

THE VICTORY OF GOD

Texts: I Cor. 15:19-26; Psalm 23

2/21/10

Introduction

What do Miller, Spillane, Weibrecht, Lysacek, Vonn, Mancuso, and Ohno all have in common? They are winners – American medal winners in the Vancouver Winter Olympics. Like most people we call winners they've managed to be a little better than the next guy or girl as measured in fractions of a second, or tenths of a point. The Olympic motto says that the challenge of sport is “citius, altius, fortius” – faster, higher, stronger. And those of us whose unofficial motto is “slower, lower, and weaker” are properly impressed.

Winners do what other people have done, better than they did it.

Most Christians would want claim Jesus as our winner. But how do we measure his victory? Did he walk on water a little faster than the next guy, teach a little better Bible lesson, or make more lunches out of five loaves and two fishes than the competition? Is he just a bit better than Buddha?

Paul says there's another way to measure victory. You could do what nobody has ever done before. In a world in which there is nothing new under the sun, there is this one thing. Paul leaves us a different motto for a different kind of winner:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. And then he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time...

Paul wants us to know that Jesus wins. In a world in which there is nothing new under the sun, once a man rose from dead. That is his victory. And the remarkable thing is that it achieved a victory in which we call can share.

1. The name of victory of God is resurrection and the challenge it overcame is called death. And Paul the apostle is asking us not simply to believe in it, but to “believe it”.

The bible is not merely asking us to entertain the possibility that a man rose from the dead and call it faith. It is asking us to believe it with the same certainty we have that Lindsey Vonn won the women’s downhill and that gravity will keep us from spinning off the planet into outer space.

Whatever spiritual feelings we might have and enjoy, Paul is saying they mean little unless we have come to place where faith anchors them to spiritual fact. He writes:

If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.

Thank God Paul calls it what it is. If faith in Christ is only comfort for this life we are living a delusion. Christian faith is not the ability to entertain the unlikely. It is first and foremost believing and responding to what happened to Jesus Christ. As the Creed says it: I believe in Jesus Christ...the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty...

The testimony is that Jesus Christ rose from the dead by the power of God. In a world that is as closed as padlock – first you live and then you die – there was a man whose life was the key that opened the lock. There was a man who broke the ironclad certainty of death and unleashed a new certainty – first you live, then you die, then you live again.

That Jesus rose from the dead is the spiritual fact that cries out for a spiritual response. It isn’t just that a man name Jesus died and rose. He is the pattern for what is to come. Paul writes:

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Firstfruits are like a downpayment on a house. They are like a taste of the harvest that is yet come in from the field. Scripture is saying the resurrection of Jesus is the first taste of what awaits the whole world. It was his story. It will be our story. It will eventually swallow up the whole world. So to live your life believing that death has the last word, and is the worst thing that can happen to you, will be to wake up the wrong side of history.

When it comes to the victory of God, the challenge is not to believe in it, but to believe it. Believe it with confidence you have that the sun will rise and set tomorrow. Believe it the way you believe the people you love the most. Believe it because his story is in the process of becoming your story.

2. To believe and confess the victory of God over death changes things. It certainly must change what the church has to proclaim.

This is a tough time to be the church in North America. Attendance is down, giving is down, and frustration is high. There's a lot of anxiety. A lot of attention is being given to what our message to the world should be. What sells? What will fill pews, balance bank accounts, and revive shrinking denominations?

But if we keep the fact of first importance in mind then it's easier to know what our story is. *Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.* The man who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified dead and buried...is alive. God vindicated his life. God validated his witness. God endorsed his testimony. And whatever else we have to say, shouldn't it point men and women toward what he had to say?

As I was working on this message and thinking about what a church that believes Jesus is risen from the dead has to say, a verse kept popping into my mind from John's gospel:

In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.
(16:33)

There is a cross and there is a resurrection and they are two sides of one coin. To live the believing life is to discover that victory costs but victory most certainly comes. How can it be otherwise? As we said last week only cross-shaped costly love has the power to break through the resistance of sinful people in a sinful world. It is the cost of discipleship. But costly love is exactly what God raises from the dead – for Jesus and us.

To proclaim the resurrection of Jesus Christ in our time is to say that the life of faith will be harder, and better, than you ever thought possible. It is to tell the truth about the way things are. Harder, because the world resists the mercy and justice of God in countless way. And better, because Jesus Christ has already overcome the world. We know the story ends in victory.

3. To believe the victory of God is proclaim that victory to all who will listen. And it is to witness with our lives that we know how the story of God's victory ends.

Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever (Psalm 23:6). What would happen if we all lived that way?

The Apostles' Creed says, I believe in Jesus Christ...on the third day he rose again from the dead (past), he ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the father almighty (present), and he will come again to judge the living and the dead (future).

We know the resurrection of Jesus - which is past - is the firstfruit of our own, which is future. What would happen if began living "as if" it's true; because we know it is? What would happen if when we run across the "valley of the shadow of death" in all its many forms, we let go of our fear because we know that the risen Christ is with us and that we will live in the house of the Lord forever?

I spoke earlier that the resurrection of Jesus was the key that released the padlock of "first you live, then you die." The world could never be the same again when Jesus rose from the dead.

But we too can give that key a turn. When we live "as if" our future with God is certain (because it is) we live differently. That's how the church changed the world. Imagine an army of people who strive to love as Christ loved, because they share the future Christ has. That's us! The resurrection is the great fact that calls us to live a new life.

If every Christian led guided by the Spirit of God would seek one "dead zone" to love as Christ loves, the world would become a better place. If we believe that Jesus Christ has overcome the world, wouldn't it just make sense to try to touch one thing, one place, one life -that the world has written off as dead and gone?

On the third day Jesus Christ rose from the dead! And we shall too. We have the opportunity to live "as if" we believe it.

Conclusion

One day a man did what nobody has ever done before. By the power of God he rose from the dead. He defeated death. He changed the meaning of victory forever.

The resurrection of Jesus is a fact that calls for our response. It seeks our testimony, asks for our lives.

Do you believe it? If not perhaps today is the day to start and share in the victory that changes everything.