

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Saints Triumphant Sunday
November 14, 2021
Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
He sat down.

In the one case, every priest stood ministering day after day, offering the same sacrifices again and again, which are never able to remove sin. ¹² In the other case, this priest, after he offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God. ¹³ Since then he has been waiting until his enemies are made a footstool under his feet. ¹⁴ By only one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being sanctified. ¹⁵ The Holy Spirit also testifies in Scripture to us, for first he said: ¹⁶ This is the covenant I will make with them after those days, says the Lord. I will put my laws on their hearts and I will write them on their mind. ¹⁷ Then he adds: And I will not remember their sins and their lawlessness any longer. ¹⁸ Now where these sins are forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin.

—Hebrews 10:11-18

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

There is nothing natural about death. In fact, it is the most unnatural thing that happens to us as human beings. Oh, we often try to console ourselves by saying that death is a natural part of life. But it isn't. Death was never in God's original blueprint for life in this world. Death is completely unnatural. Just think about it. A person's heart has been beating for decades on its own. It has pumped blood 2 ½ billion times. And then one day it stops? It just stops. That is not natural. There is nothing natural about death. One moment a person is here with us, and the next that person is gone.

I remember standing next to my grandfather's casket when I was in fourth grade. The man who taught me how to fish would no longer pick up a fishing pole. The man who was a jokester would never play another loving joke on his grandchildren. The body that lay in that casket was just a lifeless body. That wasn't my grandfather. I couldn't talk to him. I couldn't hear his jokes. He was gone. He was not there. And you know what we do to console each other with these unnatural events. We say words like: "Grandpa is now in heaven. Grandma is with Jesus." At every Christian funeral we comfort each other with the statements, "Jesus has taken your loved one home to heaven." Just a few minutes ago, we went through the list of our fellow believers who died this past year. And I said that they were welcomed home to heaven. Right? We encourage each other with these words.

But how do you know? I haven't received a letter from my grandfather in over 34 years. He hasn't called me to give me updates on what heaven is like. He has not given me pictures or videos of what he is doing in Jesus' presence. I don't know any of those things. How can we be absolutely certain that our fellow loved ones who died with faith in Jesus actually are a part of the Saints Triumphant? How can we be absolutely certain that when we die, we will join the Saints Triumphant? How do we know that this is true?

We all know that death is now a part of our lives, but as I mentioned earlier, that wasn't in God's original plans. He created human beings to live forever. We actually have glimpses of that as we look at our bodies. You cut your arm, and what does the body do? Instead of bleeding to death, your body coagulates that wound. And then the healing process begins. And after some time, the cut is gone. God's original plan was that human beings would live forever. But we don't. The history of the world is riddled with dates of death. This morning we remembered the death dates of eight people. Those bodies stopped. They stopped living and breathing. Why? Well, God tells us why. "The wages of sin is death." All the way back in the beginning, God said that if human beings did not trust him, they would die. That's what God said would happen. Death is the opposite of life. Death is being disconnected, separated from life.

God is the only source of life. I can't create life. You can't either. But God can and did because he is life. He is the source of all life. Any time that people are disconnected and separated from God, the only result is death. God made that truth very clear throughout the Old Testament Scriptures. He put a system in place that reminded the people that the wages of sin is death. As Old Testament believers, they had a visual display of the seriousness of sin. Every morning and every evening, animals were ushered into the temple courtyard. God had this set up. He had priests, his representatives, serve as the intercessors between God and the people. Day after day, the priests would take these animals and give a visual display of the seriousness of sin. They died. They were sacrificed. That is the result of sin: death. But instead of bringing death to the people, they saw the death of the animal. Those animals were sacrificed. Those animals lost their lives in place of the people. Yes. The wages of sin is death.

And death has a real sting to it. It hurts. It's not natural. We've felt it. You stand next to your loved one who dies, and you know the sting. I can't take that sting away. Neither can you. Neither could the Old Testament priests. Every day those priests stood serving in the temple. They had a constant job to do. When they were serving, they could never sit down. When they were on duty, they were constantly standing as they ministered. And what did they do? They offered the same sacrifices again and again. Not only was God showing the seriousness of sin, but he was also showing that the death of animals could never remove sin. The daily sacrifices proved that to the people. But those sacrifices also pointed the people ahead. They were a vivid reminder of God's promise. Someone was coming who would remove the sting of death. Someone was coming who would remove the cause of death. Someone was coming who would remove sin.

