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Pentecost 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Do Not Be Deceived”

Text: Luke 10:1-20; Galatians 6:1-10, 14-18

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

Jesus sent out seventy-two of His disciples, we heard today - seventy-two *others*, Luke tells us. Above and beyond the twelve. He had sent them out like this before. Now He sends more. *Lots* more. He sends ***them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to go.*** He blankets the area, with His Word, with His peace, with His forgiveness, with His power through these men. They go as His representatives. And where they go, ***the kingdom of God has come near to you.***

It's an invasion force. Jesus' disciples against the demons. Truth versus lies. Healing versus sickness. Forgiveness versus guilt and shame. Peace versus turmoil. It doesn't seem like a fair fight. Jesus Himself says He is sending them ***out as lambs in the midst of wolves.*** And lambs usually don't win that fight! Except they do. ***The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!”*** Perhaps they were skeptical at first. Uncertain. Timid. Terrified of going out with nothing - no moneybag, no knapsack, no sandals. But they went . . . and, turns out, it *wasn't* a fair fight! *The demons didn't stand a chance.*

But this was just the beginning. This was just the prelims. The foreshadowing. The undercard of the main event. The seventy-two went out as lambs in the midst of wolves, but the Lamb was coming, who was here to fight the biggest, baddest, meanest wolf of all. Jesus versus satan. And while Jesus landed a lot of punches and won a lot of battles on the way, in the end, when He hung on the cross, bleeding, dying, and then dead, it looked like He had lost the war. Lambs don't win fights against wolves.

Except He did. For the cross wasn't the defeat of the Lamb, but the blow that knocked satan off his self-proclaimed throne. It was the death that defeated death, for it was the death that atoned for the sin of the world and that lead to the resurrection of the dead. And if satan once ***fell like lightning from heaven, and*** now can't hold your sins against you and can't hold you in the grave, he's got nuthin'. Against Jesus, He didn't stand a chance.

And yet there's more. For, Jesus goes on to say, ***do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.*** Rejoice not in the defeat of one, but the salvation of many. Names written in heaven now, even if we're not there yet. Salvation now, even though we still live in a challenging and sinful world. Eternal life, even though we still live in a world of death.

And that's still true today. This is now the Word that Jesus is sending into all the world through His Church. A message of peace in the forgiveness of sins. A message of healing from our brokenness. A message of hope and life in the midst of death. The message He has sent here, *to* you, and worked here *in* you. For against that Word now here in the water, in the preaching, and in, with, and under the bread and wine, *the demons cannot stand*. And while these don't look very powerful or impressive, do not be deceived - these are the weapons of the one that won the war. For remember: all those seventy-two had as they went out was the Word and it was enough. More than enough. And so, too, for us.

So what can you do now if you're satan or his evil minions? If you've lost the war, if your power has been broken? **You deceive**. You deceive people, and especially Christians, into believing something else. Into thinking we're something, we're powerful, we're able, so we will lay down our God-given arms and fight with our own strength. And we like that because it plays on our sinful pride and vanity. That I can do it. That I'm not nothing. I'm something.

And so it was that St. Paul warned the Galatian Christians, that generation that came after those seventy-two were sent out, saying ***keep watch . . . for if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself***. Satan didn't wait around doing nothing.

And how many have been so deceived? How many in those houses and towns that did not receive the seventy-two? How many today who have been deceived into thinking that there are more important things than coming to church, than family devotions, who substitute the wisdom of the world for the wisdom of God, who seek worldly approval instead of God's forgiveness, who feast on the pleasures of the world rather than the Body and Blood of Christ, who chase after what they want rather than what God has given, and who look to themselves instead of a good and gracious God for what they need?

Call it *deception by flattery*. To think we're something when we're really nothing. To think we're able when satan's really just playin' us.

