



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

www.mzluth.org

November 18, 2007

3rd Sunday of Endtime: Saints Triumphant

2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Isaiah 65:17-25

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 150

Second Lesson: 2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

Gospel: Luke 20:27-38

Be Confident in the Lord

Fairly often during the summer it seems like someone will come up and ask me, "You're not going to preach in your gown today, are you? You are going to leave that off because it's too hot to wear a gown today, right?" I'm still wearing a gown, even on the hot summer days, for the same reason I wore a gown the first time I preached. The first sermon I ever preached was at St. Paul in Livonia, down around Detroit, and on that day, if I wouldn't have been wearing a gown, even though I was in a beautifully air conditioned church, the people would have been seeing just exactly how far the sweat stains were spreading under my armpits throughout the whole sermon. It wasn't that I was overheating like it is now, but it was because I was as nervous as could be.

I can remember also the first time I helped distribute the Lord's Supper in the church where I grew up. It's kind of a narrow little area between the railing and the altar, and I was still kind of a big guy then, and walking back and forth and trying to get around that pastor there got to be a challenge. I remember catching my left leg on the latch where the railing was put shut so the people can kneel in the middle and ripping a nice hole in my gray pants as I served communion the first time.

I'm not as nervous now when I preach. I'm not as nervous now when I distribute the Lord's Supper. That is probably for a couple of reasons. One is that I have done it often enough now. I know the Lord is going to help me through it, right? I have that trust that God will help me. Secondly I've learned that it's not my words or my efforts that people are going to be blessed by as such, it's God that does the work. So if I just keep presenting his Word faithfully, his Word will do its work.

But there is some truth to be said that the more that we do something, the more confidence we feel, right? Compare the first time you rode a bike and what your apprehensions were to a year or two later. We become more and more confident the more we do certain things.

On this day as we gather together, we focus on Saints Triumphant, and we focus on this incredible truth our God gives to us that those who die in the Lord are with the Lord. You and I need this reminder because it's not something that we have gone through ourselves. We have had loved ones that we have lost in the Lord, but there is still something that is a great unknown about death to us because we have not experienced it firsthand. All of our experience is going to be secondhand until the Lord takes us to heaven. So as we interact with death, we are reminded that death is a result of sin, and there are a lot of things that cause us to have questions and worries and troubles.

It's not a lot different from what the Thessalonians were experiencing when Paul wrote these words from Chapter 2 and 3 to them. There had been some teachers that came after Paul and kind of unsettled the people. The people now had a knot in their stomachs. They had uncertainty. They had worry. They had things that made them anxious. A lot like when we lose a loved one—but theirs had to deal with some teachers telling them that there is no resurrection from the dead, and that it had already taken place, and those that die in the Lord are gone forever. They were worried. They were uncertain about what the Day of the Lord was. They had been taught by Paul. They had been taught by those that Paul had left behind when he got chased out of town. But they were uncertain, and they were unsettled.

So Paul writes to them and he speaks to us about looking away from ourselves, looking away from what others are saying and looking to what God says, looking to what he says clearly and consistently in Scripture. What he tells us is to find our confidence in the Lord, not in ourselves. Find your confidence in the Lord. He is the one that chose you. He is the one that called you. And he is the one that says, "Don't worry. I will keep you strong. You keep looking to me, and I will be the one who keeps you strong even though you are incredibly unsettled at times."

When Paul points them to the things that would settle their churning stomachs about their loved ones, he stops first of all to give thanks for them. This I find fascinating. This I find encouraging. And this I think I find as a reminder for myself and probably also for you of how often we fall short of this. The Thessalonians had been a pain in his backside at various times and yet he says, "We ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by God, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth." He speaks of his love and his concern for them and his thankfulness for them even though they had been a difficulty to him.

Think of how often you and I don't do that. Someone says something that we don't agree with at a meeting and instead of viewing them as a brother in Christ who just has a different opinion, sometimes we start viewing them as the enemy. We just are not that bright since the fall into sin when you stop and think about it. We don't always see that the enemy is the devil, the world, and our flesh that is trying to trip us up. Sometimes Satan gets us convinced that it is each another, and we get focused on the wrong thing, and it drives a wedge between us, and pretty soon we don't have a voice that is pointing each other to Christ. We have a voice that is pointing fingers at each other. Sometimes we forget that we are on the same side.

