

“Blood’s Victory”

Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; Colossians 2:13-15; Romans 12:14-21

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The dusty street is empty, except for two men and the tumbleweed that rolls past. On one end of the street, just outside the sheriff's office, stands the stranger who rode into town a few days ago. He wears a white ten gallon hat, pulled low over his steely eyes, and his square jaw is set with concentration and purpose. His hand rests, unmoving, on his trusty six-shooter, and the sun glints off the metal Marshal's star on his chest. At the other end of the street, by the saloon, facing the lawman with grim determination, stands the outlaw who has been terrorizing the countryside for months. His hat is black and extravagant, bought with the money his gang has stolen from dozens of honest citizens, his lethal side arm is inlaid with silver and pearl, and in the air just above it hangs his hand, poised to pull the same trigger that has already killed thirteen lawmen.

The only thing moving is that tumbleweed; the townspeople and even the town drunk all have enough sense to get inside and stay out of the way. They've seen what this outlaw can do: his draw is the fastest in the West and his aim is deadly; he once shot three lawmen through the heart before they even fired a shot. He's as mean as they come, and though they all hate him, they know they're powerless before him and his gang. But the lawman in the white hat has come in the name of justice, fighting for law and order and honor and fairness, and more than one story will be told of how he came in defiance of oppression and jailed half of the unsavory members of the famous outlaw's gang. But now is the time for the showdown, because the outlaw has come looking to loose his gang from the sheriff's jail, looking for revenge, and the lawman has come to bring the outlaw to cold, hard justice.

But then slowly, deliberately, the lawman lowers his gun hand, and he draws his desert-gray duster back over his gun. He lowers his guard. The outlaw is a practiced killer, he cares nothing for fairness, he sees his golden opportunity and takes it, and in half the blink of an eye, his shining six-gun erupts three times, and as the lawman falls, the rest of the outlaw's gang opens fire from their hiding places on roofs and behind barrels. And the lawman is dead.

The outlaw allows himself the indulgence of a satisfied chuckle. This lawman was supposed to be the best, but in the end he died even faster, even more shamefully, than all the other thirteen lawmen who had fallen before the outlaw's gun. What sort of fool lowers his guard when faced with death? What sort of savior fights by choosing to die? Who expects to find victory by dying?

In our worship during the last few weeks we have been taking this time of Lent before Easter to look down the road toward Jerusalem, as Jesus did, up the hill toward the place of the cross. It's not an easy thing, the cross. The death of Christ on the cross is the beating heart of our faith, *Christ crucified* is the entire content of our preaching, and though we know that the mystery of God was revealed on the cross, it is still in many ways a mystery to us. The cross is shallow enough for a baby to play in, but deep enough to drown an elephant; it is so simple, yet so far beyond us. And so we have been taking this season to gaze at the cross through several different lenses, trying to understand it from different perspectives to better understand the entire picture. The cross is the place where Jesus was sacrificed, where God held nothing back to bring us back into his family. It's the place where the justice of God was satisfied, where he brought order back into the creation that had been plunged into

chaos by our rebellion. It's the place where he brought a new creation into being, taking the broken mud and clay of the old creation and reforming it into his world again. But as we turn the prism one more time, as we change our lenses one more time to get one more long look at the cross, we see that the cross is also the place where the power of God is revealed: this is the place where our Lord claims his victory over evil, where the creation and the people who have fallen into enemy hands are rescued by the power of God.

Often we think of the resurrection of Christ at Easter as being the time when God was truly victorious over evil, and that is certainly true. Jesus walking out of the tomb in which they had buried him not three days prior was indeed the most profound way possible of proclaiming that death had been defeated, and we will celebrate that as the high point of our church year in a few weeks. But it is also true that the crucifixion is the victory of Christ on our behalf: on the cross, when it looks as though the powers of darkness have taken their best shot and they have won, when it appears as though all of God's plans have been futile in the face of overwhelming evil, even then – *especially* then – Christ is victorious. But clearly that can't be, can it? Isn't death the surest sign of absolute defeat in a battle?

Yet it is *Christ crucified*, not Christ resurrected, that Paul preaches as the wisdom of God and the power of God in 1 Corinthians 1. In Colossians, Paul says that it is *by the cross* that Jesus disarms and triumphs over the powers and authorities. The image there is of a triumphal procession: in those days in that part of the world, if a king or a general won a great victory in battle, that king or general would be given the very great honor of leading a procession through the capital city, and all around him would be his victorious soldiers spectacular in their battle dress, and the conquered, shamed enemy soldiers who would become slaves, and all the wealth that had been taken as plunder in the war. And at the place of the highest honor came the victorious general or king, enjoying the adoration of the crowds. This is what Paul says happened on the cross: it was there that Jesus enjoyed a triumphal procession, leading all the hosts of evil and darkness as his defeated captives. The point of crucifixion was not to inflict the most pain possible; though crucifixion would be very unpleasant, there are more painful ways to die. The point of crucifixion was shame: the criminal was stripped naked and forced to die slowly, humiliated and exposed so that everyone who passed by could watch, spit insults, throw rocks. But Paul says that even though the powers of evil were trying to shame Jesus on the cross, it was in fact Jesus who was shaming them while he hung there dying.

The outlaw in the black hat chuckles in satisfaction; he thinks he has claimed the victory yet again as he looks down at the lawman's bullet-riddled body and his white hat lying in the dirt of the street. But something is different. His satisfaction quickly falters and is replaced by something else; the townspeople are coming out into the street now instead of cowering inside in fear like they normally do. They look at the outlaw in scorn, and he feels naked as they stare at him, mocking him. He has been revealed for what he is: not an unstoppable monster but a bully, pathetic and weak and hiding behind other peoples' fear of him. The lawman has shown true victory, a victory different than simply beating an opponent; this is victory that is so powerful that even death cannot shake it or stop it.

