

29 September 2012
Funeral of Mike Kekker

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Today: Paradise”

Text: Isaiah 43:1-3a; Revelation 12:7-12; Luke 23:33-43

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

As I thought about Mike this past week and a half my mind was constantly drawn to all the things he loved.

There was, of course, and first, his family. Mike never believed he was the best husband or father, but his love for his family showed. At the end of Bible Class he would often turn to Althea and say, “*Ready to go, Sweetie Pie?*” And he meant it. Those weren’t just words for Mike. When Mike said something, he meant it.

Then there was the Nationals. It doesn’t seem quite fair that Mike fell just a few hours short of watching his Nats clinch the playoffs for the first time ever. But he left with them on top, and there’s something to be said for that.

There was golf, of course. If Mike had written the catechism, I think he would have included golf as one of the things for which we pray when we say, “*Give us this day our daily bread.*”

I found out last winter why Mike loved Harry’s hamburgers so much. After he raved about them to me so many times, my family and I went there one day, and that’s when I found out - the burger was good, *but it was the Oreo on top . . .* that’s what did it!

Mike loved his Lord and his church as well. I think I can honestly say it would take me only one hand to count how many Bible Studies, study groups, and church services Mike missed in the 10½ years I have been his pastor. He loved to read aloud the Scriptures and the Confessions in our studies and he was a joy to listen to, even if he couldn’t say all the names and words right! He’d laugh at himself about that, but it wouldn’t stop him.

In fact, Bible Study is the only time I can recall Mike tearing up. When we talked about forgiveness; when we talked about how much the Lord loved Mike, despite all his faults, despite all his failures. Even though I’ve been saying all these good things about Mike, he knew how unworthy he was; how great a sinner. And that

His Saviour would die on the cross *for him* . . . sometimes it would just hit him, how astonishingly wonderful that was.

And then when we were ready to go home and I'd tell Mike, "See ya' Sunday," he would usually say . . . and all of you I'm sure have heard him say this, too: *The good Lord willing and the creek don't rise.*

Well, last week the creek rose and it was the will of the Lord to take him home.

And that we know. We know it not because of who Mike was or what he did, but because of what our Lord has said. It is the word of the Lord that gives us joy and confidence this day, even in the midst of sadness.

And we heard these words today from the prophet Isaiah:

***But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:
"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.***

***When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.***

For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."

Or in other words, *when the creek finally rises, **I will be with you***, Jesus says; you will not be alone. And that is so because the waters Mike first passed through were the waters of Holy Baptism, where the Lord put His name - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - on Mike and said: **You are mine**. And you all know what putting your name on something means - you know it from when you were a child, going to school, and your mother wrote your name on everything that was yours so you wouldn't lose it; so everyone would know to whom it belonged. Well, the Lord put His name on Mike and said: **You are mine**, my son, Mike. *And he was.*

Nope - that's wrong! Not was; Mike IS. Because as a child of God, **Mike did not live a life that ended in death, he died a death that ends in life**. For the life Jesus gave Mike in Holy Baptism is a life not even death can end. We heard those words today, too, as Jesus said to the criminal dying on the cross next to Him: **Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise**. And as true as that was for the criminal that day next to Jesus, it was just as true for the sinner name Mike Kekker.

And that we know because of the words we heard from the book of Revelation. The

one who would accuse us of our sin and try to separate us from our Saviour, that one has been **thrown down** and silenced and **conquered by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony**. *The blood of the Lamb*, the blood of Jesus, shed on the cross as Jesus hung there with *our* punishment, under *our* death sentence, forsaken by His Father in *our* place. Jesus did that so you and I and Mike wouldn't have to. Jesus did that so you and I and Mike would be saved from all that. Jesus did that because He would rather suffer all that and die rather than you.

And while those standing by, watching all this happen that day, probably thought Jesus' words to the criminal next to Him were about the most foolish thing they had ever heard - *Paradise! Really? The only place you guys are going today is in the grave!* Three days later, Jesus proved the truth of His words in His resurrection. Death could not hold Him, the grave could not hold Him, sin could not hold Him. And if those things could not hold Jesus, they cannot hold us who belong to Him either.

That's what John told us in the reading from Revelation - not just that *Jesus* conquered, but that **we** - Jesus' brothers by grace through faith - have conquered by the blood of our Lamb. *The Lamb of God* (as *another* John would testify) *who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29).

Mike received that victory of Jesus' blood in his baptism. He received that victory when he heard the Word of absolution. He received that victory when that same Body and Blood of the Lamb was placed into his mouth and poured over his lips in the Lamb's - the Lord's - Supper.

Which is why last Sunday, Althea and Michael and I could sit by Mike's bedside in the hospital and say: *"O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"* (1 Cor 15:55) . . . words St. Paul wrote to the Christians in the city of Corinth. Sitting next to a man hooked up to all kinds of tubes and life-support systems, those words probably sounded just as foolish as the words of Jesus to the criminal on the cross next to His. But because of Jesus, we can look sin, death, and the grave right in the eye, even as they're doing their worst to our loved one, *and mock them!* Because we know they cannot win. Their victory, our separation from Mike, is only temporary. The battle has been won, once and for all, by our Saviour.

And so a little over a week ago, Thursday September 20th, the 85th anniversary of Mike's birth into the world, Jesus said to Mike: **Today, you will be with me in Paradise.** And that it happened on the golf course, Mike would probably have said: *From one paradise to the next!*

That it happened on Mike's birthday is also particularly fitting, because the church has always thought of the death of our Lord's saints as the day of their birthday in

heaven. And so Mike's birthday is still his birthday.

And that this service today is held on the day when the church commemorates St. Michael and All Angels . . . well how great is that? St. Michael! That's really what we are celebrating this day. For yes, our Mike is a saint - not by right, not because he earned it or deserved it, but by gift, by grace. For a saint is simply a holy one, and Mike was - *and is* - holy because of the blood of the Lamb; because all his sins were washed away by Jesus' blood.

And that's good news for you and me as well. For by grace through faith in our Saviour Jesus Christ, we are saints as well. The unholy made holy, sinners forgiven, conquerers through the blood of the Lamb.

And that's why we sing this day. Lots of singing!

Starting with an Easter hymn and how though death did its worst, Jesus conquered death and the grave. *Christ Has Arisen! Alleluia!* (LSB #466)

Next, a hymn that speaks of the Paradise that awaits us: *Jerusalem, the Golden* (LSB #672).

Then, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God!* (LSB #656) For us fights the valiant one! And take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife . . . they yet have nothing won; the Kingdom ours remaineth.

And then finally, *For All the Saints* (LSB #677) who from their labors rest. We feebly struggle, they in glory shine.

And so today we remember that Jesus kept all the promises He made to Mike. When the creek finally rose, Jesus was with Him, as He had been for 85 years. And for that we give thanks and praise and sing our alleluias!

So next time you're on the golf course, sink a putt for Mike.

Next time you're at Harry's, eat an Oreo for Mike.

And next time you see the Nats, cheer for them for Mike.

And rejoice in all these gifts our Lord has given to us, as Mike did, even as we remember that *the greatest gift is yet to come*. When our Saviour says to you and me, **Today, you will be with me in Paradise**. And by grace through faith we will be. With Mike. Forever.

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