That is true I think of all of us. That is a wonderful reminder from Paul. When we look at the things that unsettle us, one of the things we should do is stop and thank God for the things that are a blessing to us. Our fellow believers in Christ are a blessing to us. They are a great treasure that we should rejoice in, just like we rejoice in our own family. Rejoice in your fellow believers. Think about it—at every funeral service, don't we pray this; that God would comfort us with the gospel so that we can comfort others with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. We remind ourselves in our time of grief that we have a responsibility toward one another.

So as Paul carries out that responsibility to the Thessalonians, he points them to the comfort he himself had received from God, the comfort that God had called him. God had called the Thessalonians. God had chosen them before eternity. God had chosen him and the Thessalonians. That same truth is true of you and me.

Our confidence isn't that we chose God. Our confidence isn't that we have done enough so that we have a claim now that we can lay before God that he loves us or he has to take care of us. Our confidence when a loved one dies isn't that our loved one was a good person, although they well might have been. Our confidence is that God knew them and chose them from all eternity, from before the world began. Before anyone could say "back in my day," God had already in his day chosen us to be his own. That is a glorious truth. That is an incredible comfort when we become unsettled.

Then he called us through the gospel. He reached out and touched our hearts, the hearts of other believers, the hearts of the saints that are in heaven, the hearts of the saints who are still on earth. He touched them with the gospel message, whether it was through the Word and the water or whether it was through the Word that was spoken to us; he touched our hearts with a message of "Yes, you are sinners. Yes you should go to hell. Yes, you don't treasure all the blessings that I have given you, but I still loved you, and I sent Christ, and he was perfect in your place. He loved his brothers perfectly in your place. He took all of your sins to the cross. He took them away." What he has done for the world became yours personally.

God called us. God chose us. And he called and chose the saints who are in heaven also. That is an incredibly comforting truth. This side of heaven, our abilities ebb and flow, there is a back and forth, we are up, we are down, but God who called us from all eternity is constant. His love is certain. His forgiveness is accomplished. His faith is a gift.

That's why we can take Paul's words to heart when he says that God is the one that will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one. God will direct our hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance, and that keeps us strong to the end. As we are getting closer to that time when God calls us out of this world, even when our abilities are no longer there, even when we can't form a sound with our lips, God keeps us strong. God keeps us in the faith. The Spirit intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. That is how God keeps us strong and gives us that eternal encouragement that God gives us that encourages our hearts and strengthens us in every good deed and word as Paul says.

You know how some days you wake up and you've had a good night of sleep, and you've been eating well, and you wake up full of energy and vigor, and you think you can take on the world? There are other days when you get out of bed after tossing and turning all night because you have the worries of the world in your mind and you think, "I hope I can endure the day let alone take it on." We are that way, aren't we? Our confidence on our own is up and it's down, depending on our emotions, depending upon how much sleep we get, depending on how we are feeling, depending on whether or not we get enough sunlight at times. We are up and down and all over the place, so if our

confidence is only going to be in ourselves or in our loved ones, it is going to also be all over the place. But when our confidence is in God, and when we trust that he strengthens us, our confidence can always be strong and it can be firm.

What do you do when your body tells you that you are tired? You sleep, right? If your Spirit is telling you that you are worried, you are anxious, you are weak, you are uncertain, then get some rest for your Spirit. Go to the Word. Go to the Sacraments. Have God strengthen you through the teachings that were passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter as Paul said, find in God that strength that assures you that those who die in the Lord are with the Lord. They rest from their labors and there is no more suffering or no more sorrow or no more tears. Go to those places in Scriptures and read them again and again. Let them wash over you and comfort you and strengthen you. God had already died to strengthen you, and he still desperately wants to strengthen you.

So spend time with the Word and the Sacraments and that confidence will always be there for you. As Paul said, "When we are weak and we flee to the Lord, then we are strong." God's love for us is a certainty. The strength he gives us through that love is a certainty. Make use of it!