We have to understand that the world is in many ways a very wild West; there are outlaws and thieves and dangers of all sorts all over the place. The Bible tells the one story of God reaching out in love to save his people from sin, fighting against the armies and forces that are rebelling against the heavens, but even so, that one story seems pretty unfocused sometimes. If the Bible is the story of

God's showdown with sin, then it seems like he's fighting all sorts of bad guys along the way. In Exodus God defeats Pharaoh and the pagan Egyptian gods, in the time of Joshua and the judges he fought the Midianites and the Canaanites, during David's time as king he fought the Philistines, in the books of Kings he battles the storm-god Ba'al, in the time of the prophets he fights Asherah and Molech, during the Babylonian Exile the armies of heaven are sent to fight the spiritual forces of the nations. Then Jesus comes, and he stares down Satan himself, he fights against leprosy and blindness and corruption, and the armies fighting against God are joined by the Romans and the self-righteous Pharisees. And today we recognize that even things like addiction, abuse, violence, illness, natural disasters, corrupt and oppressive governments that serve themselves rather than their people, all of these are different forces that are fighting against God. And Jesus conquered them all. The point is that Jesus wasn't just victorious over one sort of sin or one type of darkness. The Bible tells the story of how all sorts of enemies of God marched out to fight him, and God defeated them all.

But how can we include drug addiction in the same category with the false ancient Egyptian gods? How can we say that the cross defeats both demons and illness? And how on earth does the death of Christ beat all of them in one swift blow?

The theologian Colin Gunton uses the word "demonic" to describe anything that is against God. When we talk about something being demonic we might think of it as having an evil, hellish spirit inhabiting it, as though a little red creature with horns and a pitchfork had climbed inside to control it. And though we don't want to deny that there are demons at work in the world, something can be demonic – demon-like – without having an actual demon inside it. We could say that anything that enslaves humans, that brings us into the darkness, that pulls us away from God and subjects us to some form of evil beyond our control, is demonic, it works like a demon would work, even if demons aren't actually involved in it. That's why there are so many evil things in the world that God seems to fight against. All evil is not the same – a drug addiction is not the same as an oppressive government, and an abusive parent is not the same as a physical illness – but they are all demonic, they all fight against God and his kingdom and work by enslaving humans. Whenever we give a created thing the value that God should have in our lives, that thing is working like a demon in our lives. In Romans, Paul even talks about the Law, the gift of instructions God had given his people in generations past, as though it were demonic. Even that gift from God, when it was idolized and given God's place, became like a demon. That's why it's so hard to explain sin in simple terms: it works in so many ways that the demonic powers of darkness can work through anything from war to drugs.

It's that enslavement, that coercion or abuse of power, that makes so much of the world so dark. It's threatening someone with death or pain, forcing them to do it your way, using some form of violence or intimidation or manipulation, that makes our world go round. If someone wrongs you, you take them to court and make them pay. If someone commits a crime, we lock them up or maybe even execute them. If another country offends or threatens our country, we go to war to make it right. That's how our dark world works. That's how a demon would use power.

And that's how all of the allied forces of the demonic, all the evil, all the sin, all the darkness in the world tried to destroy the work God was doing through Jesus. God sent Jesus to bring in a new creation that followed God's order rather than the world's order, and the powers of darkness responded by trying to beat Jesus into submission. They tried to get him to play according to their demonic rules, where when someone hits you you either hit them back or selfishly run away, you

either abuse power yourself or you become a coward, but that's not what Jesus did. He submitted himself to their punishment, but he refused to submit to their way of doing things: he didn't turn tail and run, he marched straight up to Jerusalem knowing that it would get him killed; he didn't start a war to protect himself, he willingly lay down his life. And so it was by refusing to use those demonic methods of fighting back or running away that Jesus defeated all of those dark powers that came against him that day. As Gunton says, "To be victorious does not mean butchering your opponent with weapons, but refusing to exercise power demonically in order to overcome evil with good." That's the sort of victory that refuses to fear death and so strips it of its power, and if the powers of darkness cannot make you fear death, then they too are powerless. Rather than fearing death or pain, that sort of victory looks to God as the source of life.

In the time that follows the lawman's death, the outlaw and his gang have a harder and harder time making a dishonest living. They try their usual robberies and kidnappings, but more and more people simply ignore them; some even laugh in the dreaded outlaw's face. The outlaw's pistol, such a feared weapon that brought death to so many people, now holds no more threat to them than a toy. And he has certainly threatened them – he has even killed some of them – but his threats no longer scare them. They don't fight him or form a posse or lay an ambush for his gang. They don't need to. The outlaw has been revealed as the lie that he is; he is defeated.

The fact of the cross is that the powers of darkness have been defeated. Evil has been conquered, sin has been broken, death has been trampled. Of course we can still be hurt and killed by evil people or evil things, but their power has been taken away because we don't have any reason to fear death. All those demonic powers in the world ultimately cannot harm us, because Christ our Lord has triumphed over them. So how then should we live? How does that victory affect us today? As Paul says in our reading from Romans for today, do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. So simple to say, but so difficult to live. When faced with the demonic, the dark, the inconsiderate, the selfish, the offensive, the arrogant, the violent, look to Christ on the cross for your victory. When you are drowning in what seems like darkness so black that you can see no way out, and you are almost overcome by the evil that has you in its grip, look to Christ on the cross for your deliverance. Jesus Christ our Lord has died, and he has conquered, and he is coming again.



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