

Old Testament Lesson—Psalm 22:1-5, 23-31 (Art Cox)

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel! For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him. From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him. The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord. May your hearts live forever! All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations. To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him. Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.

New Testament Lesson—1 Corinthians 15:54-58 (Clois Engelkes)

*When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. **But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.** Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.*

“Just do it.”

Do you recall that famous, trademarked slogan? Do you remember where it comes from—to whom it belongs?

“Just do it” is, of course, the longtime slogan of Nike—the worldwide giant of athletic shoes and clothing and equipment.

The company’s been around since the mid-1960’s—growing into one of the largest and most recognizable multinational corporations on the planet—a true success story.

But have you ever wondered to what (exactly) “Just do it” is referring? Just do...what? Just...run? Just...play? Just...compete? Just...try? Just do...what?

I think, perhaps, the answer to that question can be found in the history of Nike. And I’m talking long before the mid-1960’s.

You see, in Greek mythology, Nike is the goddess of victory. Images of her can often be seen accompanying legendary athletes or ancient scenes of sport—the Olympics of course.

Given the corporation’s mythological origins then, it stands to reason that the blank we’re trying to fill—Just do...what—might be rooted in the idea of victory...

Just be victorious. Just succeed. Just...win. Just do it: win.

Our modern-day society, particularly in the United States, tends to elevate and exalt success and “winning” to the point where they become idols. “Winning” and “being right” seem to blend together these days—both opportunities to lord our supposed superiority over others. We crave those moments when we can revel in our opponent or rival’s misfortune and defeat.

And once we’ve beaten them, we immediately steer our energies and efforts toward keeping them down—below us—beneath us—in their place.

We quickly turn our attention to next season’s championship, to overturning that coming legal appeal, to strategizing our re-election campaign.

“Nike” is the Greek word for victory—found three times in our New Testament lesson this morning from 1 Corinthians.

The Apostle Paul, writing to the church in Corinth, sounds exceedingly confident in Christ’s victory over sin and death.

In fact, Paul sounds *more* than confident. He’s downright cocky—filled to the brim with bluster, even.

"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

It’s almost like Paul is taunting death itself. This is Paul talking trash...

“Whatcha got Death, huh? Not too scary now, are you? Let’s go: Gimme your best shot! Oh, looks like somebody lost their sting—oh, that’s too bad—did somebody misplace their sickle? How embarrassing! U-G-L-Y, you ain’t got no alibi, you ugly! Yeah, yeah, you ugly!”

You see, Paul makes frequent use of sports imagery and athletic metaphors throughout his letters. Surely then, he’s witnessed the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat, along with a competitor’s arrogance or dangerous overconfidence.

But he is most certainly “all in” when it comes to Christ the Victor—Christ, the conqueror of sin and death and hopelessness. Indeed, there is no such thing as being “too confident” or too zealous in Jesus’ resurrection from the dead and what it means for those who believe.

And yet, it’s important to point out that Paul is writing with the advantage and clarity of hindsight. He is several decades removed from Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Those like Paul, with time on their side looking back, can see the victory this has become for Christ and, in turn, those who believe in him.

But remember, Paul was a *persecutor* of the Church when Jesus was crucified. And for at least three days after that fateful Friday, Jesus’ death felt like the opposite of victory for those who loved him.

For the disciples, knowing Jesus had breathed his last was a gut-wrenching, tragic defeat—a disappointing letdown solidifying Rome’s oppressive stranglehold on the Jewish people.

This was clearly not the messiah they expected—the one who would come to restore the kingdom of David and overthrow their Roman overlords. This was not the new Moses come to free God’s people from Caesar, the new Pharaoh.

If Jesus *were* that person, his life wouldn’t have ended in such pathetic misery—gone the way of a common criminal—one among three in fact.

Yes, in a previous life of Paul’s, before his conversion, that cross was his and Rome’s victory over the blasphemer from Nazareth—undeniable evidence that the God of Israel was never on that troublemaker preacher’s side—proof that Paul’s campaign of terror against Christians was justified.

Indeed, that cross standing between two others seemed to suggest that the religious movement launched by the man hanging lifeless upon it was a failed movement—an unsuccessful revolution—a lost cause.

I mean: Don't conquerors conquer? Aren't victors supposed to be victorious? Winners win, right? They aren't mocked, laughed at, and hung up to dry between two nameless thieves.

