

At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. ² *Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.* ³ *Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. (Daniel 12:1-3)*

We Are Saints Triumphant

Yesterday, Huron Valley Lutheran High School had their annual Fine Arts Fair. In the hallways, art projects were displayed on tables. In the classrooms, students from Lutheran elementary schools competed in forensics competitions, reciting poetry, giving speeches and battling it out in spelling bees. And of course, there were trophies for the best in class and the best in show. For the kids who won, riding home with that trophy on your lap felt good. I bet that most of them set that trophy on the dining room table or the mantel of the fireplace and basked in the glow of winning. But how long does that glow last? Sure, every time you see the trophy, you feel a moment of satisfaction. But within a few days, other things push to the front and that glow begins to fade. Other kinds of victories might last longer. Winning a National Merit Scholarship might cause a glow that lingers more. Winning a free ride to a major university would certainly last for a while. But is there any glow of victory that lasts forever? At the end of World War II, the U.S. burst into a spontaneous celebration of victory that lasted for days. But it wasn't long before Americans went back to fighting over politics. The U.S. and the Soviet Union went from being allies to enemies and the Cold War began. The glow of victory didn't dim the strife and the problems of life in a sinful world. But there is a victory that makes a permanent difference. The world around us may not take it seriously and it may insist on living like the battle is still going on. But we can live like winners. My friends, **we are Saints Triumphant.**

I.

We are triumphant over the troubles of this world. Near the end of his life, God gave the Old Testament prophet Daniel a series of visions. In the chapter before our text for this morning, he saw the struggles of the New Testament church and the Antichrist. Then the Holy Spirit inspired him to write: **“At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered.”** “At that time” – what does that mean? Daniel saw the whole New Testament period in one sweeping vision. He lived almost six hundred years before Jesus was born, so he could “zoom out” and take in all the time from Jesus' ascension until he returns.

And in one sense, he calls that period a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations. The whole New Testament period is a time of wars and rumors of war, of famines and disasters, of persecution and falling away. But at the very end, all those horrors will be even more intense. They will make all of previous history seem mild by comparison. But what does that really mean for us who live in the New Testament era? How can we tell where we are in that process? I submit to you that none of us can really judge if our time is better or worse than other times, simply because this is the only time we know. And in every age, Christians have looked at the terrible things going on around them and concluded that this must be the end. Christians who lived through World War II certainly thought that. Christians who lived through the Black Death when as much as one third of the population of Europe died thought that. Martin Luther and the Christians who lived through the Reformation and the pope's attempts to silence the truth thought that they were living at the end.

And people like us who have lived through the legalization of abortion and the decline of marriage and the economic meltdown of our country and the increasing threat of global warming and the rabidly unchristian bent of the media which has come hand in hand with a constant decline in church membership and participation – we, too, feel like we must be at that end God was talking about. And we may be. God designed this process so that we would always live with the expectation that we could see Jesus return today. He said that no one can know when he will return and that he will come at a time when people least expect him. So it will always feel like this world is as bad as it can get and the Lord should just come back now.

But in all that upheaval and persecution, Daniel says that the archangel Michael arises to protect God's people. God sends his angels to protect us while we live here. That means that we aren't nearly as helpless as we sometimes feel. God has given us allies that are more powerful than any enemy we face in this life. So we always win even here. That's true, even when it looks like we're losing. What makes it look and feel like we're losing here? Sin, right? Sin inflicts pain on our lives. The sins of people we love disappoint and hurt us. The sins of people we don't like often inflict enormous difficulty and anxiety on our lives. Our own sin ruins relationships and cheats us of the things we treasure most. Our own sin damages our faith and devalues the gift God gave us in our church. In all that, it looks and feels like we are losing.

But we are always winning. We're winning because Jesus died and paid for all our sin. He rose and announced that all that sin is gone forever, no matter how much damage it has done to our own lives. He paid for the sins of the people around us, too. He forgave them, just as much as he forgave us. And he sent his angels to protect us from what their sin does to us, to limit the damage to only those things that God will turn to our advantage. How do we know that's true? When we look to the cross, we see the love of God that sacrificed his own Son for our good. That love is still working for us. And when we look to the empty tomb, we see the power of Christ to triumph over all that sin inflicts on our lives. The angels wield that power for us every day of our lives. We never see them. But they are there. We win through them.

