

24 November 2019  
Last Sunday of the Church Year

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Victory!”

Text: Luke 23:27-40; Colossians 1:13-20; Malachi 3:13-18

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

***Today you will be with me in Paradise.***

Someday, those words will be spoken to you. When the one who spoke them to the criminal on the cross next to Him comes to speak them to you. Where will you be when He does? When will it be for you? How will it be for you? None of us knows. But those words will be just as true for you as they were for that criminal, and will deliver for you the same: eternal life. Death and the grave will not be your end. Life will. Life in a “today” that has no end.

But before Jesus speaks those words to you, there are others He speaks to you now. No less powerful. No less life-giving. Words of hope. Words of truth.

**Today you are My child.** He spoke that to you when you were baptized. And you are. A child of God. On that day, born again, born from above, into the family of God. He made you His child. He gave you His name. And on that day, you began to live a new life. A new life in a “today” that will never end.

**Today your sins are forgiven.** He spoke that to you again today. And they are. Your sins cannot condemn you; *they are forgiven*. Your sins cannot and will not be held against you; *they are forgiven*. God will not judge you because of your worst moments and deeds, but because of His Son’s perfect sacrifice and deeds for you. Your sins are forgiven, **for** they were **given** to Jesus on the cross, and His life given to you.

And so because you are His child and because your sins are forgiven, this too - you will hear these words too, one day: ***Today you will be with me in Paradise.***

*What’s the alternative?* Today you will be dead. Just dead. You will cease to exist. That’s what some believe. Or, today you are condemned. Sadly, that will happen to some. But those are not words God wants to speak to anyone. What God wants to say, to you and me and all people, is: ***Today you will be with me in Paradise.***

*So why doesn’t He? Just say that to all people?* Well, what do you think would have

happened if Jesus had turned to the criminal on that other cross, on the other side of Him, and said that. What would have been the response? A hearty laugh? *Yeah, right!* More ridicule? *How can you save me? You can't even save yourself!* Or maybe some spit spewed Jesus' way? Jesus' words of grace would have been rejected, the same as some reject them today. Baptism? Repentance? Forgiveness? No thanks.

But we here today say: **Thanks be to God!** Thanks be to God for His baptism which, to use the words that we heard today from Saint Paul, *has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*

*The domain of darkness.* Our world today calls itself enlightened, and thinks that Christians are the ones in the dark. God says it's the other way around. But one thing all of us can agree on, I think: *this world ain't Paradise.* There is evil. There is death. There is hatred. We live in the cancel culture. Don't love your enemy, eliminate them. With your words. Or even with the deed.

But this is nothing new. Some say the times we live in are the worst they've ever been. I doubt that. Death and revenge and hate really is the oldest profession in the world. So Cain killed Abel. Saul tried to off David. Isaiah was sawn in two. Paul had his head chopped off. Peter was crucified upside down. Early martyrs were fed to the beasts or to the flames. A price was put on Luther's head. Or think of just a few years ago, when 21 young men knelt on a beach in Libya and had their throats sliced and their heads severed from their bodies. *Domain of darkness*, indeed.

We could also speak of genocide, the Holocaust, and the modern day holocaust of abortion. People deceived into thinking that mercy killing and assisted suicide will give you what you need and is the answer to your problem. Or trying to escape through drugs or being someone you're not. *Domain of darkness.* The darkness within . . . against ourselves, condemning us. The darkness within . . . coming out against others, condemning them.

But in the midst of this darkness, and this world that certainly ain't Paradise, **there is hope.** The hope of the criminal on the cross next to Jesus. That even in the very midst of darkness, evil, and death, the love of Jesus is greater. The love that kept Him on that cross and would not let Him jump down and save Himself. The love that enabled Him to pray for forgiveness for others, even while hanging on the cross: ***Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*** The love that brought Him here into our darkness in the first place, to do something about it. To be swallowed up by the darkness of evil, sin, and death - *in your place* - that He might speak these words to you and to all: ***Today you will be with me in Paradise.***

Now, the dead can't speak - at least, *I've* never heard a dead person speak! And so to

Speak those words to you, that means Jesus cannot be dead, but alive. Risen. Resurrected. Victorious. The grave that once held Him as empty as the cross that once held Him. And the voice that called forth life in creation now calling forth life from the dead. Giving life to those now dead in their trespasses and sins, and giving life to those who have here breathed their last in faith. For Jesus risen from the dead means that the domain of darkness - as strong as it is and as long as it's been - didn't win. He won. Life won.

And that's true even though we're still living in a very dark world. It's why Paul and Peter and martyrs across time, even to those 21 young men on a Libyan beach, could offer their bodies and necks to sword, teeth, nails, and flame - **they knew the victory has been won!** That not even death could end their life. That when their bodies succumbed to death, their ears would hear these words: ***Today you will be with me in Paradise.*** Words spoken not as a reward for our killing others, as some today believe. But words spoken to us because of the one who gave His life for us.

And if that's true - *and it is!* For try as they might, no one has even found Jesus' body or bones and never will. If that's true - *and it is!* - then we have been given a life that is certain and sure and cannot be taken from us. And so we can now use this life that has been given to us, and that cannot be taken from us, for others. We can now lay down that life for others. With that same love Jesus gave to us. With that same forgiveness Jesus gave to us. With that life Jesus has given to us. For even though we are still living in this domain of darkness, Saint Paul was right - we have been delivered from it, and transferred to the kingdom of the Son. A kingdom which has no end.

That's our message this Last Sunday of the Church Year. This Sunday set aside to look with anticipation to when Jesus comes again in glory. **That the victory has been won and the victory is ours.** You may not see it right now. You might not feel very victorious. It might seem to you as it seemed in the prophet Malachi's day, that the ***arrogant are blessed, and evildoers not only prosper, but put God to the test and escape.*** So what's the use? Why follow the Lord? Why believe?

Because it will not always be so. The domain of darkness is coming to an end. This world ain't Paradise and never will be, but that doesn't mean Paradise doesn't exist. It does, and one day - maybe soon! - you will be with your Saviour there. **He promised. He spoke it. And He did it.** And as empty as the cross and grave that once held Him, so will be the cross you bear and the grave you will lie in - they will be empty, too. When you, too, hear those words, ***Today you will be with me in Paradise,*** and when the risen and victorious Jesus comes again, this time in glory, and all His angels with Him, and your body will rise - perfect, sinless, glorified.

Until that day, until we are *the ones coming out of the great tribulation,* we confess this. We confess Him. We speak the Word of God. We speak the word of truth. We speak Jesus. And we live Jesus. We live in His love and forgiveness, and we give His love and

forgiveness. And we do all this knowing we don't have to win. Jesus already won for us. So you don't have to come out on top. You don't have to be first or best of the greatest or the highest. You already have the victory. You can serve and give and do for others. You can give your life because Jesus gives you His life. Today we'll eat His Body and drink His Blood and have His life in us. Life that never runs out. Life that will never end.

So we speak and live in Him and His victory, and He will do the rest. He always has. And He always will. It is now for us to trust. In that. In Him. For ourselves, for our children. That when we close our eyes and bow our heads like the criminal on the cross next to Jesus, it is not in defeat, but in victory. It will be *our* "today." Paradise awaits.

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.