God didn't have to do that. There is nobody who is like the Lord. He is in a class all by himself. He is not dependent on anybody or anything. He doesn't need anything from us. And he certainly didn't need to promise someone who would rescue us from death. But here's the incredible thing. The God who is completely independent, the God who is not bound by anything chooses to bind himself to a promise. God chooses to make a covenant, a promise, a contract, with the people of this world, with us. It's a one-sided, unilateral covenant. He enters into that covenant with this world and says, "I will make everything new."

In what sense? He will reverse the unnatural. He will take away death and its sting. No more sin. No more guilt. You know what guilt is. We feel guilty because we know we should be clobbered because of our sin. We try to hide our sins because we know we should be punished for them. That's the Biblical picture of the guilt of sin. I have a punishment hanging over my head.

When I first heard Jesus' words in the Gospel for today, I cringed. "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out. Those who have done good will rise to live, but those who have practiced evil will rise to be condemned." I cringe at those words. I haven't always done good. I have at times practiced evil. If my standing with the Saints Triumphant is based on my performance, I don't have a chance. In order to be good according to God's standards, I need to have a perfect record. No sin. No rebellion. No defiance.

And I look at my record, and I know the guilt. I know that punishment that ought to be for me. If I look at my record, I would be condemned. And so would you. And yet, we are celebrating Saints Triumphant Sunday. How can we do that? How can we confidently know that when our loved ones die, they are ushered into the triumphant glories of heaven? How can you know that that is what is waiting for you, too? Because God promised. He made a covenant. He promised to take away the guilt and punishment of our sins. It's the new covenant. What the Old Testament priests could not do, there is one priest who could do it. Jesus is our great high priest. He is the fulfillment of God's covenant of grace. It wasn't an animal that was offered on an altar. It was the Son of God who was offered on a cross.

How do you know that Jesus has really set you free from sin and death? How do you know that Jesus' sacrifice is really good enough to take away your sins and guilt? How do you know that he has really given the victory to you and your fellow Christians who have died? Jesus sat down. That is a key element in these words that God has given to us. He sat down. His mission was complete. His task was done. He sat down.

In fact, Jesus himself saw that on the very day he was crucified. Do you remember? When he stood before the high priest, the high priest asked him under oath, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" Do you remember Jesus' response? "I am. And you will see the Son of Man *sitting* at the right hand of power and coming with the clouds of heaven." In the midst of his trial, crucifixion and death, Jesus knew what the end result would be. He would sit down at the right hand of God. His work would be done.

And you know the historical record. They placed Jesus in the tomb. His body lay dead. The disciples mourned over the fact that their Lord was dead. But he didn't stay there. Jesus came alive. He rose. The last great enemy to be destroyed was death itself. And Jesus conquered that enemy by rising from the dead. He physically rose from the dead. He proved it. He appeared, physically, to more than 500 people. They saw him, touched him, heard him. Jesus is alive. And his disciples were with Jesus when he ascended into heaven. They couldn't see what happened on the other side of the cloud, but God has not kept us in the dark. The Lord makes this point very clear. Jesus sat down. The great high priest sat down. When all the other priests throughout the Old Testament could *not* sit down, this one did. He sat down.

And what does this mean for us? Because of Jesus, God does not remember your sins. He doesn't. You are not held accountable for your sins anymore. The Lord forgives your sins. He sends them away, never to be brought up again. Not just your sins of the past. All of your sins. They are nailed with Jesus. They were left there in Jesus' tomb. Because of Jesus, God does not remember your sins anymore. Oh, if only we would fully know the power of that forgiveness. You see, I remember. I remember my sins and shortcomings. I remember the people I have hurt because I lost my temper. I remember the pain I caused because of my selfishness. I remember my sins. If only we would fully know the power of Jesus' forgiveness. For God says, "I don't remember your sins." The almighty and all-knowing God says, "I don't remember." Why not? Because Jesus has taken them from us and made them his own. When Christ took our sins upon himself, sin remained no longer upon us, for it cannot be in two places at one and the same time. God no longer sees the sins on you because he sees them on Jesus.

I believe that. You believe that. Remember that. Do with your sin exactly what God has done: forget about it. How can you do that? Remember this important fact: Jesus sat down. He did everything. It is finished. He rested from his labors because his labors of living and dying and rising as your Substitute are done. And that gives us the greatest confidence when the sting of death infects our bodies. Jesus sat down. That gives you such joy when you are standing next to the casket of your loved one who died with a trust in Jesus. Jesus sat down. And where Jesus sat down is where his people, his believers, have their home.

And that is why we can celebrate the Saints Triumphant. That is why we can remember those who have died this past year and say with confidence: The Lord has brought home to heaven the soul of our departed brother or sister. And that is

why we can have confidence when we close our eyes in this world that we will open them to our home in heaven. We rest in the accomplished victory of our Lord Jesus Christ who sat down. Amen.