25 July 2021 Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
St. James the Elder, Apostle Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

"Glory Through the Lens of the Cross"
Text: Acts 11:27-12:5; Mark 10:35-45; Romans 8:28-39

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Herod is at it again. Two weeks ago, we heard how his sword came down on the neck of John the Baptist. Today it is James who feels the cold steel. The first pleased his niece; the second the Jews. So he arrests Peter, too, and will deal with him after the festival is over. Give the Jews more of what they want. Herod was a people-pleaser.

But Herod's sword is a two-edged sword. On one edge might be the blood of John and Jamesbut the on the other is his own. Beheading John pleased his niece, but deprived him of the one he heard gladly (Mark 6:20). And the church (as we heard) was actually sending famine relief to his people! Why kill the ones who were helping him? But so it is with sin. Sin isn't rational. Sin isn't logical. Sin can't be satisfied. It always wants more. More of you, until it has <u>all</u> of you.

That's why sin is so dangerous. You can't say: I'll just keep this little sin, this little vice. It's not a big one! Just over here, in this little corner of my life. Way over here. No one will know. It won't hurt anyone. It's fun. It feels good. It satisfies. *I can handle it*. But sin is not so easily tamed. It won't stay where you want it to stay. Even a little leaven leavens the whole lump. Cain's jealousy grew into murder. David's lust did the same. And so too with Herod. His lust for his niece, and his lust for power.

So when James and his brother John came up to Jesus that day, asking for, praying for, dare we say *lusting* for, those places of honor beside Jesus, at His right hand and at His left hand, **this is not good**. They ***don't know what they are asking***. They don't know or see the sin at work in them, eating away at them, leading them down the wrong path. Greatness in the kingdom of God is not like worldly greatness. Power in the kingdom of God does not look like worldly power. It is, in fact, quite the opposite. ***Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all***. <u>That</u> is the Jesus way. The way of the cross.

And lest we exalt ourselves over James and John and exalt ourselves over the other ten apostles who got indignant at them, realize how we struggle with this, too. How we, too, struggle with the way of the cross.

Take, for example, the first verse we heard in the Epistle today: ***We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*** We hear such a verse and what do we think? My life will be good, as a Christian. Which is true. 100%. That's what it says. But *what* good? What *kind* of good? And *whose* good? Yours, or God's? And make no mistake about it, those are *often*, maybe even *mostly*, quite different.

For what is good to you? A job that pays well. A life that maybe has *some* struggles, but not too many. Things mostly go according to your plan, how you think things should be. You get into the right schools, you have good friends, joys are many and tears are few. You might get sick but not *too* sick - at least, nothing that can't be cured. Others think and speak well of you, your children don't rebel too much, Jesus answers all your prayers with *yes, right away!*, and life, in general, is pretty enjoyable. How am I doing? Pretty close?

But what is good for God? For God, good is how creation was before sin. Good is a world not with manageable sin, or not too much sin, but *without* sin. And so it is that good that ***God is working all things together for - for those who love God, for those who are called according to His purpose***.

So how does a God do that? How does He take a world completely and totally plunged into and infected by sin, and make it that kind of good again? How do you reform such a world? How do you wash such a world clean? You can't. If so, you would expect that after the flood, things would have been good again, right? The whole world was washed! All those evildoers drowned and wiped out, and only righteous and believing Noah and his family left. And yet sin was still there and quickly showed its ugly face. It's a good lesson for us. The problem in this world isn't *other* people. It's me. It's my sin. Even if you were the only person left in the world, the world would still be filled with sinners.

There's only one way to deal with sin: to die. Kill it and bury it. You must die and be born again. Not in a reincarnation sense of try and try again; try harder and keep climbing until you get it right, until you reach your goal. That's not God working good but you working good. That's you trying to conquer your sin. And a lot of people try that. Some really hard and really sincerely. But it doesn't work. You need God's way - the way of the cross. To die with Christ, to die in Christ, to be raised with Christ, raised in Christ, to a **new** and **good** life.

