

30 July 2024
Funeral of Nancy Jean Nelson

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“A Birthday Into Heaven”

Text: Job 19:23-27a; 1 Corinthians 15:51-57;
Romans 6:1-5; Matthew 28:1-10

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

Ken, Donna and Read, Rhonda and Louie, Erika, Tatiana, Luke, Jazzmynne, and Artie, family and friends,

78 years ago *today* a little girl named Nancy was born into this world in Wichita, Kansas, much to the delight, I'm sure, of her parents Marcus and Velma. Of course, Nancy didn't quite make it to her 78th birthday - she fell one week short. And instead of celebrating her 78th birthday here with us, she instead got to celebrate another birthday, a new birthday, her birthday into heaven last Tuesday. It wasn't what we expected. It wasn't what we hoped. We hoped to have Nancy here with us a lot longer! To enjoy her laugh and her unique sense of humor. To appreciate all she did for others. To watch the races with Ken. To receive her text messages which she always seemed to send in threes! But God had other plans. And as delighted as her earthly father and mother were at her birth her, *even more* delighted is her heavenly Father, to have her, with Him, in Paradise. So while June 23 was a sad day for us, it was a joyful day in heaven.

People often wonder what heaven will be like. The Bible tells us a little about that, but not much. I suspect because we wouldn't understand anyhow. For us trying to understand what heaven will be like is like trying to get a baby in the womb to understand what this world will be like! Before you're born into it, all you know is where you are. But for a little, newborn baby, a whole, big, beautiful, exciting world awaits. And for us, too, as Christians. There is a whole, big, glorious eternity waiting for us, when we, like Nancy receive our birthdays into heaven. And while I don't know what that will be like, Nancy now does. With her Father and her Saviour. With no more cancer, doctors, treatments, tests, therapy, oxygen, or hospitals.

And this is true for Nancy not because she was a good person. She was . . . at times. She did many wonderful things. But she had her moments, too! She could be as ornery as the next guy, and she confessed every Sunday that she was a poor, miserable sinner. She knew it.

But she knew something else, too. She knew, as Job knew, that she had a Redeemer, and that her Redeemer lives! And that *after [her] skin has been destroyed*, after death and disease has done its worst and robbed her of life, *yet in [her] flesh she [would] see God*;

that *[her] own eyes [would] behold Him*. And now, what she for almost 78 years knew and saw *by faith*, she will see with her own eyes. Those eyes are now at rest, for a time. She closed them for the last time last Tuesday. A few hours after that, Ken and Rhonda and I sang, *The strife is o'er, the battle done* (LSB #464). And it was. She was set free from her trials and troubles, her labors and struggles, to rest in the arms of her Saviour. The arms of her Saviour Jesus, which He once stretched out on the cross for her, to bear all her sins. Yes, He bore them, every single one. To redeem Nancy - and us all. To pay the price for our sins. All of them. He took Nancy's sins and failures and shortcomings and orneryness upon Himself so none of that would be on Nancy; so none of that could be held against her. And then He died with all of that, for her. He paid for them with His life, He redeemed her, so she could live. And not just now, for a while, as we all do. But with Him, forever. A life that death cannot not end.

Which is a pretty bold claim to make! Here in this world where death is all around us; where death ends everything, try as we might to conquer it. You and I will one day die - maybe sooner than we think, and unexpectedly, like Nancy last Tuesday. No, *we* can't conquer death, but there is one who can. And did. We heard that account today, when Jesus, who died with and for all of Nancy's sins - and all of your sins and my sins, too - **rose from the dead**. That first Easter morning, the women went to the tomb of Jesus expecting to find His body. His *dead* body. But they instead saw something quite unexpected - a glimpse of heaven itself! An *angel*, with an *appearance like lightning and clothing white as snow*, who told them: *He is not here; He is risen!*

Now, normally, when you go to see someone, to be told he or she is not here is *bad* news. Like the news we received last Tuesday, that Nancy was no longer here with us. But in this case, it was not only good news, but the greatest news ever and of all time! That the Jesus who died on the cross beat death! **He is alive**. And then *they saw Him*, and even *took hold of His [very real] feet*. And now Nancy, too. **She is not here**, and she also is not dead. Her body is, and we will commit it to the ground next Tuesday. But she is alive and at rest with her Saviour.

Which she was very much looking forward to. These past few weeks, even months, had been tough for her. And she was ready for rest. She was ready to be set free. For she knew the promises her Saviour made to her in her baptism - that her sins were covered with His righteousness, and that her death was conquered by His life. That, as we said at the beginning of the service today, *buried with Jesus by baptism into death*, she knew that *just as Jesus was raised from dead*, so would she be, too. So she would sing, as we did earlier: *Death, you cannot end my gladness: I am baptized into Christ! When I die, I leave all sadness to inherit paradise* (LSB #594 v, 4)! And last Tuesday, Jesus fulfilled that promise.

She also looked forward to this day every Sunday in receiving the Lord's Supper. The Body and Blood of her Saviour which not only fed and forgave and strengthened her here and now, but also was, she knew, a foretaste of the feast to come; the heavenly feast,

waiting for her. But the last few times she received the Lord's Supper were not at our church, but in the hospital. But whether at church, at her dining room table, or in the hospital, didn't matter. Jesus was there. For her. Feeding her, His little girl. Forgiving her. And she received Him and all His gifts given there, from her loving Jesus. Embracing Him, as the women did that first Easter morning. As the women did to their victorious Saviour.

Because those women knew, as the angel told them, and as Saint Paul told us today, ***Death is [now] swallowed up in victory!*** On Good Friday, it looked like death had won. Last Tuesday, it looked like death had won. Today, it looks like death has won. And next Tuesday, it will look as if death has won. But it has not, will not, and can not! For as Saint Paul goes on to say, *mocking* death: ***O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?*** You are like a fighter who has been knocked out. You are like a empty bottle of poison. You are a race car without any gas. (Nancy would like that one!) You are a toothless predator. Because the death that swallows us has itself been swallowed up. The grave which swallows us up has itself been swallowed up. The enemy of my enemy is my friend! Or even better, my Saviour! ***Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!***

Which is why even in the midst of tears and sadness today, **there is joy**. Because our hope is not built on how good we are or what we are able to do - *My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less than Jesus Blood and Righteousness* (LSB #575). We're going to sing that hymn at the end of the service today. It was one Nancy liked very much. I didn't always pick hymns that she liked. I think she got frustrated with me at times for that. But I'd sneak one in for her every now and then. Like this one. Now, she gets to sing the song of heaven.

These next few days, weeks, and months are going to be tough ones for you all. Nancy's absence will bring tears, and her memories will bring smiles, but let this be true as well: let her faith and confidence inspire you. Inspire you to lean on your Saviour, as she did. To repent that you have not been who you should be, and receive the forgiveness of Him who always is. That when the day comes when you are called from this world and life, maybe suddenly and unexpectedly, you have the confidence Nancy had - that in Jesus, *and in Him alone*, we live, even when we die. ***That Jesus lives! The vict'ry's won! Jesus lives! Death's reign is done! Jesus lives! This shall be my confidence*** (LSB #490)!

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