

Saints Triumphant Sunday – 3rd Sunday in End Times – Year A – November 13, 2011

Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY

Based on Ezekiel 37:15-28 written by Pastor Paul Horn

Wait for God's Kingdom

I. It will be one

II. It will be forever

During last Sunday's sermon we briefly talked about the signs Jesus gave his disciples that would signal the End Times. Jesus predicted that there will be wars and rumors of wars. Do you know how many wars are being fought around the world at this very moment? According to a global security website there are 42 major wars or civil wars being fought around the world. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/index.html> These specific signs of the End Times are also the reason why we have a federal holiday called Veterans' Day. Because of war there are many men and women in our country who have or are serving in one of five military service branches.

The sad reality of war is that it is very divisive. We experienced that as a nation from 1861-1865. This even happened with God's own people. But it wasn't always that way. King David enjoyed a rule over a large united kingdom, as did his son Solomon. However, when Solomon died, one of his officials, Jeroboam, led a revolution and took control of the northern portion of Palestine known as Israel. Solomon's son Rehoboam ruled over the southern kingdom known as Judah.

Most of us are familiar with the Revolutionary War slogan, "United we stand, divided we fall." It is not surprising that within 400 years both the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom fell into the hands of invading armies. War not only divides, it destroys countries. Babylonian army did just that to the southern kingdom – literally - knocking down all the walls of Jerusalem, burning Solomon's magnificent temple to the ground, taking people away from their homeland to live in exile.

Why would God allow this to happen to his people? He not only allowed it, he made it happen! You see, as a whole, the people of Israel declared war on God. Led by their kings they rebelled against his laws. Solomon and his sons set a bad example by worshiping the false gods that their wives brought home with them, and all of the gross sexual immorality that accompanied it. As punishment on his people, God divided the nation. God sent the invading armies. God sent the people into exile.

You may recall from a sermon preached a few weeks ago that Ezekiel was a pastor to the exiles in Babylon. The LORD often told Ezekiel to use visual aids in his sermons, in this particular sermon he was to write the names *Israel* and *Judah* on two sticks, symbolizing the two separated nations. It was a sobering reminder of their sins which separated them from their God. But the LORD directed Ezekiel to join the two sticks together and say, **"This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Behold! I am going to take the stick of [Israel] and join it to Judah's stick, making them a single stick of wood, and they will become one in my hand."** (vs19-22) The LORD would return the exiles back to their homeland and they would be a united nation once again.

War divides a country. War tears a country apart, and it especially affects those sent into war. A veteran told me this week that he feels everyone who goes into combat comes home with some form of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Not every case is extreme. There are different levels and each Soldier handles it in a different way. Some struggle to recognize the symptoms for themselves. When a loved one, their pastor or

a friend says, "This is what I'm observing," not every Soldier is eager to seek help or even admit it. Ingrained into the Soldier's psyche is, "I am Army Strong. I am a warrior. I do not need help. Help is for the weak." And so they have this inner struggle that very few understand.

As Christians we understand the concept of inner struggle. Romans 7 Paul described the civil war that waged inside his soul every day - his personal battle between his new self and his sinful self. **"The good I want to do, I do not do, the evil I do not want to do, this I keep on doing!"** Argh! You can empathize with the dear Apostle because at the end of every day you feel the battle wounds. Your new self, created by the Holy Spirit, wants to live in harmony with others, especially your brothers and sisters in Christ. Your new self wants to show love to parents and children and siblings, it wants to live in peace with coworkers and neighbors. But your sinful self, who has lived in you since conception, loves to complain about other people. It is impatient. It is rude. It says things about others that aren't beneficial to anyone. These words create division between spouses, children and parents, disharmony between members of the church, dissonance between coworkers. But the real division is between us and our God. When there is no peace between us and God, the rest of our lives experience very little peace.

And your new self questions, "Why did I say those things? Why do I behave this way? Why must keep on fighting? When will this struggle end? Because I'm tired of dealing with this every single day!" And our new self longs for the day when we will be rid of the sinful self, when we will be one in harmony and peace with each other and live in perfect peace with God.

What if I could guarantee that you will live in a country where there will be an end to this inner civil war? What if I could guarantee that you will live in a country that will be free of dissension and fighting? I can't... but God can guarantee it, and he does. He guaranteed that type of country for his people Israel. After 70 years, the LORD would bring the nation back to Jerusalem, they would rebuild the city walls, they would rebuild the temple, and they would be a nation once again. This is what the exiles were waiting for.

But the LORD wasn't just talking about the future physical restoration of the nation of Israel. He was pointing ahead to another kingdom – a place that will be without divisions caused by sin, but exemplified by oneness - one stick, one nation, one king, one shepherd. How could that ever be? Even the great President Abraham Lincoln could not bring unity to our nation! This is something beyond us. God must act for us. And notice how many times he says he will act.

"I will make them one nation (vs22). I will save them from all their sinful backsliding and I will cleanse them. (vs23) I will make a covenant of peace with them (vs26). I will establish them and increase their numbers. I will put my sanctuary among them (vs26). I will be their God." (vs27) We are purely passive in acquiring the kingdom in store for us. God will act. He has to. He has to cleanse us from our sins, because we cannot. He has to establish peace between us and him, because we cannot. In order to do all that, God provided someone who had no sinful nature to contend with. But he did contend with temptations. The temptations blasted out of the guns of Satan and the sinful world were real for him. He overcame. He did not gossip. He did not slander. Mean and hurtful words never left his lips, nor did they live in his mind or heart. This man was patient with everyone. He spoke words of love, encouragement and forgiveness.

Because of Jesus' life of perfect obedience, God declared his own Armistice Day. Through faith in Jesus, God has cleansed you by covering over your life of hateful words with his Son's perfect life of love. Through faith in Jesus, God has saved you from your sins of dissension and hateful thoughts and words. Through faith in Jesus, there is peace between sinners and a holy God.

Even though these realities comfort us, we do not fully enjoy this peace, because our sinful self is still here with us, and lives in everyone else, and there is still division and discord all around. We long for that day when there will be no more war, no more arguments, no more gossip and hateful words. We long for that day when there will be one nation and one God over that nation, when everyone will be one in love and harmony.

What Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. could not accomplish, God will accomplish in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, in a flash, at the trumpet call of God. The dead will be raised. We will all be changed, and made incorruptible. We will be renewed in the image of our Creator; holy, perfect, sinless. God will destroy this earth with fire, and create a new place for us to live, his eternal kingdom of heaven, "Jerusalem the golden, with milk and honey blessed." The wedding supper of the Lamb prepared for us. God the Son will reign as King, as Shepherd over his people. And we will be one people, living in love and harmony. We will be one with our God. We will be able to serve him as we have longed to do since our baptisms! Imagine! No sinful nature to butt in. No sinful self pulling us away from God's will, but perfect obedience, perfect service to him and to our fellow saints! No wonder the angles sang, "Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!"

What took place on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918, the temporary cessation of hostilities, was just that, temporary. But God's kingdom, his covenant of peace, will last forever. Four times he uses the word "forever" and once he uses the word "everlasting" to describe this new kingdom. Imagine a world where peace reigns forever and ever! Imagine a place where there will be no deployments ever, no suffering from PTSD ever, no inner struggles ever, no fighting with spouses or children or parents ever. No church members fighting with each other ever. Imagine a place where you will live in the presence of your God and Savior and his angels forever. You don't have to imagine it. God has promised it. It's real! It for you. Wait for it!

Come quickly, Lord Jesus, and bring us to your eternal kingdom! Amen!