Daniel tells us that when tribulation rises to the point that it exceeds any other time in history, then God's people will be delivered. Of course, delivered doesn't mean put in box and dropped off. It means rescued! He says that God's people are all those whose names are written in the book. The Bible uses this image of the Book of Life, a book that records the name of every person who will reach heaven. God speaks of a book because for us a written record is more permanent than memory. We've all had the experience of being sure we remembered something right, only to discover we were wrong. But a written record keeps the information straight. God has no memory problems. He remembers everything correctly and I'm not sure there's an actual book in heaven where he writes all our names down. But the point of the image is that God's record of his people cannot be lost or forgotten or be incomplete. We will rise on Judgment Day. We will win.

II.

The last day equals our final victory. **We are Saints Triumphant, triumphant over death and hell.** Daniel says, **"Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt."** Every person who ever died will rise. Even if their bodies were burned to ash, even if they were eaten by sharks, even if their bones have long since turned to dust, they will rise. I once had a very bright young man in catechism class and when we talked about Judgment Day, he asked if there is enough matter on earth for this to happen. He was thinking of the billions of people have lived and died. Is there enough matter to restore all their bodies? To take his thought a little further, without a doubt, some molecules have belonged to more than one body. When our bodies decay, the chemicals that they're made of reenter the environment and become parts of worms and then plants and then maybe they become steaks or pork chops and then become part of other bodies. Who gets those molecules on Judgment Day? How will this all work?

God doesn't tell us. We don't need to worry about it. If God could say, "Let there be light" and there was light, he can raise all our bodies. But notice what we will wake up to: Some to everlasting life and others to shame and everlasting contempt. God reserves the term "everlasting life" for paradise. He never uses it for hell. In fact, he sometimes calls hell "death." But passages like this make it clear that he does not mean that we cease to exist in hell. The unbelievers will rise to *everlasting* contempt. Hell will go on forever.

The Bible clearly teaches that hell will hurt – that's the point of the fire, right? It speaks of hell as darkness and as separation from God and his love. Here, God adds shame. There's a striking parallel with the cross. God never talks about much Jesus' cross hurt. He dwells on the shame and disgrace of the cross. Jesus was held up to God's contempt for us because our sin deserves God's everlasting contempt. He suffered that so we don't have to. But those who die without faith in Christ throw away the sufferings that Jesus offered in their place and they condemn themselves to an eternity of hell – of suffering and darkness, yes. But also an eternity of God's contempt. We will not share that contempt. We will be rescued, not because we're so great at serving God or such good examples of Christian living or so regular in our church attendance. We will be rescued because God gave us faith in Christ. The contempt Jesus suffered gives us the eternal glory he won.

In fact, Daniel goes on to say, **“Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.”** We will have glory! That is, if we are wise and lead many to righteousness. Do you qualify? Of course you do! Wisdom equals trust in Christ. Every person who has faith is wise and will shine. That’s the gift God gave you when he sent the Holy Spirit into your heart. But what about leading people to righteousness? How do we do that? By leading them to Christ. The only way that anyone can escape God’s contempt in hell is through Jesus. He gives us his righteous life. He paid for our sins. We are now all righteous in God’s sight because of Christ. When you lead people to Christ, you lead them to righteousness.

Have you ever done that? Some of you can probably think of people that you talked to about Jesus and brought to church. Maybe you can even think of people who became believers through your testimony. Others maybe can’t. But you know what? If you are a parent and you taught your children to know their Savior, you brought them to righteousness. If you read Bible stories to them, if you brought them to church and Sunday school and Lutheran elementary school and high school, if you talked about God’s Word after church and answered their questions, if you disciplined them in love and forgave them when they repented, you did what God is talking about here.

But that’s not the only way you were a part of bringing people to righteousness. You are members of this congregation. We reach out together into the world right outside our doors. Did you know that over the last five years more than one hundred people have joined our church? Many of them came without a clear understanding of Jesus and his work for us. You were a part of bringing them to righteousness because you support this work. You invite. You pray. And you provide the financial resources and the physical effort necessary to do our work. The same applies to what we teach in our school and our Sunday school and our catechism classes. You share in all that. And you share in all the work we do through the synod. God shares with you the work of every missionary, every professor, every teacher or pastor who is bringing people to righteousness because he gives you the privilege of supporting that work.

What will be the result? You will shine like the stars for all eternity. You will bask in the glow of triumph forever and ever. Not because you earned it. We’re sinners and we could always do better. But God gives you this gift: he chooses to honor you because you did what he asked you to do here. He will give you the glory that only belongs to him, because you are his children.

I don’t think we’re going to get trophies on Judgment Day. I don’t think there will be any gold medals or blue ribbons. But we will share the glory of Christ. We will share the triumph of the Son of God. And it will last forever. We will never need another win, because that glow will never fade. That’s God’s gift to us. In Christ, we are Saints Triumphant. Amen.