Yes, even by today's standards, certain individuals might argue Jesus was...a loser. One might say, "He was weak." He's a disgrace—not fit to rule—not strong enough. For crying out loud, what kind of "messiah" dies before their first battle's even begun?

Even Jesus' own words from the cross, perhaps, can prop up such a viewpoint. Echoing the psalmist's lament, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" we see Jesus' full humanity clear as day—a dying man who's frightened and in pain—abandoned by his friends and by the God he serves.

"Seriously, *this guy's* the messiah? *He's* the one we've been waiting for? *This* is your conquering hero? Give me a break! Riddle me this: Why on earth would the God of *Israel* forsake the supposed messiah *of Israel* during his greatest time of need? It makes no sense!"

At least, it *wouldn't* make sense if that's where our story ended. We know the story does not end there. We know Jesus rises from the grave. We, with the benefit of two millennia's hindsight, know the Resurrection became the greatest success story ever told—the biggest comeback in history—a rallying cry for the Church then and now.

Paul, with the benefit of decades of hindsight, knew the victory of Christ's resurrection, that all is in vain if Christ has not been raised—but knew also that that message took time to proliferate the world—took time to get out.

It took a lot of hard work—preaching and persuasion and mission to open the ears of so many. It took, according to Paul, the risen Christ appearing to more than five hundred people before the best news ever given began to take root and spread.

Yes, my friends, our Lord's public disgrace of a death wouldn't make sense if the psalmist stopped at "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

We, with the breadth of Scripture at our disposal, know the psalm goes on. Jesus knew the psalm went on too. Jesus knew the psalm ended with the confidence that God hears our cries. Jesus knew the psalm ended with an abiding hope in God's grace extending to countless future generations—those already passed on and those yet to come joining hands to worship the Lord.

Jesus knew the psalm gave voice to the hopeless and restless while also holding on to the belief that God will overcome our hopelessness and restlessness—that God is our champion—that God is victorious over suffering and death—giving a nod, even, to eternal life.

May your hearts live forever...and I shall live for him, says the psalmist.

Christ utters those famous last words from the cross—those we know so well because he knew the psalm so well—words that express the authentic dread and despair of a flesh and blood human being, yes, but words that also express Christ's fundamental hope in God's promise to redeem him from the Pit of despair and fulfill his most glorious purpose.

Yes, perhaps our Savior's ignominious death wouldn't make much sense if he had went about his earthly life preaching about the importance of winning and being right and lording one's status and wealth and fame and achievements and conquests over one's enemies.

Yes, then perhaps I might understand why many at the time and some long after the fact viewed Jesus' death by crucifixion as shameful and disqualifying for any would-be messiah.

But Jesus *didn't* value those things, did he? Jesus didn't speak like a wannabe famous person seeking glory. Jesus never preached any of that stuff.

Instead, Jesus preached about the importance of *losing*. Jesus spoke about the honor of coming in *last* place. He preached about losing one's life in order to save it—including laying down his own life willingly.

Jesus taught that the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. His message was about sacrifice and humility—about loving and praying for one's enemies—not even stopping short of welcoming them at your dinner table.

Siblings in Christ: There's no question about whether Jesus will “just do it.”

He's done it. It's done. It is finished.

Sin and Death *have* been swallowed up in victory. And through our faith in Christ we, too, can lay claim to that victory.

Now, it's true—we still feel the sting of Death on this side of glory. As long as we see in a mirror dimly, grief isn't going away. But that sting isn't meant to last—not forever. It, too, shall pass—along with the tears our God will surely wipe away—tears our Lord has promised to wipe away with God's gentle, yet victorious right hand.

In his letter to Rome, Paul again uses the Greek word “nike”—that word for “victory”—a passage we'll explore later in this sermon series. Predictably, Paul uses it during another moment of great confidence in God's boundless love.

After offering a list of things that may make us feel separated from God, he asks whether those things ultimately separate us from God's love. Paul's response is swift: *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Christ who loved us.*

But that word rendered as “conquerors” comes from “nike,” which is why I'd like to offer an alternative translation: *“No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ who loved us.”*

My God, my God...Isn't that the greatest news?

To the victor goes the spoils. And my friends: Our unearned and undeserved spoils are an ocean of grace and the steadfast love and mercy of the living God whose Son died for us.

Thanks be to God who will never leave us nor forsake us—who is closer than the air we breathe—especially during our most fearful and painful moments—who gives us the victory—the overwhelming victory—through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.