

October 16, 2022

The 19th Sunday after Pentecost

The Lessons:

Genesis 4:1-15

Psalm 5

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Luke 18:9-17

The Hymns:

966 *Before You, Lord, We Bow*

664 *Fight the Good Fight*

702 *My Faith Looks Up to Thee*

The Collect:

Almighty and everlasting God, You are always more ready to hear than we to pray and always ready to give more than we either desire or deserve. Pour down on us the abundance of Your mercy; forgive us those things of which our conscience is afraid; and give us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask except by the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Sermon:

In Memoriam

2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18

The Word of the Lord from 2 Timothy 4:7-8: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing." This is the Word of the Lord.

I. Looking Back, Looking Forward

Our world is big on retrospectives, on looking back. Each time the Olympic Games draw to a close, viewers are treated to a video montage of the highs and the lows, the thrill and the agony. When the World Series concludes in a couple more weeks, you can see a look back at the champion's season, how they got to where they are. Same is true of hockey and football seasons. There's a reason for this: the games are over. The fights are fought. The races are run. Viewers can't look to the next one starting up the following day—the next competition is months or years away. There's really nothing to do but to look back.

The world acts the same way at the end of life, too. When a famous statesman or celebrity dies, we're often treated to an extensive look back at the things they did and the speeches they made. When a friend or acquaintance dies, it's customary to gather, to reflect, to share memories. There's nothing wrong with that. It's a good thing. We miss people because they're worth missing, and we want to remember the treasure we had in them.

Such retrospectives, however, can convey an unintended sadness: it is when the look back becomes the entire focus of a funeral service. There is really only one reason to spend a funeral service looking back, and that is because there is nothing to look forward to.

It is because, since the world does not know Christ, it has no hope. Without the hope of the Gospel, each person fights the good fight as well as he can for as long as he can; but eventually he's overwhelmed and loses the fight. He runs the race as hard and as far as he can, but eventually he falls and the race goes on without him. That's life in this world if you have no hope. There's nothing in the future to look forward to, and the present time of grief is a horror of frozen time. The best you can do is look back and see what was, but what is lost and is no more.

That's the Law which is preached by the shadow of death to this world every day. Apart from Christ, one must contend with hopelessness that will either drive him to despair, rage against God or an attempt to turn death into a friend. But none of that has hope.

As St. Paul writes our epistle to St. Timothy, his death is near—the time of his departure has come. So he writes, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith." Now would be a good time for a retrospective, for Paul to look back upon his life, review his accomplishments and travels, maybe talk about good friends and fond memories. But Paul doesn't opt for the past. Present for the moment in a Roman prison and awaiting execution, he looks to the future. Why? Because he can. Because he has hope—the hope of heaven and eternal life for Jesus' sake.

He declares with confidence, "Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing." He's looking forward. He's looking forward with confidence. There's no doubt. He doesn't say, "Henceforth I sure hope there's laid up for me the crown of righteousness." He doesn't say, "I'm pretty sure that I've done enough to get there." He says, "Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness." Paul doesn't just have a shot at heaven: it's his. Why? Because it's not his to achieve: rather, it's the Lord's to give. The Lord will award it to him on that day. No doubt.

This certainty is even more remarkable when you consider what Paul calls the Lord: he calls him the righteous Judge. The Lord judges righteously: He condemns sinners to hell and rewards the righteous with eternal life. It's significant that Paul declares that the righteous judge will undoubtedly give him eternal life. This apostle is the former "Saul the persecutor," the one who pursued and imprisoned Christians for being Christians, who approved the death of Stephen and who knows what other believers. Yet Paul is confident of heaven, awarded by the righteous Judge! It's not that Paul has made up for his previous sins and crimes by his work as an apostle: no amount of good deeds can restore the life that he took or wash the blood from his hands. It's not that Paul doesn't deserve condemnation, that his sins are not worth prosecuting in God's eyes—this is the righteous Judge who hates sin.

No, it's nothing that Paul has or hasn't done that makes him certain of eternal life. It's all about who Christ is and what He's done.

