

THIS IS THE FEAST OF VICTORY

In a loud voice they were saying: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise! Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!"

Then a voice came from the throne, saying "Praise our God, all you His servants, you who fear Him, both great and small! Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him glory. For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and His bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear." (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God's holy people.) Then the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!" And he added, "These are the true words of God." Revelation 5:12-13, 19:5-9

This is a day we have been waiting for. Seven weeks ago we closed our services by singing this phrase:

*Alleluia cannot always
Be our song while here below
Alleluia, our transgressions
Make us for a while forgo;
For the solemn time is coming
When our tears for sin must flow.*

That was right before Ash Wednesday, when Lent began. But now we can let loose. Easter is here! We can sing our Alleluia's for Jesus is risen! We can sing today again, "*This is the feast of victory for our God.*"

But do we really feel like celebrating? When you are on top of a hill, it is easy to go down. But when you are on the bottom, it is a lot harder to go up. In some respects Lent was supposed to be subdued as we think about our sins. But this would also build up our excitement so that on Easter we can really let it go like going down from the peak. Yet, we only coast downhill for so long. Then it is the bottom going up. (The only exception to that is when grandparents describe walking to school. Then it was uphill both ways.) But there is so much more in our lives than what happens at church. Only four more weeks of classes are left at the university and you are probably way low when it comes to having the energy to get everything done. Or you are that way because of the loss of a job or not getting the job you wanted or because of illness or age or because the exhaustion of taking care of little children

or the worry over those children who are now teens. When a person drowns, he comes up three times. Each time he only has so much air to breathe in. Twice that air gives him the buoyancy to come up. But the third time there is too little air. He drowns. Are we like that, with just too little of whatever to really celebrate?

Even if we are not today out of energy, as we go down from the top we end up at the bottom. We may feel joy today on Easter, but before we know it can be the dog days of summer, then the killing frost of fall, and then the dreariness of winter. We may spend the first 15-20 years of our lives growing, but then it is downhill as we age and get nearer to death. "This is the feast of victory for our God," may be great for now. But what will happen later?

Listen to what we sing in "*This Is the Feast.*"

*This is the feast of victory for our God
Worthy is Christ, the Lamb, who was slain,
Whose blood set us free to be people of God.
For the Lamb who was slain has begun His reign.*

This is song of celebration, but it talks about a Lamb who was slain and how His blood set us free. This is referring to the bloody sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Celebrations aren't supposed to be for the messes in our lives. We don't celebrate deaths. We don't celebrate injustice. We don't celebrate weakness. Well we might if there was something wrong with us like a terrorist sighing with joy over the body of a victim or a swindler relishing how he got by with a scam. But we don't celebrate when we lose a job or

fail a test or get sick. Why would we celebrate the unjust, cruel, horrible, bloody death of Jesus?

Because that is how God saves us. So many of the things we celebrate involve a break—like Christmas, summer vacation, or the recent spring break. But they are just that—a break, not our normal life. And if we talk about a celebration as just a time to be happy, that is nice, but it won't last. Like the object going from top to bottom, there is only so much of it going down. Then we are back in the “real” life—going to classes, completing reports, checking with the doctor, paying bills, and changing diapers. Yet Easter is not just a break, a time to feel happy. Easter is “the feast of victory for the Lamb who was slain has freed us by His blood.”

Ernest Hemingway said that in a real story the hero dies. It did in the story of Jesus. Jesus died on the cross with our sins. We use the word “atonement” to describe what He did. In the Old Testament God required sacrifices. The blood of a lamb was poured over the Ark of the Covenant. In the Ark was the Ten Commandments, God's law which shows us our guilt. But the blood “covered” so God could not see the law accusing us of sin. The word “atonement” means “covering,” what Jews still observe in their “Yom Kippur” --day of atonement (covering)—each year. The sins were covered. But that was only an “object lesson” to show us what God would really do for us. His own Son would be sacrificed on the cross. His blood would cover our sins. That is real, as real as the blood that runs through our veins.

*This is the feast of victory for our God.
Power, riches, wisdom, and strength,
And honor, blessing, and glory are His.
Blessing, honor, glory, and might
Be to God and the Lamb forever. Amen.*

Those words come from the book of Revelation where the heavenly host is pictured singing praise to God. In Revelation, John the disciple of Jesus, sees a vision of what is to be. But in seeing it, he also sees what is. We won't experience the complete view of what John glimpsed until that last day when Jesus raises us from the dead. But it is not just a matter of the future. God brings the heavenly celebration, which is eternal, to our reality today. Easter is not just a celebration that we too will rise from the dead as Jesus did. Easter is that we have new life now. Our celebration today is not simply a break to be happy for a day. It is that we are connected to the

heavenly celebration now, a celebration that has no ending, no getting “to the bottom” when we have to start again.

“This is the feast of victory.” We used to sing after the offering these words:

*Let the vineyards be fruitful Lord,
And fill to the brim our cup of blessing.
Gather the harvest from the seeds that were sown,
That we may be fed with the bread of life.
Gather the hopes and dreams of all;
Unite them with the prayers we offer now.
Grace our table with Your presence, and give us
A foretaste of the feast to come.*

“A foretaste of the feast to come.” This is what we sing as we prepare to celebrate Holy Communion. We join in the feast that Jesus prepares for us of His body and blood. In communion we right now are participating in the celebrating that is going on before God in heaven. Easter means that the future glories we will share in heaven are now projected into our time and space now. Yes, Easter assures of that future, but in God's great love He moves that into our lives right here and now.

You get in an accident. Your insurance only covers liability. You can't afford a new car which you need to get to work. But your dad covers the cost for a new car. It is paid in full.

That is what Easter means to us. Easter is the receipt we get which says everything has been paid in full by Jesus. It is not just a nice thought; it is the real fact because Jesus rose from His complete death on the cross and the shedding of His blood to pay the price for us.

*This is the feast of victory for our God
Worthy is Christ, the Lamb, who was slain,
Whose blood set us free to be people of God.*

Sermon delivered by Pastor Mark T. Heilman
April 1, 2018
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Ames, Iowa 50014