

All Saints' Day: November 5/6, 2016

Feeble Struggles and Shining Glory

[sermon slide] Anyone stay up to watch the Cubs win game 7? Chicago was one big block party into the wee hours of Thursday, as my daughter Hillery attested to as she sent us video from her Addison window at 3 a.m. It was a celebration for the ages! But that is not where we usually live. We live with two feet on the ground, trying to keep our balance and avoid slipping on a banana peel. This life, with all its attendant challenges and struggles, is described by theologians as the church militant. "Church militant" is a term used to describe Christians on earth who struggle as followers of Jesus. All Saints' Day sets that aside for one Sunday a year and affords us a different perspective. On this weekend we consider the church triumphant. "Church triumphant" describes all who, in St. Paul's words, "have fought the good fight, have finished the race, and have kept the faith." They enjoy the presence of God in the glory of heaven, where "they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple." In the church militant "we feebly struggle." In the church triumphant "they in glory shine."



We know life in the church militant. St. John describes it by contrasting it with life in the church triumphant. No more hunger, thirst or scorching heat. No more tears. Truth be told, we shed plenty of tears in this militant life, and never more so than when we are confronted with the death of a loved one. Some of those tears will be renewed today as we see loved ones remembered in a video tribute. When I was young they were mostly just names. The older I get the more they are my friends, they are my family. What I realize is that a little bit of me dies with each of them. The ground that God declared as "good" and from which he formed man in his image: This God would later declare "cursed" because of our disobedience. "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground; dust you are to dust you will return." Death is our great enemy, and it came into the world because of sin. Tears.



Jesus enters this world of tears and joins us in our sorrow. So he approaches the grave of his dear friend Lazarus...and he weeps. He does not weep for Lazarus; we know what was about to happen. Jesus weeps for Mary and Martha; he weeps for you and me. He knows the scourge of death. The entire population, however many billions they are numbered, passes away with each succeeding century. "As for man, his days are like grass," writes the Psalmist. "He flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more" (Psa. 103:15-16). Jesus joins us in this sorrow. But he does more. Where God said "cursed" Jesus said "blessed." "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." What comfort was he offering? He was offering the comfort of perspective. He saw a cross looming large in his future where all curses would be settled and all debts paid. He saw an empty tomb and death reversed as he would rise victorious. And he saw heaven opened and springs of living water from which the believing redeemed would come to drink. This is the comfort he was offering. Our loved ones? They are safe within his care, and provided for in ways we can only imagine.



“Oh, blest communion, fellowship divine, we feebly struggle, they in glory shine. The saints triumphant rise in bright array; the King of glory passes on his way.” I am reminded of what Olympic runner Eric Liddell said about running: “God made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure.” To “feel the pleasure of God,” that is what heaven will be like. That is the “shining glory” in which our loved ones exult. “We shall be like him,” John writes, “for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). While words certainly fail to capture the glory of God as he is, perhaps the experience of Peter, James and John at the Transfiguration gives a glimpse. There Jesus’ face “shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.” Jesus would teach us, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). We will gaze upon his beauty and, as Paul further illuminates, “we [will] reflect the Lord’s glory, being transformed into his likeness” (2 Cor. 3:18). In the words of Eric Liddell, we will feel his pleasure.



So how will we feel his pleasure as we reflect his glory? While the Bible strains at words to describe this, it does provide some guidance. First, there will be an overwhelming feeling of **welcome**. “Blessed are those who wash their robes. They have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city” (Rev. 22:14). Remember the tree of life? The last time we heard of it, it was being guarded by cherubim with flaming sword and evermore forbidden from man. Now, once again, it is freely given, and with it comes its blessing. In God’s words, we will be able “to reach out [our] hand and take from the tree of life and eat, and live forever” (Gen. 3:22). So the first word is “welcome.”



The second word describing heaven is **diverse**. “After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude... from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.” Yes, this is a great comfort to know that our God’s reach goes to “the ends of the earth.” But in it is also a caveat. Two words to heed. First, God’s word to Peter: “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” Jesus calls blessed “the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the peacemakers, the persecuted.” Many in these groups are not politically correct or socially acceptable. Yet they, like we, are made clean through faith in Jesus. They are our brothers and sisters. Do not treat them as unclean. The second word belongs to Jesus: “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also.” God’s tent covers Lutherans of every persuasion. Protestants and independents. Catholics and Orthodox. Messianic Jews and nations who come to His light. God has a diverse tent.



The third word describing heaven is **celebratory**. “[The saints] cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.” This is better than Chicago at 3 a.m. celebrating their Cubs. This is better than our hallelujahs at an end to political ads come Wednesday. It is hearing the “Hallelujah Chorus” for the very first time and leaping to our feet. Don’t think harps. Think full throated organ accompanying a world-class orchestra. *Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!*



The last two words describing heaven speak comfort to all who miss loved ones, and especially those whose we remember today. They are **fulfilled**. “Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat.” Hunger, thirst, scorching heat: that’s a description of “feeble struggles” and that is our life. But not theirs. They in glory shine. What did Jesus mean when he said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full?” (John 10:10). The Greek means “a superabundance of life.” We enjoy the down payment of that superabundance with the gift of Holy Spirit borne faith. In that day it will be brought to completion, and faith will give way to sight.



The last word for the day? **Joyful**. “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” And that brings us full circle. We started with tears and we end with tears. But we came with tears of sorrow. We leave with tears of joy. Realize that joy is not simply an emotion. It is much deeper and not subject to the vacillation of moods. Joy is the “good” God spoke in the beginning. That is what awaits. A new heaven and a new earth. In perfect harmony. A place for loved ones gone before. A reservation held for you. And a place for many more. From earth’s wide bound and ocean’s farthest coast, where the saints triumphant will stream in, a countless host. Singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost: Alleluia! A blessed All Saints’ Day to us all. Amen