

"Victory"

At least 44 deaths in the US have been blamed on Hurricane Matthew— 26 of them in NC. At least 900 people died in Haiti. In addition to lives lost, countless homes and businesses have also been destroyed. Thousands remain without power. Life for many folks who were in the path of last week's storm will get harder before it gets better. Sadly, even here at Hope, one of our families suffered a terrible loss when their son lost his life in flood waters. During times like this, we can't help but wonder where is God? Why didn't he do something? Experiences like a devastating hurricane and the countless other tragedies that so many of us go through can challenge our faith can't they? They remind us that we live in a messed up world and they certainly remind us that ultimately, we are not in control. But these types of experiences can also take us to places where we don't need to go. Places where God is invisible but still places that we think we can go and actually understand how and why he works the way he does. The It's the theology of our fallen nature where we try and seek God on our terms and reduce him to act in ways that make sense to us. Bad things ought to happen to bad people and good things to good people if an almighty and merciful God runs the show. This makes sense to us, right? But when the opposite happens, a lot of times, all we can conclude is something must be wrong with God because it sure looks like he dropped the ball. And as someone shared with me recently who knows all too well about tragedy and uncertainty in life, going to places like this time and time again can actually cause a person to lose their faith because in human terms God's work always seems to come up as unacceptable.

But today, as we kick off a new sermon series called "Lutheran Words" we are going to look at tragedy and even death not from the perspective of trying to figure out God, but from the perspective of how he has revealed himself to us. And how he has most revealed himself is in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. This might sound silly to rational thinkers, but the place where God appears most defeated is in fact the place of his victory. Think about this. In the cross of Christ, we see our God who hides victory in defeat; power in weakness; and life in death. He suffers and dies for us, and then rises to life not to save just himself or a few good Lutherans, but rises to save the world! What

started on the cross and ended with the empty tomb of Easter morning is our victory and is the place of our faith's power and most importantly, our certainty.

But so much of the time, for many of us, this is not enough! Sometimes when something bad happens, if we don't go down the road of wondering if God dropped the ball, we start to wonder what it was **we** did to tick Him off. That's what Job's friend did in our OT reading. Job was a good man. In fact, the Bible says he was "blameless and upright." He was rich; he had a nice family; he had good health and then for what seems like no good reason at all, he loses everything. Job really suffered and through it all never blamed God. But his friends did. In fact in our reading today, his friend Bildad is trying to get Job to get right with God so God would get right with him. "If you are pure and upright, surely God will restore you," Bildad pleaded." But his friend had it wrong. God doesn't work that way. He can't be manipulated through our breaking of a few less commandments. That kind of thinking would assume that we are not dead in our sin but only broken by it. But according to the Bible, "the wages of sin is death" and spiritually dead people cannot enter into God's world and expect to find the answers. But you know what? People who are alive in their faith in the one who is victorious over death can.

This is really important because we so desperately want to seek displays of God's glory and power when bad things happen. We want him to answer us in ways he has never promised and when we don't get the answers we think we deserve, we start to doubt that he is even present at all. Lots of people think like this, perhaps even some of us here today.

When we think like this, we are forgetting about the very faith we confess. As the words of the Creed remind us, we believe in Jesus Christ who was "crucified, died and was buried." We believe in the one who descended into hell to prove once and for all to the devil that he had won. And we believe in the one who on the third day rose from the dead! We have faith in the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ. And even in those situations when we think we deserve more from God or want more answers, this **is** enough. It's enough because in our pain and suffering we have the one who knows exactly what pain and suffering is all about. We must never forget that every part of our sinfulness and every part of our sinful world was given to Jesus and nailed to the cross with him. Every pain; every disease, every victim of violence; every death from a storm—all of it. We will never understand why bad things happen but we do know that whatever happens to us or our loved ones, God will see us through because he saw his Son

through something far worse than any of us could imagine. And he did this to save us. So ultimately, isn't this the most important thing for any of us?

This way of interpreting the world through the lens of faith in Christ and what he did for us is what Martin Luther called the *theology of the cross*. It calls a thing what it is, which in many of our lives is not what we want because it can mean suffering or even death. Yet even in what we might consider the worst of life, the cross points us to Jesus, who in his victory, grabs us and takes us with him to eternal life!

And you know what? When we came to faith in Christ, which for most of us was at our Baptisms, eternal life for all of us began. Of course, we're still on this side of heaven, which means we still have to deal with the mess of this world. But one day Christ will return. One day the vivid picture of the Jesus of the resurrection in the new creation, as my favorite hymn of praise, "*This is the Feast*" paints will be our reality. This feast— this gathering of the family of God— all of our loved ones who have passed in glory— celebrating the words from Revelation chapter 5— will be our reality. "Worthy is Christ, the lamb who was slain, whose blood set us free to be people of God." This is the feast of victory! It's not the feast of "mediocrity" or the feast of some kind of "tie" between good and evil. This is the feast of victory for our God. It is affirmation of our Lord who promises to be present with us no matter what. And it is the celebration of passing from death to life—a life reigned by the victorious Lamb, that has no end.

My friends, call a thing what it is! When bad things happen call them bad! When you can't understand your pain, say that you can't understand your pain and it hurts. But call things what they are keeping the cross of Christ near because that's where you will always see the glory of God and His victory. And his victory is your victory and mine!

Blessing, honor, glory, and might be to God and the Lamb forever and ever. Alleluia and **Amen.**