

10 August 2016
Commemoration of St. Lawrence

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Greenspring Village, Springfield, VA

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“His Treasures”

Text: Ezekiel 20:40-42; Revelation 6:9-11; Mark 8:34-38

God’s people had been scattered. After years of wars and troubles, through good kings and bad kings, some of the people had become refugees in foreign countries, some had been taken as prisoners of war, and some wandered from place to place, living day to day, thankful for a meal and a place to sleep in safety. It was not an easy time in Israel, and things didn’t look like they were going to get any better any time soon. That’s how it looked to Israel, anyway.

But not to God. God had a plan. Nothing was happening that He did not know, and everything that was happening was serving His good and gracious plan for His people. This scattering, this discipline, was necessary, to bring them back to Him in repentance, for many had wandered from the faith. And so it was good. Hardship in *this* world and life to lead them to *eternal* life.

And so to testify to this, God sent the prophet Ezekiel to the people who had been hauled off as prisoners of war - with good news. The time of the scattering was going to end. God was going to gather His people once again from everywhere, from all the countries, where they had been scattered. They were going home. For He is the Lord, and He keeps His promises.

Which means this: if He is going to gather His people from all the places, all the countries, where they have been scattered, then He knows where they are, and all they have been going through. His eye has never been off of them, though maybe to them it seemed like it - like God didn’t see, like God didn’t care, that God wasn’t there for them. But He did see, He did care, and He was there. He was working good for them and good in them.

And He still is. For the gathering of which Ezekiel spoke was a picture of the gathering that is still taking place today, as God gathers His people to Himself from all the places in all the world where they have been scattered. He knows where each and every one is. His eye is never off of them. He is caring and keeping His promises. His promise not for an easy life now, but for a life with Him forever.

Some of those already gathered we heard about in the reading from Revelation: ***the souls of those who had been slain for the Word of God and for the witness they had borne.*** Or in other word, the martyrs. Those whose lives had been taken from them, were

gathered to the Lord and are resting in Him. Even in often gruesome deaths, the Lord cared for them and kept His promise to them, and gave them life. Martyrs like Lawrence, whom we commemorate this night.

But notice this too: *there are still more to come*. Not all have been gathered. There are still more who will be killed for their faith. And when they are, **their death will testify to life**. That life is not just what we have here and now, but that God is gathering His flock to Himself. That if they are killed, that is not the end. That if they are killed, it is not because God didn't see or care; it is not that God was powerless to stop it. It is that God decided to gather that child home now. To His promised home of rest and peace.

And that is the promise He has for you as well. For that is the testimony of the martyrs to us: that no matter where you are, no matter how things are with you, no matter how your life is taken from you, your Father in heaven sees, cares, and is gathering you to Himself. He who gave us our life is also going to decide when it ends, and how - even though we want to be the ones in control of that.

And many try to be. Many in our world today try to be in control of when life begins, through contraceptives (to stop it) or medical technology (to make it happen). No thank you God, I'll handle this. And even more try to be in control of when life ends, through abortion, assisted suicide, murder, and mercy killing. For we, not God, know best. But that is to make ourselves god, and deny that our Father in heaven sees and knows and cares and is always doing good for us.

But today Jesus said to **deny ourselves**. Deny that. Deny that we are in control of the when and how of life and the when and how of death, and let God be God. For if you want control, if you want to be god, if you want to save yourself and your life, you will only lose it. But if the when and how of your life and death is in God's hands, then there is salvation. For He is gathering His children to Himself.

Lawrence is a great example for us of that. Many Christians at that time were being killed for their faith, in often horrible and gruesome ways. Lawrence had seen friends taken, and he was next in line. He could have saved himself by handing over the money the church had collected for helping the poor, but to do so would have confessed that those who had demanded that money had the power of life or death; had the power to decide whether Lawrence lived or died. And Lawrence knew that only God had that power. That if God wanted Lawrence to live, no man could take his life. And if God decided to gather Lawrence to Himself, no man could stop it - not even Lawrence himself. So Lawrence gave all the money away to the poor and needy of the city, and when the Emperor called for Lawrence to bring all the treasures of the church to give to him, Lawrence brought all the poor and needy and said: *Here are the church's treasures*. And for that He was roasted over an open fire . . . after which he began his life under the altar of God, to wait in rest and peace for the rest who would be killed for their confession.

Here are the church's treasures. Lawrence could say that because he knew these were the ones for whom Jesus laid down His life on the altar of the cross. These are the ones redeemed not with gold or silver, but with the much greater and more costly holy precious blood and innocent suffering and death of Jesus, God's own Son. And that was the price paid for Lawrence too. So if God gave that for him, would He not also see him through this time?

And you too. For the holy precious blood and the innocent suffering and death of Jesus was *for you*. That your sin (no matter how great) be washed away, your death be swallowed up by His death, and your grave shattered in His resurrection. That whenever and however death comes to you, it matters not - for your life is safe in His hands. He will use your death to gather you to Himself, to that place in His kingdom that He has prepared for you.

The martyrs, like Lawrence, testify to that truth and that life. And so we thank God for their testimony and their example to us. But more than that, it is Jesus who is that truth and delivers that life to us, by grace through faith. So Him we worship. To Him we pray. And to Him we entrust our life and our death. Knowing that He does all things in perfect goodness and love. For us, His treasures.

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