

7 March 2007
Lent 2 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The God who Regards”

Text: Deuteronomy 7:6-9; Luke 1:46-55

Our world today is all about climbing up.

Up the ladders of prosperity, power, popularity, prestige . . . and which others? More money, a bigger house, a bigger church, a well-respected pastor, the admiration, respect, and praise of those around us. And if we're not very high up those ladders yet, we want to be, don't we? And we'll do whatever it takes. Climbing *over* those in our way. Climbing *past* those who slow us down. Climbing and leaving those not like me behind.

But when you get to where you're going, where will you be? The cure for failure is obvious – but what will cure us of success?

The truth is that we are afraid to be failures. For that means I am *worthless*, or worth *little*, in the eyes of the world. Failures are looked down upon and consigned to the scrap heap of history, to be forgotten as time goes on.

And the only thing worse than being a failure? Admitting it. And so we have become especially good at avoiding this – spinning news of defeat to make it sound like victory, and failure to make it sound like what was supposed to happen all along. Save face at all costs. *And keep climbing.*

But when you read the Scriptures, they do not talk or think like this. The direction of action is almost never from low to high, but from high to low. It is the great reality not of pulling ourselves up by the bootstraps, of us going up to God, but of God coming down to us. And that our story turns around not when we climb up to God and regard Him in the heights, but when He regards us in the depths. **For it is not that God regards the ones who are blessed; it is that God regards, and so we are blessed.**

For so it was for the people of Israel. As we heard, they were not the biggest, the best, or the brightest people on the earth, so that God regarded them and chose them. No, quite the contrary! They were among the least, the lowest, and the slowest people on earth. Failures. They were not the cream of the crop, but the bottom of the barrel, able to boast of no reason at all why God should regard and choose them. And so when God did – when God looked down, *all the way down* to Israel, and chose *them* to be His treasured possession, **it was pure grace**. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. It made no earthly sense at all. But it made perfect sense in Heaven.

And then we heard of Mary. She of humble estate. Poor, not rich. Young, not learned and wise. Nothing special about her or her parents. She is able to boast of no reason at all why God should regard and choose her. But when the time came for a mother to bear God's Son, God looked down, *all the way down* to Mary, and regarded her. **And it was pure grace**.

And so it is with us. For the truth is that we *are* failures. We may not like that word, we may not want to admit it, and the world may even think differently and regard you as a pretty good and successful person! . . . But the truth is – under the good looking veneer, under the accomplishments and praise of others, under the side of us we present to those around us – *we are failures*. We fail at life, because we're all going to die. We fail at goodness, because we all sin. We fail in our relationships, our families, our friends, our love . . .

Earthly wisdom says we better, then, shape ourselves up! God helps those who help themselves, after all!

But the truth is exactly the opposite of that . . . of that *theology of glory*. For as with Israel, and as with Mary, and as with the poor, the hungry, the lame, the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the diseased, the outcast, the demon-possessed, and all those other failures and sinners we read about in the Scriptures – the truth is, if that's you, **then you are right on the bull's eye for God to regard!** For to you – you who are unable to go up, God came down, *all the way down*, to us. Not consigning us to the scrap heap of history or forgetting about us, *but joining us*. In remembrance of His promises and mercy. Not regarding those who are blessed, but blessing those

whom He regards.

And so He came. All the way down. To a feed trough, to Egypt, to Nazareth. To Samaria and Galilee. To embrace those the world says shouldn't be embraced. *And then to the cross.* The end and most colossal failure for any religious or political activist, right? Jesus hung naked, shamed, reviled, mocked, scorned, that He might be discredited and consigned to the scrap heap of history . . .

*And it would have worked! . . . Except for that one troublesome fact: **He rose!*** He was not a failure. He *joined us* in *our* failure and sin, to take all our failure and sin upon Himself, so that He could climb up out of it **for us**. And thus rising for us, raise us as well. Out of the scrap heap in love. Out of our sin in forgiveness. Out of our death and into life. **And all of it, pure grace.** With no merit or worthiness in me. With no reason to boast. With absolutely no reason why God should regard me. And yet He has. You too. That we may be His own. That as Mary said: *for He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name.*

And so *the theology of the cross*, the theology of the Scriptures, the theology of our Saviour, is not about climbing, but rising. Not about achieving, but receiving. Not our strength, but His strength. Not about saving face, but about repenting. And so it is not about how we regard God or think of Him, but how He regards us.

For in truth, **God helps those who cannot help themselves.** And so regarded, so blessed.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.