Or, if you're susceptible for whatever reason to the more serious effects of the virus, that you throw caution to the wind. You still have a vocation. God has placed you here for a purpose—to serve your neighbor. You can't do that when you're dead. Throwing caution to the wind isn't great faith; it's putting *God* to the test.

But don't for that reason think or believe that the Lord isn't putting *you* to the test through this very real predicament and asking who or what do you fear, love, and trust above all things? Just like He did to Philip.

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It's in the nature of a "test" from the Lord to feel like you're being "tempted" by Him. In fact, the word in Greek for "test" and "tempt" is one and the same: *πειράζω* [*peirázdō*]. In a test, it feels like sin is lurking right around the corner.

For Philip and Andrew the sin lurking right around the corner was the sin of unbelief: when this thing was all said and done, would they emerge trusting that Jesus Christ is God's Son, that He can and does set limits to all evil, and that He rescues from every evil of both body and soul, or would they not?

But God doesn't test in order to tempt. He tests in order to temper.

It's as if He were taking your faith to an old-fashioned blacksmith. Like a piece of iron plunged into the blast furnace, then laid on the anvil and hammered over and over and over again, then plunged into the cold water, and right back again into the blast furnace for another round. It's giving shape to faith, not melting it away. It's giving strength to faith, not destroying it.

And here's the reason why a "test" is not destruction, but a strengthening: to faith being tested, the Lord always presents Himself as He is.

That's just what happened with Philip and Andrew. Imagine the questions swirling around in their brains. What kind of God is Jesus? Can He do anything about this? Will he do anything about this? Does He even care?

And no sooner are the questions asked and thought and pondered, than the Lord Jesus presents Himself to them as that Shepherd of Israel, the Psalm 23 Shepherd, the Lord is my Shepherd Shepherd. He makes the people to lie down in green pastures. And in the face of their enemies He prepares a table for them, and the cup runs over. Baskets and baskets full of leftovers.

Fellow-redeemed, that's exactly what the Lord is doing today in the midst of your own testing. Today He prepares a table for you in the midst of your own enemies—in the midst of your anxieties and fears and sins, in this valley where the shadow of death has grown terrifyingly long. And it's not just a meal that's somehow supposed to comfort you because it's what you've done every Sunday year in and year out. It's a meal that actually brings and delivers to you what it celebrates: His final, once-for-all limitation on evil: the death of His own Son. For on the cross of the Son of God, Satan was defanged. Sin, the sting of death, forever blunted. And death itself overcome. Whatever they are, you've been freed from them all. That doesn't mean you won't sin or die. But it does mean that sin and death have no hold on you and that you no longer have to live or walk according to their terrified ways.

And so let me say it again: "For the sake of you, my brethren and companions, I will now say, 'Peace be within you.'"

Amen.

*pax dei, etc.*

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