But there's another deception satan uses, *that's exactly the opposite: to make you think you're nothing when you're really something*. This is satan wanting you to think not that you're *something*, but that you're *nothing* in the eyes of God. Worthless. He doesn't care about you. You're not good enough. You're too sinful. Too hopeless. And your messed up life is proof, that God isn't doing anything and isn't going to do anything. You're on your own. And with this deception, too - call it *deception by despair* - satan has again deceived you into laying aside the weapons of God so that he can have his way with you.

But you're not nothing in the eyes of God. **He sent His Son to die for you**. Which makes you something! And more than just something - you are very precious and valuable. Far more than you know.

That's why St. Paul goes on to say, *far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*. Now that's an amazing statement from Paul, who used to boast in himself quite a lot! All that he was and all that he achieved. But no more. He himself was deceived. And what opened his eyes was the cross; what Jesus did for him there. For while he was deceived, the cross will not deceive us. In the cross we see the truth - of our sin and of God's love. In the cross we see things rightly - where our true strength lies. The cross is where somethings like Paul becomes nothings and nothings become somethings. And whatever somethings I can do are nothing compared to what He did for me. And the nothing I am becomes something because He did that for me. Because in Jesus I am something. I am a child of God.

But that's exactly what satan doesn't want you to know, so he tries to give you spiritual vertigo! Twisting you around and making your head spin, thinking you're something to thinking you're nothing, from pride to despair. So that you're not sure where you stand, or where you stand with God.

But the cross doesn't do that. It gives us the foundation - the firm foundation - we need to make the world and our lives stop spinning. And not just the cross that happened 2,000 years ago, **but the cross that is happening NOW**.

The cross that happens at the **Font**, where baptized into Christ crucified, I die and rise with Him and become a child of God. Not because I am something, but because there He made me something.

And then I go from there to the cross in the **Absolution**, where I confess that *I have been deceived*. That instead of being something in Jesus I have tried to make myself something and in so doing just made a mess of things! But then instead of rejecting me, I am raised to life from the death of my sins and the nothing I created to something again, to life again, in the forgiveness Jesus won for me there. Jesus telling

me *I forgive you* means I'm not nuthin' - He's here for me with His gifts for me.

And then after the Absolution *I hear more* - all that Jesus has done for nothings like me to make me something, to raise up children of God. Jesus loving the loveless, paying attention to the outcast, teaching and then teaching some more, raising up the lowly, giving hope, and most of all, taking my place *there* [pointing to the cross].

And then finally . . . well, you know what it means that ***your names are written in heaven?*** It means **there's a name card for you at His Table, at His feast**. And not just in heaven but even now, here, at this Table, where the food He gives and the food you need is His very Body and Blood - the Body and Blood from the cross, now food for nothings to make them something; something with a life that cannot end.

All this through all your life is the truth that does not change and cannot lie because it was sealed by Jesus' blood on the cross and proven by His resurrection from the dead. Maybe you just go through the motions some Sundays, not really thinking of all this. Or maybe you never really thought much about it, what is happening here. But do. For here . . . this is ***the kingdom of God coming near to you***. This is the King coming to you, to redeem you.

And this was the truth those seventy-two went out to proclaim, the truth the church now proclaims in the world, and the truth you also proclaim in your homes and workplaces and schools and wherever you go, as you take this transforming, life-giving Word of God with you. You may be skeptical, uncertain, timid, terrified, to live the new life you've been given. You may feel like a lamb among wolves. And if so, know you're not alone.

But if so, the answer is not to stop or give-up or retreat, but look to the cross and remember: **the Lamb won**. And He still is. And while the Word we have and live may seem weak and nothing we do seems to make a difference, and we may not see the demons fleeing the Word of God or satan falling like lightning from heaven, one day you will. One day, what is now hidden will be seen, the struggle will be over, and our hope fulfilled.

Do not be deceived. The kingdom of God has come near to you. You are not nothing in Jesus. You are a forgiven, raised up, precious child of God. And so is the person next to you. And the Word that has done that for you is still working, still invading, still saving, still winning. *So rejoice!* And do not listen to the deceiver. Your name may or may not be much here, but it is written in heaven. And in the end, that's all that matters.

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.