

Second Sunday Of End Time - Saint's Triumphant

November 13, 2011

Amazing Grace Lutheran Church - Pastor Chip Wilke

1 Thessalonians 4:13-14

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. (NIV)

And then he died, and then he died, and then he died, and then he died, and then he died. This is the eye-opening refrain repeated again and again in Genesis chapter 5. It is a sobering thought. Yet when sin entered the world the reality now was that from dust men came and to dust they would return. This is still the reality today. It is a reality in each of our own families and among all of our friends. This is the reality because of sin - sin that we are all born into and sin we commit against God. We have earned death. We deserve death. There is no sharper preaching of the law than when we see our loved one's body lying lifeless in a casket. We are reminded of Paul's words in Romans of how ***"death came to all men, because all sinned."***(5) Death is truly an awful, dreadful thing. The Bible calls death our last enemy.

However, dear friends, we have something or I should say we have Someone who completely changes our view of death. We have Jesus. When it comes to death, Jesus makes all the difference in the world. Because of Jesus and only because of Jesus can we call the Sunday we are celebrating what it is - Saints Triumphant. We celebrate that all those who have died in saving faith in Jesus and are now in the glories of heaven. This morning, with these words before us, I pray we will be moved to sing and shout: **Death in Jesus - What a difference!**

God's people in Thessalonica were like children, children in the faith who had some questions about death. They were under severe persecution for Jesus and these questions were very much on their minds as Christians were being put to death. Would they be lost for good? What about our fellow believers who die before Jesus returns? Where are they and what will happen to them? Yes, these are questions very much like we might get from our children the first time they lose a loved one or attend a funeral.

Just like we would give a truthful and loving answer to our children, Paul gives one to his family in the faith. ***"Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope."*** Paul wants them to remember the facts. There is a big, big difference between how the world views death and how believers who are wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus view death. Do you see the difference? The first difference is on how we talk about death. How does the world speak about death? You hear things like. *"He is gone. She was taken way before her time. He was cut off in his prime."* You hear words like travesty and tragedy. People talk about it being all over or the end of the road for them. To the world death often means it is all over, or at the very best leaves vague uncertainty to what is next.

But death in Jesus - what a difference! Do you notice how Paul refers to death? In the same way Jesus refers to death he says death is a sleep. Loved ones who die in Jesus have just fallen asleep. Neither Jesus nor Paul are just trying to make something

that is bad seem a little better by referring to it in rosy terms. It is not like we might do with our children when they get a bad bump on their head or get a bloody scrape and we refer to it as a little booboo to make them feel better. No, when Jesus and Paul call death a sleep they are describing what death really is for one who is dead in Jesus. Death is something we fear, sleep on the other hand is not! Death is something we dread, something unknown, something that gives us unspoken anxiety and which seems to have no end. But sleep offers rest, sleep is something we know and sleep is something from which we will wake up. Sleep is even something might I say we long for at times. Death in Jesus - What a difference!

Do you see another difference? When someone dies in this world without Jesus there is one very important thing that is missing - hope. What hope do they have? Where can they turn for comfort? Have you picked out a sympathy card lately? Last time I was at a store looking for a sympathy card I noticed the same things about most of the cards. Where is the hope? The cards say nice things such as *"You will always have those memories to cherish,"* or *"Know that your loved one will live on forever in your heart."* One card basically admitted there are no words, no thoughts of human ideas, to say that will help at such a time. There is no real comfort in these messages. That is why the world grieves the way they do. You can see it in that person crying uncontrollably. Nothing can console them. They grieve like the rest of men without any hope.

But death in Jesus - what a difference! There is hope - a sure and certain living hope! We hear the difference in the voice of Job when he suddenly lost all his children and said: ***"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised."*** We hear it in His voice again as he is confident to face his own death: ***"I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes--I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!"*** (JOB 1, 19) That same hope was in the apostle Paul who calls death *"gain"* and says ***"I desire to depart and be with Christ which is better by far."*** (Philippians 1) We witness Stephen's trust in this sure hope as he prays at the moment of his death: ***"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."*** (Acts 7)

Each of us could share examples of this hope in countless other Christians who face their own death and the death of their loved ones saying: ***"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"...Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."*** (1 Corinthians 15) Death in Jesus - what a difference! This doesn't mean we do not grieve to see our loved ones leave us for a while. It is not a sin to cry. Engraved in our minds is the picture of our Savior standing out by the grave of his friend Lazarus with tears in his eyes. We are sad to lose those we love here on our earthly journey. We miss them. We long to see them. But we also know the facts. By God's mercy we are not ignorant. By God's grace we are not like those who have no hope. For ***"we believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him."***

This is our gospel and the message we cling to again and again and again. ***"Jesus died and rose again... Jesus died and rose again."*** Yes, we believe we still deserve death, even eternal death, because of sin. We deserve eternal death because of all the times we are like the world in our grief, in our fears, in our actions which too often hide

our hope. But we also believe that God gave to Jesus what we deserved and He gave it to Jesus on the cross. It should have been our punishment, our blood, our eternal death. But instead “*Jesus died.*” We also know that Jesus “*rose again...and that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.*” We know that when we fall asleep we will wake up in heaven. We know when Jesus returns all believers in heaven and on earth will be gathered together before Him. When our Lord Jesus comes with the trumpet call of God and with His angels on the Last day, we, in our new glorious bodies, will be saint’s triumphant ready to enjoy the greatest family reunion forever!

I want to be completely honest right now about life in this world of sin under this veil of tears. Sometimes it stinks. Life can be hard. Some days, some months, perhaps some years can be tough. There is so much sin and trouble in every home and family. As God’s people we face many obstacles and attacks. When in love we carry each other’s burdens I don’t know about all of you but I can sometimes start to feel their weight. When we or the people we love have problems and issues it can be very troubling. At times can’t we feel a bit defeated?

At those times what a comfort it is to celebrate once again Saints triumphant - how the victory in Christ is ours and our labor in never in vain! What a joy it is to see the difference Jesus makes in our lives and in the lives of the people we love! When sickness or disease is ravishing us or loved ones and we see bodies that are wasting away, how great it is to be reminded by our Lord to focus not on what is seen but on what is unseen for what is seen is temporary but what is unseen is eternal. When we are with friends or family in the surgical waiting room what a comfort it is to know that everything will turn out good because the life of our loved one is in the almighty hands of a God who knows best. When that time comes that we as God’s people gather around a lifeless body in church or at a gravesite, how awesome it is that we get to encourage each other with the words of truth that we will see that loved one again and even better we will all one day be with the Lord forever!

Isn’t this, dear friends, what being a Christian is all about and what makes everything else worth it? It is all about the difference Jesus makes not just in life, but in death. We keep our eyes on Jesus, the Son of God, who shared our humanity so that: “*by His death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death*” (Hebrews 2). Jesus has destroyed even our last enemy. Since Jesus paid for our sins and defeated death we could actually rewrite Genesis chapter 5 so that behind every name of every person who dies in Jesus it would say: “*and he lives, and he lives, and he lives, and he lives, and he lives.*” “*Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*” (1 Corinthians 15). We are triumphant indeed! Death in Jesus - What a difference! Amen.