

Pastor Troy Schreiner—Victory Lutheran Church, Jacksonville

November 17, 2019—Third Sunday of End Time—Saints Triumphant Sunday

Series/Theme: Welcome Home, To an Everlasting Family

Sermon Text: Revelation 22:1-5—LIFE

“In this world nothing can be said to be certain except death and taxes.” Benjamin Franklin isn’t saying anything we don’t already know, right? Death is inevitable. A certainty. An unavoidable reality. So much so, that when someone dies, people searching for comfort will sometimes say, “Well, that’s life.” That’s interesting, isn’t it; that death is “part of life”? And yet, although death is an inevitable, certain, and unavoidable part of life, we still don’t like it.

Like searching for the Fountain of Youth, many try to dodge death with special diets, exercise, and treatments. Many are terrified of meeting death, and grieve when it meets someone they love. And that’s understandable, because death is ugly. Unnatural. Unavoidable.

But it wasn’t always that way. At the beginning, everything God created was perfect, including the man and woman he created, Adam and Eve. There was no sin. And since death is the penalty for sin, there was no death either. In the middle of that perfect Garden, occupied by sinless people, God placed two special trees: One, the Tree of Life, had fruit that gave eternal life. The other, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God had commanded Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit of that tree, warning *“When you eat of it, you will surely die.”*

Based on the number of cemeteries, we know what happened. Adam and Eve rebelled against God by eating the forbidden fruit and introduced sin into a formerly perfect world. Which is like introducing rat poison into your diet. Death became an inevitable reality, a part of life.

As a result, sin didn’t just make death unavoidable. Sin made death a necessity. God drove Adam and Eve out of Eden, and posted angel guards and a flaming sword to *“guard the way to the tree of life”* because as God explained, *“[Mankind] must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.”* Now that sin was part of life in this world, death needed to be too. To live forever as a sinner in a world fractured by sin would be the worst possible life, especially since God had a far better life to offer. Life on earth must come to an end, so that God’s people can truly live!

That doesn’t mean death stops being ugly, scary, and unnatural, just because we’re Christians. But Christians can have a different kind of certainty about death than an unbeliever can. Not just a certainty that we will die. But a certainty that death brings... **Life!** That’s why today, in a service that focuses on our believing loved ones who have died before us, we can praise, smile, and rejoice, instead of being sobbing messes unable to pick ourselves up off the floor. You might shed tears thinking about loved ones who are in heaven, because you miss them. And that’s OK! Death is still sad and ugly. Even Jesus wept at the grave of his dear friend Lazarus! But we can grieve the death of members of the family of Christ without in a different way. Because for a believer, death brings life. Because we belong to an everlasting family!

The Apostle John relays that peace in a vision God gave him, a vision of the life that the Saints Triumphant are now living in Heaven, the life we can also look forward to! While exiled on the island of Patmos for preaching the good news of Jesus, God gave John seven visions, which are recorded in the book of Revelation. Most of the visions symbolically portray the struggles and suffering believers will experience in this sinful world, but John’s Revelation ends with a glimpse of Heaven.

He describes his vision, ***“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”***

This vision is full of incredibly beautiful symbolism! Compare this glimpse of Heaven with the description of the Garden of Eden I gave earlier. Did you notice what’s in both places? The Tree of Life! Except in Heaven, the tree isn’t locked down by angel guards to prevent people from eating from it. The fruit that gives eternal life is open for all to feast upon. And the fruit doesn’t go out of season. The Tree of Life continually produces its life-giving fruit year-round. In Heaven, eternal life is in constant, abundant supply!

And that’s not the only life source in Heaven! The first thing John saw was a river, flowing with the crystal-clear waters of life. “The water of life” might be a familiar phrase. That’s because Jesus told a Samaritan woman at a well that he is the source of “living water.” Not water that only temporarily quenches a dry mouth, but ***“a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”*** The water of life is faith in Jesus as Savior. Notice that the Tree of Life is planted right next to the River of Life, so that it waters the roots of the Tree of Life in order to produce fruit. Just as those who have faith in Jesus receive the fruit of eternal life!