Jesus Christ is the righteous Judge who will come to “judge the quick and the dead.” But while He is righteous, He is also merciful. And so much does He desire to be merciful that the righteous Judge suffered the death sentence for sin on the cross, on behalf of those who would come before Him at the Judgment. As Paul writes this letter to Timothy, he already knows the verdict he’ll hear: Christ will declare to him, “I declare you not guilty of murder, blasphemy and all the rest of your sins, because I’ve already borne the guilt and died for that murder, blasphemy and the rest of your sins.” Paul knows that heaven is his because Jesus has already suffered hell for him. Because it all depends on what Jesus has done, there’s no doubt that enough has been done.

This is Paul’s point when he declares that this crown of righteousness will be given not only to him, “but also to all who have loved His appearing.” Paul doesn’t specify which appearing—but whenever Christ appears, it is for the good of His people. His birth in Bethlehem brought peace and goodwill, and His appearance on the cross won salvation for the world. The Lord still appears in His Word and His Sacraments; and where He is, there is forgiveness, life and salvation.

That’s why Paul can look ahead, because heaven is his solely for the sake of Jesus. And because it was solely for the sake of Jesus, that crown of righteousness is certain.

2. Henceforth For You

That same hope is yours, and it is just as certain because it is for the sake of Christ. We are always in the shadow of death in this sinful world, and we don’t know how much time we have left here. But we can say with confidence, “Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day.” No matter what lies ahead, you always have more life to look forward to.

Remember that, and remember that it is all for the sake of Christ. See, you might feel very certain of your salvation now, but uncertainty becomes the devil’s haunting weapon of terror when death draws near.

For now, you continue the fight; and it’s a good fight because you’re a child of God, because the Holy Spirit sanctifies your life for the sake of Jesus. But it’s a fight all the same, as the devil, world and your own sinful flesh work hard to make you miserable for being a Christian. For now, you run the race; and it’s a good race, too. Your pace might be faster or slower, but the finish line means heaven, not the end. All the while, though, there will be temptations for you to drop out of the race as the devil whispers that it’s too difficult, too burdensome to keep going. For now, you keep the faith—by the grace of God, you continue to hold onto Christ and His cross. No matter the fight, you know you are Christ’s. No matter how uphill the race, you know you are forgiven. That is hope, certain hope that will not disappoint.

But as I said, the devil wields uncertainty when death draws near. He will whisper in your ear that you should look back, that you should consider all that you’ve done in your life; and with the specter of death, he’ll do his hellish best to make you focus on your worst sins, your greatest failures. Even the strongest of Christians often face this battle when death draws near, and it’s the devil’s purpose to make you say, “I’m far too unrighteous. My fight and race have been so soiled with sin that I haven’t kept the faith. There’s no way that heaven could be for me.” The devil wants you to look back so that,

when you look forward, you only doubt God's love and fall away. In other words, the devil wants you to hear the Law in such terror that you forget about the Gospel.

The Lord often permits this temptation, but His purpose is far different. He may well permit you to review the sinfulness of your life so that you do, in fact, despair of yourself—so that you're rescued from ever thinking that your righteousness earns you a place in heaven. But the Lord doesn't stop there: His merciful purpose is to turn you from looking back at yourself to looking at Christ. He would have you look at the Lord's appearing in the flesh and say, "That cross is for me! He has borne all my sins to the cross and died for them, and so I am certain that God doesn't count them against me!" He would have you delight in His appearing now in Word and Supper and say, "Now I know that Christ has given that forgiveness to me, because I heard Him speak it to me in His Word! He has fed it to me in His Supper! I know that heaven is mine—not because of me and my works, but because of Christ and what He has done for me."

That is your assurance of salvation. That is why you can look forward with hope—certain hope. The crown of righteousness belongs to Christ, who wore the crown of thorns for you. Risen again, He lives and reigns forever, and He shares that crown of righteousness with you. Dear friends, this is the comfort you hold onto now and for the rest of your days. Eternal life is yours solely because Jesus died to make it so. Because of the cross, the Lord will rescue you from every evil deed and bring you safely into His heavenly kingdom. To Him be the glory forever and ever—and you will give Him glory forever and ever—because you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.