

**St. Paul Lutheran Church
Grant Park, IL
All Saint's Day, November 4, 2018
Revelation 20:4-6**

Then I saw thrones, and those who were sitting on them were given the authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast and his image, and they did not receive his mark on their forehead and on their hand. They lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not live until the thousand years came to an end.) This is the first resurrection.

Blessed and holy is the one who has a share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them. Instead they will be priests of God and of Christ. And they will reign with him for a thousand years.

What does victory look like? Is it a football team kicking a game winning field goal as time expires to win a big game? Is it a sailor grabbing a random nurse and giving her a kiss because they've just heard World War II is over? Is it one head of state signing documents of unconditional surrender on a battleship? Is it sitting a doctor's office and hearing the words, "You're cancer free?" What does victory look like to you?

I would think you could find support that victory looks like any of these scenes. However, would you say victory looks like a person being forced to kneel before a jihadist to have their head cut off? Or a group of people being fed to hungry lions? Or a prominent leader thrown into a prison camp and forced to do hard labor? I don't think you would find much support that victory looked like any of these scenes.

Why bring up two incredibly different scenes where one scene clearly fits our definition of victory and the other does not? It has to do with our lesson from Revelation this morning where John records a victory scene for us. **"Then I saw thrones, and those who were sitting on them were given the authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years."**

The first part of the scene is something we could clearly identify as a scene of victory. It contains a picture of people sitting on thrones. These people have been given authority to judge. Judges are people who have power and authority over other people. Clearly, these people are victorious. Yet, did you notice how they got these positions? They were beheaded because they were Christians who clung to God's word despite the risk of losing their lives.

How can these two opposite scenes connected? Their connection has to do with the way Jesus views death. Death in Jesus' eyes is a gateway to enter into paradise with him. It is the tool which Jesus uses to transport his faithful and loyal followers out of this world of pain and sorrow into a world where they will reign with him forever. It is transporting people to a place where they will no longer have to worry or be afraid because nothing can harm them anymore.

You can hear this important idea echoing through our reading this morning. **"Then I saw thrones, and those who were sitting on them were given the authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast and his image, and they did not receive his mark on their forehead and on their hand."**

"They lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not live until the thousand years came to an end.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who has a share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them. Instead they will be priests of God and of Christ. And they will reign with him for a thousand years." Jesus makes some pretty strong promises in these words, doesn't he?

He promises his followers that they will reign with him for a thousand years. A thousand years is the Bible's way of saying forever and ever. Jesus says the people who come to believe in him, stay loyal and faithful to him (even when their faith is threatened) will live with him forever because they stayed loyal

to him in the face of persecution and suffering. Jesus' promise reveals the way in which death becomes a door to enter into glory with him.

Now, we've talked a lot about the good things which Jesus promises in this lesson, but he does reveal some difficult things which Christians will face since they are Christians. **"And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast and his image, and they did not receive his mark on their forehead and on their hand."**

You might have heard this section and wondered who this beast is and what does it mean to have his mark? Think about it a little bit in the context and see if you can figure out who the beast is. It is clear he is Jesus' enemy because when you have his mark on you it means you won't be able to enter into Jesus' kingdom. He also takes great pleasure in inflicting pain and suffering on Jesus' followers such as beheading them.

Have you figured out who the beast is yet? It is Satan. Satan hates Jesus and he doesn't want to see anyone live and rule with Jesus. He wants to see people suffer and experience pain for eternity with him. Satan works to make your eternal suffering and mine happen through some tools at his disposal. There are many people in this world Satan has marked as his own. These people do their best to hurt and harm Jesus' followers here on earth.

I'm sure you've heard of Christians throughout our world who are killed simply because they are Christians. The nation of Iraq is a great example of this hard truth. It is estimated that there were about 1.5 million Christians in Iraq in 2003. Today, the estimate is there are around 250,000. That is a drop of over a million in 15 years. What happened to them? Some died because they were Christians. Some were forced to flee. Sadly, some exchanged following Christ to following the beast.

Closer to home, Christians aren't killed because they are Christians, but we are often subject to ridicule and scorn. There have been several professional Christians (bakers, photographers and florists) who have been sued because they won't endorse homosexuality. Christians are accused of hating women because we don't agree abortion is a good thing. We are called simple and naïve when we trust God will take care of our planet rather than panic because the climate is changing.

It can be rather frustrating and tiresome to be subject to Satan's constant attacks. In fact, maybe you've even prayed about it. Your prayer could go something like this, "Lord, why are you letting evil reign? Why are Christians being killed? Or Christian morals despised in our world? Why do you let the beast win more than he loses? Why do you allow Christians to suffer so much in our world?" Have you ever felt this or wondered why God doesn't do more to prevent Christians from having to suffer?

What is the reason Jesus allows Christians to suffer? Think about the way your salvation was won. How did it come about? It came through suffering. Our salvation is only possible through Jesus' suffering and death. When you suffer because you are a Christian it is a reflection of Jesus' suffering. Did you ever stop to think about the fact your suffering for being a Christian is a reflection of Jesus' suffering? Not only is it a reflection of his suffering, but it also brings him glory?

Wait, what? It doesn't make sense. My suffering brings Jesus glory? How can this be true? What would the easy thing be to do when you are faced with suffering because you're a Christian? Isn't the temptation to give up your faith? To be marked with the sign of the beast and live an easier life on earth? Yet, what does John say about those who rule with Jesus? **"And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God."**

"They had not worshipped the beast and his image, and they did not receive his mark on their forehead and on their hand." He says they resist the temptation to abandon their faith. When you resist the beast aren't you saying my Jesus is the most important thing in this world to me? Aren't you saying people might try to use my suffering to take my faith away from me, but I won't let you do it and I will cling to Jesus even though you are doing your best to harm me?

Now, do you understand how Jesus uses your suffering to bring him glory? You suffer because you believe Jesus promise he makes to you in Revelation. **"Then I saw thrones, and those who were sitting on them were given the authority to judge. They lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. Blessed and holy is the one who has a share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them. Instead they will be priests of God and of Christ."**

Christians don't often experience great triumphs in the world. We aren't praised because we're Christians and we are often viewed as losers rather than victors. However, our lesson has reminded us today that we are victors in Jesus. Yes, we might have to suffer for his name and we might even lose our lives because of it. Yet, our suffering brings Jesus glory because we cling to him and the promises he has made to us. Amen.