

**New Life In Christ—The Upside Down Victory of Jesus**

John 12:27-33, Col 2:8-15

Good morning! I hope you are surviving this heat and smoke. I feel like we are living in a BBQ joint! Just in case we forget how crazy everything is now we have NBA playoff basketball—In AUGUST! Actually, having basketball on TV now might actually be a plus. I have to admit I've become a reluctant sports fan. I think I've been disappointed so often that it takes a little bit for me to commit. When the Jazz started playing again a month ago, I didn't dive in emotionally. But these last couple of games have changed my tune! Friday's game was crazy—winning by 37 points! I'm getting excited now!

Still, it is hard to get very excited with no games to attend in person, and no real crowd to roar on tv. This is such a strange time—the games have screens showing videos of fans in some of the seats and artificial crowd noise. Very weird. What will it be like for the champions? Will they have a parade? Maybe a parade with screens with pictures of fans on them lining the route?

Parades have been how people celebrate big victories for a very long time. But in ancient times the victory parade was not just to celebrate the winners, it was also to mock and shame the losers. And that kind of victory parade is what our readings point to today. We sure could use a victory parade about now, right? As we live through this time of uncertainty and fear; as we worry about sending our kids to school, about *not* sending our kids to school, about whether and how we can get together with friends or family safely, as the list of beloved but now closed local businesses grows and grows, you name it—things are scary. It is really easy to feel overwhelmed. It's easy to feel unsafe and frightened. It's easy to let worry take up residence in our heads and refuse to leave.

Well, today I have good news for you! No matter how bad things seem, we have peeked ahead and know the end of the story. Despite the present darkness, that's not how things end up. No-- King Jesus wins! Sickness, pandemic, recession, unrest, racism, pollution, wildfires, unemployment, uncertainty—all of those things are powerful and are scary. But they do not

win in the end. Jesus has already defeated all of those enemy powers. If you hear nothing else today, remember this—Jesus has won the victory! You can rest in that; you can live with hope—no matter how dark it looks today. Remember, if it is not alright, it is not the end, because Jesus holds our destiny and you are safe.

In our reading today Paul reminds us to just focus on Jesus. He is all we need. The church in Colossae, just like us sometimes, was tempted to look for something more than Jesus. That only leads us in the wrong direction. No secret knowledge, no conspiracies, no special rituals can add *anything* to Jesus. Whenever you hear someone trying to add to Jesus, your antennae should be up and your warning lights flashing.

Paul warns us-- don't get tricked! Don't get confused, stay focused on Jesus. How do we know that Jesus is enough? Because of WHO he is and WHAT he's done! Because of *who* he is and *what* he's done. Who is he? Paul immediately reminds us— The WHOLE fullness of God—that is Jesus! How can we need more than all of God? Jesus is everything, all in all.

Jesus is all we need because of who he is—God in the flesh— and because of what he's done. Paul describes it beautifully in our reading today: we've been filled in Jesus—there is our theme again—our new life in Jesus. We've been raised to new life with Jesus because of God's work in us, and we've been made whole again by having all of our sin and mistakes and wrongdoing cancelled and wiped out. Thanks to Jesus your slate is clean! It says he set aside all of our record of debts and nailed it to the cross! You do not have to drag your shame and self-loathing and secret guilt around anymore!

Friends, this is powerful! Jesus frees us from the chains of our past and energizes us for new life with Him today—we don't need any extras; Jesus is already everything!

Then Paul tells us the biggest thing of all that Jesus did. Jesus didn't just rescue certain individuals; he rescued the whole world. All of creation! Even including some people that we don't like—Jesus rescued the whole world. In our last verse today, verse 15, it says that Jesus disarmed the powers and authorities and made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. That may sound confusing, so let's talk about it. But here is the heart of it—Jesus has defeated EVERYTHING that seeks to hurt us. The war is still raging, but his victory on our behalf is assured, so we can live with confidence and hope.

We miss out on this good news of confident hope because we tend to skip over verses like this one and shrink the gospel down to just managing our sin. What are the ‘powers and authorities’? What is Paul talking about? It sounds like superstition! We are rational, educated people! Church, I’m here to tell you—we would not have all the problems we see around us if there were not evil powers involved! It is not superstition to believe that forces acting for evil are at work in the world, it is realism. It is the best explanation for all of the suffering and pain and hurt that we see. The Bible teaches us that there is a struggle going on between good and evil. I am not talking about good people versus bad people, or us versus them. No, I’m talking about a struggle within every one of us -- struggling with the whispers of the evil forces. In another letter Paul said it this way: Our fight is not against flesh and blood, it is against the rulers, the authorities, the powers of this dark world, the spiritual forces of evil. As the Message puts it, this is no afternoon athletic contest, it is a fight to the finish. Jesus himself talks about it this struggle. Often. In our first reading Jesus is predicting his death. He said ‘now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out.’ First—notice that judgment is bad news for the evil ruler of the world, but it is not bad news for people. It is good news for everyone who gets rescued, who were under the heel of the evil powers. But who is this ruler of the world? What are these powers and authorities? They are the powers of evil and darkness, they are Satan.

