

14 September 2003  
Holy Cross Day

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

## Jesu Juva

“Looking to the Cross”

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:18-24

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

With the second anniversary of the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks this past week, we again witnessed the actions of people struggling to cope. Struggling to cope with loss. Struggling to cope with fear. Struggling to cope with uncertainty. Struggling to cope with death.

But while this past week we saw this struggle on perhaps a larger scale than usual, it is nevertheless a struggle that is carried on by many everyday. For loss, and fear, and uncertainty, and death did not just happen that clear September day two years ago – they happen each and every day. And so each and every day there are people – including you and I – who are struggling to cope with life in this world, and with the surprises and difficulties that life often brings us. There are people struggling to cope with divorce. Struggling to cope with disease. Struggling to cope with betrayal. Struggling to cope with financial ruin. Struggling to cope with isolation. Struggling to cope with unemployment. Struggling to cope with loneliness. Struggling to cope with sin, and with death, and with a whole host of other difficulties and failures. . . . And these are the people all around you everyday. These are the people here in the pews. No one is exempt.

But how do we cope? Where do we turn? To who or what do we look for the answers? Some turn to their spouses, or to family and friends, for support and strength. Some turn to the government for the assurance of protection and provision. And then some turn within themselves, looking inside themselves for what they need. For example, listen to this “letter to the editor,” written just after the terrorist attack two years ago:

*“In times of tragedy . . . I look to myself and those around me. I find my answers within, either consciously or subconsciously, and on the outside through my surroundings. . . . I choose to use my inner-self as a backbone in life. This is what I look up to, down to, ask questions to and find answers from.”*

OK. . . . But what happens, what then happens, when these people and things let us

down? When those we look to for strength are weak? When those we go to for help are themselves struggling? When those we thought would always be there for us are not there? When those we thought would provide for us cannot even provide for themselves? When we look inside ourselves and find nothing there? Our backbone gone limp, our wisdom having no answers. . . . And what then when we find that *we also* are responsible for these things? That the sin in us has not only hurt us, but has also caused others this same pain and struggle?

That is the dilemma many are facing in their struggle to cope – and (as I said) not just this week, but every week. Our faith in others, our faith in our government, our faith in the strength of buildings, our faith in ourselves, has let us down. And it always will. Your faith is only as strong as its object, as the one in which you put your faith. And many have found, and continue to find, that all that we thought wise, is not. All that we thought strong, is not. All that we thought enduring, is not. All that we thought we could count on, we can't. Or as St. Paul asked in his Epistle to the Corinthians: ***“Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?”*** Where is all that we thought we could count on? Where are all who thought they had the answers? Where?

Unfortunately, many are still asking those questions, and still searching for the answers.

But that we might not have any question as to where – as to where is our help, where is our strength, where is our hope, where is our assurance, where is our life, where is our certainty when everything else in life has let us down – that we might know the answer, God planted the answer right down in the midst of this world, in this midst of this life, on a small mountain right outside a city named Jerusalem. For there, on Calvary, He planted His answer. His answer to the sin in this world. His answer to the struggles of this world. His answer to the losses and fears and uncertainties of this world. For there He planted the cross of His Son Jesus Christ. And He said, *“You want answers? There is the answer!”*

And it is the answer because the cross shows us that we are not alone in this struggle, but that God Himself is with us. And not just in some fuzzy, spiritual way that we can't grasp and have trouble finding or figuring out – but in a very real way. A flesh and blood way. In real life. And so the One who was Himself betrayed is with us in betrayal. The One whose friends turned against Him and abandoned Him is with us when the same happens to us. The One who was forsaken is with us when we are forsaken. The One who was hungry, and thirsty, and tempted, and hated, and had no place to lay His head, is with us as we face those struggles. And the One who faced death is with us when we face death. . . . And so when we wonder, as so many wondered two years ago, where is God

in all of this? Where is God when we need Him? The cross shows us that He is not far away, but near. That He is not unconcerned, but has joined Himself to us. That He does not ignore, but is, in fact, right in the midst of human suffering and tragedy. That He is with us, to give all that He has to us, even giving His life unto suffering and death, so that we who are struggling in suffering and death, might live.

And so the answers that we are looking for are found in what looks like their very opposite! The things of this world that look so mighty and strong turn out not to be and let us down, while the cross which looks so humble and weak gives real strength and hope. And so when we are looking for life, we look at death. When we are looking for strength, we look at weakness. When we are looking for acceptance, we look at rejection. When we are looking for God, we look to a man. When we look for forgiveness, we look at condemnation. That's what it means to look to the cross.

Now the world hears that and calls it folly! Ridiculous! Nonsense! But no, says St. Paul. For while ***“the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, to those who are being saved it is the power of God.”*** And it is the wisdom and glory of God. It is where God has come **for us**. That coming to where we are, He might take us to where He is.

Folly! Ridiculous! Nonsense! The world says. How can a man who lived and died some 2,000 years ago help you now? . . . He can only if that man who lived and died was not just a man, but the very Son of God who lived and died *and then lived again*, so that He can still today, in flesh and blood, in real life, be here with His people.

Folly! Ridiculous! Nonsense! The world says. . . . But no, God says, it is, in reality, the only thing you can be sure of. It is the only thing that will not let you down. For the cross shows us the love of God, and assures us that His promises are true. It shows us His wrath against sin, poured out upon His Son, that we be assured that He is not punishing us now. And it shows us His forgiveness, that we know that nothing can separate us from Him. And the cross shows us those things because just as God and man were together on the cross, and together in the grave, so we know that they were also together in the resurrection, and will therefore also be together with Him in Heaven. And whatever happens in this life, whether we think it good or bad, fortunate or unfortunate, tragedy or joy – it does not happen by chance or by fate, but happens by design, with one goal in mind: to lead us to the cross. And in leading us to the cross, to lead us to life.

In the Holy Gospel some Greeks came and said to Jesus' disciples, ***“We wish to see Jesus.”*** That was not only their desire, it is God's desire as well. That we see His Son, but not just anywhere, but on the cross. That we see His blood, that we see His shame, that we see His weakness, that we see His death. And that in seeing, you know the love

of God for you. The love of God who planted His cross in this world, and who still is planting His cross in the lives of His children. Planting the cross in our hearts when we are baptized. Planting the cross in our hearts as we hear His Word. Planting the cross in our hearts as we eat and drink the body and blood of the One who hung on the cross. And He is with us. He is in us. And we are in Him. And in Him, we have all that we need. We have His forgiveness. We have new life and resurrection. And we have the strength to not only *cope* with life in this world, but to live the life that God has given to us. A life without fear and confusion. A life of hope, and love, and confidence.

You know, as I was writing this sermon, I briefly thought to myself that it is a shame that Holy Cross Day is September 14<sup>th</sup> instead of September 11<sup>th</sup>. But then I realized that that is really a good thing. For now, Holy Cross Day falls *exactly three days* after September 11<sup>th</sup>. *Three days!* So that we know, that because of the cross, after the death and despair, there is life. There is resurrection. And there is hope.

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.