**Hebrews 11:32-40** November 6, 2022

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** All Saints’ Sunday

*Hebrews 11:32 And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, 33who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, 34quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. 35Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. 36Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. 37They were stoned ; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—38the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.*

*39These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. 40God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.*

**Remember Those Who Have Gone before in Faith**

Dear Friends in Christ,

The Nike swoosh is one of the most recognizable logos in the world. You may never have owned a pair of Nike shoes in your life, but I’ll bet you know the logo. And, you would certainly know what your friend is talking about if she said, “Yesterday my son went out and bought himself a pair of Nikes.”

But that word Nike, where does it come from? Is it someone’s name? Is it a place? What is it? It’s Greek. It comes from an old, old Greek word nikh (ni’-kay), “victory.” Cool name for an athletic shoe! “I’m wearing my Nikes! I’m wearing my Victory!” Hold that thought for a second.

**A. They Have Won a Victory!**

In our second reading from Revelation 21, the last verse, verse 7, after the apostle saw the serene beauty of heaven descending upon earth; as he saw a place where all hatred, sorrow, pain and tears have passed away and are forgotten, God says to the apostle, *“He who overcomes will inherit all this.”* That word “overcome” in Greek is “nike.” “The one who *nikes* will inherit all this.” What is the moment when victory becomes yours? Death. This is a crucial concept of All Saints’ Sunday: that people who die in the Christian faith, even though they die, they are the ones who have won the victory.

Which is not how the obituaries read. “After a long battle with cancer…,” “Having struggled with Alzheimer’s for several years…” I’m not going to finish the sentences. You know how they end. The implication is always that in the end, they lost. It’s never anything else. It can’t be anything else. Sooner or later, the battle is always lost to death.

But that’s not what God’s word tells Christians about Christians. God says that in the moment of departing from this life, the Christian doesn’t lose the battle, he and she win the victory. In the moment that least looks victory, that most looks like defeat, God decrees that we win! Nike!

There’s an old bluegrass song that sings this truth. Sometimes bluegrass music is lampooned as unsophisticated music for simple people. Truth be told, a lot of bluegrass songs, especially the older ones, sing profound theology. What is maybe my favorite goes like this: “Oh Come, angel band; Come and around me stand; Oh bear me away on your snow white wings to my immortal home.” So you have a picture of a man on his deathbed, knowing his time is short. He remembers Jesus’ words about the angels bearing poor man Lazarus to Abraham’s bosom, and then he sings, “My triumph has begun!” (The Stanley Brothers, *Angel Band*) He’s talking about death and winning in the same sentence! How can he say that? It takes explicit faith in Christ to say that, faith you won’t hear in any Top Forty song. “Christ gives me the victory!”

“My triumph has begun!” Is that what you thought this past year as Brien Grace, as Marianne Grace, as Jeff Kurbis, as Kim Roberts were laid to rest? “Their triumph has begun!” I’m not sure what you thought, but I know we didn’t feel that way. As the fourth funeral in four months was announced, I heard a member say, “Now who died?” It wasn’t disgust or a calloused heart. It was someone who had been struck but didn’t know where the wound had come from. He spoke for all of us when these four were called by their Savior.

But God wants us to remember that what feels like a loss for us on this side of the veil, is in fact triumphant victory for the departed in Christ. And now, these saints’ lives lived in Christ encourage us saints in our Christian faith. This is the point of All Saints’ Sunday every November. We must look beyond what our eyes see and what our hearts feel. Those who die in Christ, win the victory.

**B. They Won the Victory through Faith**

In our Bible reading from Hebrews, these people called Hebrews, were tempted to leave their Christian faith. Basically, here’s the situation. These Christians had become Christians honestly and sincerely. Since that time, however, things had gotten hard for Christians. Popular opinion had turned against them. Some were suffering violence and financial loss for their faith. And you know what happens when the going gets tough: people start reconsidering. They wonder, “Is it worth the trouble?” Some were abandoning Christ.

This writer, this pastor, cannot just let the people under his care make up their minds for themselves. That would be the equivalent of leaving sheep out for the wolves, of a doctor seeing a 99% blocked artery and saying, “Meh.” There is one way to be saved. That is through faith in Jesus Christ. There is no other way. To let people drift into the most comfortable option about Christ Jesus is pastoral malpractice!

So the writer does something we often do when we want to direct people to positive action. He pointed these Hebrews to the good and successful examples. We look at and analyze successful people and aspire to what they have achieved.

