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St. James the Elder, Apostle

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Our Baptismal Glory”

Text: Acts 11:27-12:5; Romans 8:28-39; Mark 10:35-45

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord. (LSB #644 v.1) Upon that cornerstone is built the foundation of the prophets and apostles (Eph 2:20). And today we remember when the first apostolic brick of that building was laid, with the beheading of St. James the Elder, brother of John, son of Zebedee. It was a most difficult time for the church.

We heard the report of his beheading in Acts chapter 13, but what had happened up until this time? Well, Acts chapter 2 was Pentecost and the sending of the Holy Spirit, and the baptism of 3,000 people (2:41). The church seemed to have a remarkable unity (2:44) and was growing (2:47). In chapters 3 through 5 we hear of the apostles' teaching and miracles, and hear that the church was not just growing, but multiplying (6:1, 7). It wasn't all easy, though, as at this time the apostles were persecuted, flogged, and arrested - but they did not grumble or complain, but *rejoiced* that they were counted worthy to suffer for Jesus (5:41). In chapter 6 we hear of the choosing of deacons to help in the work of the church, particularly its acts of mercy and human care (6:1-6) - but this mercy is met with hatred, as Stephen, one of those first deacons, becomes the first Christian martyr (7:54ff). The Gospel then begins to be spread to the Samaritans (8:4ff) and Gentiles (8:26ff; 10;1ff) in chapters 8 and 9, and through the conversion of Paul from persecutor to preacher, the multiplication of the church continued (9:31), though they had their share of disputes and disagreements. And we heard today that the mission church in Antioch came to the aid of the mother church in Jerusalem by taking up an offering to help them with the great famine (11:27-30). Not bad.

But then . . . then Herod the king steps in. The religious persecution by the Jews was now ratcheted up to a new level, with a new ally. James is suddenly and capriciously beheaded, and then Peter is jailed and put on death row. Two of Jesus' top three apostles - two of the famous trio of Peter, James, and John - those Jesus took with Him to witness the transfiguration, and to pray with Him in Gethsemane, were suddenly taken from them. This was no small bump in the road. This is more than the death of a deacon, and is more than just a religious dispute as now both synogogue *and* state had turned against them.

What would they do? What *did* they do? They didn't run. They didn't hide. They went to church and prayed.

Would I have done the same thing? I don't know. . . . Actually, I do know. For during my second year at seminary, on a rainy night in early Spring, one of the fourth year students who was about to receive his call and become a pastor, was killed in an accident right in front of the seminary. Right at the front gate. We were stunned. We didn't know what to do. We were confused. We wondered *why* - why would God have this happen, or let this happen? Ray was a good guy. He was going to be a pastor. Why him? Why now? And I imagine those early Christians asked the same questions. Why James? He was a pastor, an apostle, an evangelist, a leader in the church. Why him? Why now?

Well, in our haze and daze, the Dean called us to the chapel, and we prayed. Maybe it was John or Andrew or one of the other apostles who did the same for those early Christians that night. We turned to the God of all mercy and comfort, of all power and might, who holds both the past and the future in His hands, and confessing our unbelief and fear, we prayed: *Hallowed be Thy name. Thy will be done. Give us our daily bread. Forgive us our trespasses. Deliver us from evil.* And our prayers were heard and answered, for all prayer in the name of Jesus is both heard and answered.

So too for those early Christians. By the end of Acts chapter 12, we hear that King Herod is dead, *but the word of God increased and multiplied* (12:24).

And we learn that the church grows, and faith grows, and the Word of God grows not through ease and glory, but through persecution and the cross.

That is a hard lesson to learn, for more often than not, we think like Gentiles and not like Christians. We're used to thinking that way. We try to measure the things of God by the standards of the world. And we strive for what the world says we should strive for - like James and John did one day when they asked for the places of honor on Jesus' right and left in His glory. They didn't know what they were asking. They didn't yet know that the glory of Jesus was not a worldly kind of glory, but the glory of the cross.

Today we heard that James did, in fact, get what he asked for - he was baptized with the baptism that Jesus underwent, a baptism of fire, of martyrdom. He received the honor and glory of being the first apostle so put to death. But in this he was not conquered or defeated. Because while he was baptized with the baptism with which Jesus was baptized, **more importantly, Jesus had been baptized with the baptism with which we are baptized.** A baptism of repentance for the forgiveness

of sins. A baptism Jesus didn't need, since He had no sin to be forgiven. But a baptism He received for His glory, for His cross. That He bear *our* sins. That He fulfill all righteousness. That He die our death that we might live His life. That He join us in our depths here, so that by the forgiveness of our sins, we join Him in the heights of heaven.

And James knew this. Not at first! But being catechized by Jesus for three years, witnessing Jesus' death and resurrection, and then being taught by the Holy Spirit, he learned. He learned that while Herod's sword could separate his head from his shoulders, and his life from this world, it could not separate him from his Saviour. He had learned what Paul would later write to the Romans: ***Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?*** James had learned: no one and no thing could do that. Jesus had conquered all through the glory of His cross and the victory of His resurrection. All James' sin had been forgiven, and so he, too, was victorious.

And so it is for you. *How do you know?* Because you, too, have been baptized. Baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection. Baptized into the forgiveness of all your sins. And because in those waters, Jesus has joined you to Himself - because it is *His* doing and not *your* doing - nothing can separate you from Jesus and His love. Nothing. ***Neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation.*** Like James, you too are victorious.

But that's sometimes hard to believe, isn't it? Like those early Christians who received the news of James' death and Peter's imprisonment - *they didn't feel very victorious*. And like me and my seminary classmates when we received the news of our friend's death - *we didn't feel very victorious*. And like you when you are sinned against, or stung by bad news, or receive the hurtful barbs of others - even other Christians - *you don't feel very victorious*. And it seems as if what Paul said is true for you: ***For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.*** Slaughtered sheep: a tasty meal for those who want to sink their teeth into us.

But it is at such times that we learn. It is at such times that the church grows, and faith grows, and the Word of God grows. It is at such times that our baptism stands tall as we die and rise with Christ. Dying and rising with Christ as we forgive those who sin against us, do good to those who hurt us, and pray for those who persecute us. For the death and resurrection of Christ is greater than all these things. His cross and forgiveness can repair the most damaged relationships, give peace to the most hurt feelings, and raise the greatest and most hopeless sinner. Could we do any of these things? No, not one. But our Saviour does, giving us His victory still. His victory in the forgiveness we receive, and in the forgiveness we give.

And so the victory of Christ, given us in baptism, is lived each and every day of our lives - even if, like James, that day brings a sword. We are conquerers. No - ***we are more than conquerers through Him who loved us*** and laid down His life for us, and who gives us that life still in His Body and Blood. That bowed low and deformed by sin we be set free and, as St. Paul said, be conformed to the image of the Son of God. The image in which we were first created, and are now re-created.

I doubt that James had any idea what lay before him, when by the Sea of Galilee that day a few years earlier, Jesus said to him and his brother John: "*Follow me*" (Matt 4:21-22). He did, and oh, where he followed, what he heard, what he saw. And today, James followed that final step through death to life eternal.

And so it will be for you. Like James, I'm sure your life has had its share of the unexpected; of twists and turns; of hurts and fears; of joy and happiness. And what lay in the future . . . we surely have no idea. And so we simply do what James did: we hear the voice of our Good Shepherd and follow Him. And today, we follow Him to His altar, where He calls out to us to eat and to drink His very Body and Blood, to receive His forgiveness, life, and salvation. And with Him, in Him, and through Him, like James, we are more than conquerers. *We are sons of God.*

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.