We like to imagine that there is no spiritual battle. But it is hard to listen to the news and really believe that. Or look at your own heart. Look at how you react to a Facebook post that annoys you or the anger that springs up when you don’t get your way. Or is this just me? Evil seems ready to flow out and multiply and spread destruction if its given even half a chance. We see peaceful protests turn to riots, discussions devolve into screaming matches, well intentioned programs become corrupt. Friends, the truth is evil is real. Evil is real. We aren’t fighting a made up, imaginary foe—no, we are fighting a powerful, clever, subtle enemy. One who is smarter than we are and can turn our best ideas into deadly traps before we even realize it. Without Jesus we are lost. Without him we have no hope against this enemy. That truth is played out over and over again all over the world every day.

But the good news—yes, there is good news! The good news is that the decisive victory has already been won. Jesus says so, Paul says so, the Bible says so. Jesus defeated evil at the cross. Jesus said that he'd throw out Satan, the ruler of this world, and that as Jesus was lifted up (to be killed) he would attract everyone to him. Paul tells us that Jesus disarmed these powers of evil and made a spectacle of them at the cross.

This is the ultimate upside-down victory of Jesus. The cross was designed to symbolize getting crushed by Rome. It was so awful that people wouldn't talk about the cross or crucifixion in polite company. Rome and the powers thought they'd won when Jesus was killed, but God turned the tables completely around. Instead of the cross symbolizing the end of Jesus' troublemaking, it became the worldwide symbol of self-sacrificial love. It is the constant reminder that non-violence and love can actually change everything.

Empires love to call their brutality peacekeeping. The Romans were happy to "keep the peace" by bringing in the army. The musical Hamilton illustrates how heavy-handed empires can be. I love whenever the ridiculous King George of England comes on stage. He walks out and sings a little love song to the colonies—"you'll be back, wait and see. You'll remember that you belong to me. And when push comes to shove, I'll send a fully armed battalion to remind you of my love." Or in a later verse he is even more explicit-- "I will kill your friends and family to remind you of my love." That is the voice of evil--of the powers and authorities. It is our way or we send the troops come in.

In Roman times when a big threat to the empire was defeated, they would bring the losers back to Rome and parade them through the streets. The victory parade was not just celebrating the winners, it was exposing the losers to shame. The Romans would come back home and show off their captives, and then kill them. **(slide up)**

In the Forum in Rome there is a famous arch, built around 80 AD, called the Arch of Titus. This arch has become the prototype for victory arches all over the world, the Arc D'Triumph in Paris, Washington Square Arch in Manhattan, everywhere. It celebrates the Romans' defeat of the Jews and the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The emperor used this arch to brag about the great victory his father and brother had won in Jerusalem—and to make sure that any other would-be rebels got the message, don't mess with Rome! One of the

panels of carvings on the arch displays the kind of victory parade I'm talking about. **(Slide up)**. You can see the captives being driven along, with chains around their waists and being forced to carry the treasure that had been looted from their home. They are carrying a giant menorah and other treasures taken from the temple in Jerusalem.

In the ancient world there was no confusion about who the winner was and who the loser was. The winner was riding on his horse, wearing armor and receiving the adoration of the crowd. The loser was stripped bare, walking in chains, and getting tomatoes and filth thrown at him, on his way to execution. **(slide down)**

Being stripped naked and crucified was Rome's way of saying you lost. That is what the cross represented. But Paul claims that actually it wasn't Jesus who was defeated and shamed at the cross—no Jesus won! He defeated evil and made a public spectacle of the powers and authorities. "Making a public spectacle of them" describes a victory parade. The Message translates this verse like this: Jesus "stripped all the spiritual tyrants in the universe of their sham authority at the Cross and marched them naked through the streets!" The worst the powers can do to you is kill you. But what happens when death is not the end of the story? When people aren't afraid to die, they can accomplish amazing things! Jesus disarmed sin and took away death's sting by breaking open the way for us to be with God at last.

Jesus is the one holding the victory parade and showing off the defeated captives, not Rome, not the powers of darkness. Jesus' victory is not just about putting us right with God—it is not just an accounting journal—crossing our sins off a list. It isn't merely a transaction where Jesus pays off our debt. It is so much more than that! The way that Jesus cancels our sin at the cross is by defeating the evil powers that cause the problem! Sin and Death are not just bad things; they are *evil powers*. The final answer to them is the cross. The answer to the problem of evil is Jesus. We don't need anything more.

So you are probably thinking—if Jesus defeated sin and death at the cross 2000 years ago, why are things still so bad? Why is there still death, why does my loved one have cancer, why are there riots and killings and hunger? Church, we are living in time of already but not

yet. Jesus has already won the decisive victory, but all the battles aren't over yet. The new creation has begun but the old is still all around us.

How do we live in this in between time of already but not yet? By trusting Jesus. We live by faith. We have new life in Christ. That isn't something we work for or achieve; it is a *gift* from Jesus. We are no longer dead in our sin. Many people today are like the walking dead—mindlessly wandering, spreading hurt and destruction everywhere. But followers of Jesus are supposed to be different. We have been raised to new life! We are enabled to respond to God. We can live in the hope and power and purpose that Jesus gives us. We can join in Jesus' rescue mission that is transforming the kingdom of this world into the kingdom of God.

Friends—evil and pain and fear do not have the last word. Jesus is the last word. He is the beginning and the end, and he shall reign for ever and ever. Amen! Let's trust him and follow him as he calls each of us out to spread the good news of his victory and share his love.

Let's pray: Lord Jesus—thank you so much for saving us and for saving the world—for uprooting sin and death and leaving them ultimately powerless. Help us to trust you completely. Empower us to follow you, even in the dark, because you are light of the world. Make us people of your light Jesus. Amen.