But you will notice that this word of God does not direct our minds to any and every success story. The people mentioned in this list are a very select group of people. Why not mention the powerful Roman Caesars? Why not mention the wise Greek philosophers? Why not mention the first century equivalent of billionaire entrepreneurs? Don’t successful people like that have something to teach Christians? No. All of them failed. None of them received God’s commendation. None of them are a model for Christians in the thing that matters most of all: faith.

At the end of the long list of examples, what does it say? In verse 39 it says, ***“These were all commended for their faith!”*** It wasn’t the fact that David was a powerful king that got him on that list. If he had been even more powerful, but not a believer, he would not have been on the list. If Samson had been even stronger, but not a believer, he would never have made the cut. What mattered was faith, trust in God.

**C. Their Victory Is One Every Believer Shall Share**

Now as you listen to the list of the faithful, you start to think, “Okay, so he’s putting in front of us *Christian/believer* success stories to encourage us in our faith.” It starts out predictably enough, ***“What more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets…”*** These are big name Old Testament people: powerful, successful. ***“…whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again.”*** Good stuff, good stuff. And then it takes a turn no one saw coming: ***“Others were tortured and refused to be released… Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison… They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.”*** What happened to our motivational speech? When you are trying to motivate people you put positive things in front of people. You don’t tell them about things gone wrong, of good intentions unappreciated. That’s not how you do it!

But that’s how God encourages us in our faith. He points out negative things that happened to believers of the past because these things happen to believers living in a fallen world. Disease and accidents have their way with them and us. And in some times and places—which is what was happening to the Hebrews—Christians are ill-treated by an unbelieving world. Just as Jesus said today, *“Blessed are you when men hate you… because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven”* (Lk 6:23) These verses in Hebrews 11 let us know that the bad things that happen, even the really really bad things do not remove a believer from God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

Think of it the other way around. If God only told us positive and happy examples, do you know what would happen? When things go bad, we would think it is a sign that God is angry with us. If our godly plans don’t turn out well, we would think that God must be against us. But God tells us about these suffering saints and then renders this verdict, ***“The world was not worthy of them.”*** Oh, dear God, thank you for writing that in there. I have a chance!

What matters is this, ***“These were all commended for their faith.”*** Both the kings, and ones who ended up hiding in holes. ***“These were all commended for their faith.”*** Same declaration for all! They all win the victory!

It reminds me of a parable Jesus taught. It was that parable about the workers in the vineyard—you know, where some were hired in the morning, others at noon, and others an hour before sunset. At sunset, when it came time to pay the workers, you know what happened. The owner came out and gave them all the same wages, both the ones who had worked twelve hours and sweated it out under the afternoon sun and the ones who just worked a single hour in the cool evening breeze. God is pleased to give all who have faith the same prize of heaven. Some have an easier time of it than others—maybe, or so it seems to us. Which is wonderful. Or if you just can’t accept the fact that God is generous and gives the same thing to all people because he is such a generous and good God, then I hope you get an attitude adjustment.

That blanket promise of forgiveness and heaven to all who believe in Jesus is exactly the thing that gives hope even when God calls our loved ones – whether in expected or totally shocking ways. I don’t wonder about our four brothers and sisters: Brien, Marianne, Jeff or Kim. It isn’t about whether they measured up to Abraham or were as blessed as King David to prove God’s favor. They simply took God at his word. And now the victory is theirs, even while we still patiently labor in this world.

God’s guarantee about them gives me hope. I don’t have to worry. It’s “I’m saved” whether my life looks like a wreck or its one for the history books; whether I succeed in all I do or it seems like everything I touch goes bad. It’s grace, it’s God’s undeserved love, it’s 100% of the work done by Jesus walking around fulfilling all the commandments and dying on a cross cursed for my sin. And now I am just waiting for the day of God’s call. I’m marching, marching, marching; being a husband, a father, a neighbor. Going to God every day in prayer and repentance; listening to his love, him holding me in his mighty hands. And one day (unless Jesus decides to come back first) I will breathe my last breath and you who still live here below will say, “His triumph has begun.” And if you should be called heavenward before me, I will say the same thing about you, dear Christian, “His/her triumph has begun.” A triumph that will be completed at the end of the ages when the final words of our reading will be fulfilled:

***“These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us will they be made perfect.”*** Victory! Amen.