

## THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

Isaiah 42:10-16

*Victory?*

Victory. What does that word make you think of? Superbowls, parades, fireworks, riches, muscle and adrenaline? Victory. Look around you. Do you see victory here? Look in the pews. Many of them are empty. Are we gathered today with our country's richest and most influential people? Are we all finely adorned? Does the world see us as the cream of the crop? Look at your preacher. Certainly handsome, athletic, witty, with one good foot, but nothing to write home about. Victory?

Why don't we see an abundance of victory among us? Our eyes are in the wrong place. The Christian's victory hangs on the cross. We are victors by association. We are crowned with the triumph of another, of our Substitute, of Jesus Christ.

Israel was at an all-time low when Isaiah spoke. The Northern Kingdom had been conquered. The Southern Kingdom was teetering. The Church was crumbling. There was little reason to hope. Yet Isaiah spoke of victory. But how? There was no hint of victory in the daily headlines. There was no hint of victory in the word on the street. But God spoke to these people who appeared by all accounts to be losers and spoke of victory to come. He was going to conquer their enemies. They were not going to conquer their enemies. He was. But God would not act spontaneously. He was patient, giving His foes plenty of time to see their error and repent. *"For a long time I have held my peace; I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor; I will gasp and pant."* Those of you who've ever waited for a or had your mother tell you for how many hours she was in labor with you know what He means. It seems like forever, like the baby's never coming, but then, all of a sudden, it is time and everything moves more quickly than you can process it.

When it was time to act, He acted. *"The LORD goes out like a mighty man, like a man of war he stirs up his zeal; he cries out, he shouts aloud, he shows himself mighty against his foes."* In World War II, the Allies wanted to gain a foothold on the European continent at Normandy. Eisenhower gathered all the resources at his disposal, and then did what led many at the time to criticize him. He waited. And then he waited some more. He waited until he was sure the conditions were right. It seemed like the attack would never take place, but then threw every troop and weapon he had into the battle. Wave after wave of battalions charged the beach and they eventually overcame the Germans, securing complete and total victory, all because Ike waited for just the right time.

God did the same thing. He sent his Son at the perfect time, when the conditions were right, and He will send Him again at the perfect time to gather His elect and to judge those who would not have His mercy. And when God acts, God wins. God succeeds. God never fails. The fight is easy to call. There is no need for judges. It is a knockout, cut and dry. Isaiah writes, *"I will lay waste mountains and hills, and dry up all their vegetation; I will turn the rivers into islands, and dry up the pools."* When the LORD fights for His people, He conquers completely. He delivered the Israelites from Babylon, just as Isaiah promised. He's delivered us from sin, just as Isaiah promised.

An outsider looks at the Church and sees anything but victory. He or she sees earthly weakness, poverty and sickness, oftentimes intrigue and scandal, perhaps a failure to separate ourselves from sexual immorality. He or she hears slanderous words, or notices poor stewardship, doubt in times of testing, maybe a lack of zeal for our mission. All too often, he or she even sees us looking for earthly victory rather than standing securely in what the Lord has won, valuing attendance or budget numbers more highly than

faithfulness. And sometimes such observers realize much better than we do that we've taken our eyes off the prize.

This is not a new problem. The Church has fallen into this trap throughout history. Crusades, indulgences, attempts to have the government force people to be Christians, persecution in the place of patient preaching. These are not new phenomena. Our sinful nature longs for earthly victory and immediate results. But that is not what God promises us. He promises suffering tempered with joy, a cross to put to death our old Adam.

No, there's no victory in this dirty heap of sinners. Victory stands in the murky waters of the Jordan. Yes, the church may be full of hypocrites, but it is not built on one. It is built on this Substitute who receives our Baptism that hypocrites might find healing. And so where would we have hypocrites gather, but around Him? I don't know who said it, but someone once said, "There are three kinds of hypocrites: those who admit it, those who don't, and those whose standards are too low." The sick man who refuses to go to the hospital because sick people are there dies. How foolish it would be, then, for the stubborn man to condemn the man who acknowledges his sickness and looks for the remedy. We come here to be molded and bronzed in God's grace as His trophies, not merely polished. This is right where the nicked and dented belong. All of us, the pastor included, which is why I stand with you for the confession of sins and only step up for the Absolution, when I speak for God and not myself. The statue of our Lord on the altar reminds me of this, because His hands extended in blessing rest over my head as I extend His blessing that rests in His worthiness to you.

*"I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground."* If I blindfolded and kidnapped you, drove you to a new and strange place, waited until it was the middle of the night and pitch black, and then took off your blindfold, you'd be lost and clueless. You would stumble and fall. But one who knew the way could lead you through the darkness and to safety as an experienced guide. Who better to lead us from the cradle to the grave to heaven than He who in mercy has trod the same path? *"I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know,"* He says, *"in paths that they have not known I will guide them."*

Left to ourselves, we know only the wide road, the easy road, the road that feeds the passions but leads to hell. Too often still today, we find ourselves returning to it. Isaiah says of us in chapter 59, *"Like the blind we grope along the wall, feeling our way like men without eyes."* By conscience, nature, and reason, we can recognize that there is a God, but we cannot find Him, know His name, serve Him, or know His will. The blind must be taken by the hand, and that is what Christ does in the Jordan. He guides us out of the muck of sin and into the muddy waters of Baptism that, following Him, we might come before His Father as a dear son or daughter, not by our own works, but by His soggy Son's ministry, which today He declares so pleasing to Him.

*"These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them."* He has forsaken His only-begotten Son so He would never have to forsake you. Appearances can be deceiving. What could look less victorious than Christ's cross, but where else can such a victory be found? The world may see declining attendance, financial problems, sickness, poverty, a lost child of sorts, but God sees victory in you, because His Son is in you through faith. God sees us as His trophies. And trophies aren't hidden in the closet; they're set out to be seen. Live as the trophies you are, that in your love others may find the love of your Savior.

Everything becomes clearer in the muddy waters of our Lord's Baptism, and what is clearest of all is that Christ loves us enough to step into our chaos and have it heaped on His head, that we, in turn, might be made clean. You are victors, because He is the Victor, and you are His and He is yours. Let this life be our victory lap, and let us carry Him who has won our crown as we go, that all might know in whom our victory is found, that all might share in His reward. Amen.