That's why when James and John make their bold and bodacious request to Jesus, He answers them as He does. **He gives them the cross**. ***Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?*** That's cross talk. They say yes, ***we are able***. And they will. Not as punishment, but **for God to give them what they want!** To glorify them with His glory. To work His good in them. To make them His kind of good. The cross, then, is God's gift to us.

So not just Jesus' cross is a gift - so are the crosses given to you. If we don't see them as good, it is because of the sin in us that wants our own idea of what is good, not God's good. When we think that these crosses aren't giving us what we want, but, in fact, just the opposite! Saint Augustine once noticed that, too, and remarked that people want every good except to BE good (City of God)!

But that's really the only good that matters to Jesus and what He wants for you. He wants to give you good things, yes! But even more, to give you good *life*. A new life. A new and good and eternal life. And so His cross has transformed the cross. It is no longer merely a Roman instrument of torture and death, but the way of Christ to that life He has for you and wants for you. So yes, James and John, ***the cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized***. You will have the cross in your lives, too. That you may live and be exalted and good.

And then Jesus gives them the punchline: ***For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*** That's why Jesus is here. That is His glory. To lay down His life for the life of the world. You want to be on His right and left *there*, James and John? While Jesus is on the cross? *Well . . . that's not . . . what we meant . . . what we were talking about . . . !* But those places had been prepared for others. In fact, James and John would receive much more than that; much more than they asked for.

As will you. For you will receive a far greater good and a far greater glory than just the good things and glory of this world and life, but the good and glory of a new life in the new creation. For you have been baptized with Jesus' baptism, baptized into His death and resurrection, that the old sinner in you been drowned and die, and you rise to live a new and good life. The cup that Jesus drank He has now filled with His blood for you to drink, for the forgiveness of *all* your sins. That where you go, Jesus goes; and where Jesus goes, you go. For, as Paul said to us today, ***nothing is able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.*** Nothing. Not ***tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword***. Not even Herod's bloodthirsty sword. Not ***angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation***. For you are in Christ and Christ is in you.

So while James and his brother John did experience all that - ***tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger*** - and for James, the ***sword*** - through such things God builds His Church and brings His people to glory. *Wait. What?* It's true. Through ***tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and sword*** God is working good, building His church. John the Baptist was arrested, jailed, and killed and the church grew. James was killed and the church grew. Ten of the other twelve apostles were persecuted and killed and the church grew. These things cannot destroy the church.

If it was a church *built by men*, then yes, it would. Kill the men and kill the church. But if the church is not built by men at all, but by God, if it is His church and not ours, then He'll take care of it. He'll see to it. He'll see to it that there are places of honor for His children; for you.

And so Jesus doesn't chastise James and John, He teaches them - and us - to think differently. And to think through the lens of the cross. That glory and honor come in no other way than through the forgiveness of sins, through death and resurrection with Christ. And in this world, *that don't look like much!* It might even get you hated and killed. Just ask Abel, Uriah, John, or James. But as Jesus said, *Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.* **Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven,** *for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you* (Matthew 5:11-12). *That's* Jesus' way to glory.

That's the glory now here at the altar. We'll sing of it in a moment. *Holy, holy, holy, Lord, God of sabaoth adored; Heaven and earth with full acclaim shout the . . . glory of Your name* (Sanctus). Not just heaven is full of His glory, but the earth, too. Look around. Do you see it? James and John didn't. Not yet. They were looking for something else. What are you looking for? What are you asking for? What are you expecting? Here in **water** and **words** and **bread and wine** is the glory of the God - *is God Himself!* The glory of a God who comes to serve you. The glory of a God who comes to die for you. Here is the glory of the God who loves sinners like you and me. Here is the glory of the forgiveness of sins. Here is the glory God's goodness, making everything new and good again. Even you. That when Jesus comes again in glory, a new **you** live a new and eternal **life** in a new **creation**.

The world will always have its Herods. Don't worry about them. They'll do what they do. But as a child of God, you will always have a Saviour greater than all the world's kings and Herods combined. The King of kings, in fact. That's who you have. And you have been baptized with His baptism. You drink from His cup. Your sins are forgiven. And so this too: You will be with Him . . . in Paradise.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.