Food and water are the two most vital things for earthly life, and in Heaven, God gives both abundantly—not just to nourish our bodies or quench our thirst. But to give us life that doesn’t end! That’s why we can rejoice in life, rather than despair over death on this Saints Triumphant Sunday!

But who exactly are these “Saints Triumphant”? According to Webster’s dictionary, “saints” are people who lived exceptionally holy or virtuous lives. So does that mean you have to be really good and do lots of really good things to get in? I’ve heard family members question whether their loved one was in Heaven, because in their words, “He was no saint!” Maybe he was an alcoholic or struggled with drugs. Maybe she was unfaithful in her marriage. Maybe they were emotionally or physically abusive. Maybe she wasn’t a very loving mother. And so people wonder whether their “not so saintly” loved one is in Heaven or not.

Maybe you worry about yourself, as you remember something you’ve done. You know your weaknesses firsthand, and remember your sins and failures. You know how often you’ve feasted on the forbidden fruit of this sinful world and rebelled against God. And so you also wonder, “Will I be in Heaven? I’m no Mother Theresa after all!”

On our own, we aren’t any more worthy to feast from the fruits of the Tree of Life than Adam and Eve were after their fall. Because of our sin, and because of the sins of our loved ones, death is indeed still a sad, ugly reality in our lives. The Saints Triumphant are neither saints, nor triumphant by themselves!

But did you notice where the river of the water of life comes from? John says it was ***“flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb.”*** Christ is commonly pictured as The Lamb, and is once again in Heaven, to symbolize what Jesus has done for us! He is the lamb who was slain, the lamb offered as a sacrifice to make atonement for our sins. By themselves, believers are not holy. But through faith in Christ, we receive Jesus’ righteousness, the perfect life he lived for us, and the forgiveness and salvation he won for us through his sacrificial death on the cross. As John the Baptist said about Jesus, ***“Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”***

And the water of life flows from the throne of The Lamb, the victorious Lamb who rules over all things because he has conquered sin, death, and hell! Through Jesus’ sacrificial death, and glorious resurrection, ***“death has***

been swallowed up in victory!” So when God looks at people who have died in the faith, he doesn’t see their lack of holiness. He sees Jesus’ perfection and his victory, so that they can truly be called “Saints Triumphant.”

That’s why the Tree of Life is now unguarded and open to all in Heaven. Because ***“No longer will there be any curse.”*** In eternity, we will live freed from the curse of sin and its terrible consequences; free from the ugly, inevitable curse of death.

And because that curse is gone, the sin that separated mankind from God is also destroyed. That’s one of the greatest blessings of Heaven. Not only will we not be separated from God by sin, we will live with him! We will see him with our own eyes and rejoice in his glorious presence! ***The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.***” In ancient times, criminals were banished from being in the presence of the king. But no longer in Heaven. Now, the one who makes us triumphant saints will dwell among us forever!

And in a world where death is an inevitable part of life, that means everything! It means that when we stand at the casket of a believing spouse, parent, child, or relative, we can know with certainty that death is not defeat, but rather, the portal to eternal life at Jesus’ side! It means that if I get in a car accident and die on the way home, I know where I’ll be. It means that if you have a dire health problem, and you’re unsure if it’s heading down a path towards health or hospice, it doesn’t really matter—because God will give you life either way. It means that when a family member, whether by blood or by faith falls asleep in Jesus, that bond hasn’t ended. Rather, the bond we share through faith in Jesus will last for eternity!

Did you notice what was in Eden that isn’t in Heaven? The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. In heaven the curse of sin and death are gone. The Tree that brought death is gone. All that remains is life!

It’s interesting that people say about death, “That’s life.” It’s unfathomably beautiful that as Christians, we can stand at the casket of beloved believers and say, “That is LIFE!” Death is not the end. Death is not defeat. Death is the beginning of life that never ends. For God ***“is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.”***