

Making Saints

In the name of Him in whom we have become children of the heavenly Father, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: It was exactly fifty years and one month ago when the Soviet Union stunned the western world – and especially the United States – by launching into orbit the world's first artificial satellite, an unmanned spacecraft they called *Sputnik*. There wasn't much to it. It was only about the size of a beach ball and contained little more than a radio transmitter that sent out a single repeating signal, so they could keep track of it by radar. Nevertheless, it sent the US into a near panic. First because the Russians had something up there passing over our heads every ninety-six point two minutes (maybe even spying on us) and there wasn't anything we could do about it; and secondly, because they had the technology to do it and we didn't. We suddenly woke up to the fact that the space race had already begun, and we had slept through the starting gun. It was time to play catch up.

So we put some of our best minds and bravest jet pilots into the newly created space program. And something to remember is that back then space flight was a great unknown. What's fairly routine to us now was then a dangerous and deadly business. But what many people don't know is that in those early days of the space program, there was a point when all of the astronauts threatened to walk out of the project. Why? It was because the initial design for the first manned space capsule didn't have a window. The engineers who designed it said it would only weaken the structural integrity of the capsule; and besides, it wasn't necessary since there weren't any flight controls in the craft itself. Everything was to be controlled from the ground. So the astronaut didn't need to see where he was going because there was nothing he could do to change directions even if he wanted to. The question for the NASA engineers wasn't "Can a man fly a spacecraft?" It was "Can we put a guy up there into orbit and bring him back alive?" As far as they were concerned, the astronaut was more cargo than pilot.

And the engineers were *technically* correct. What they failed to understand was a basic need of human nature. These astronauts were originally test pilots. They had made careers of putting their wits and skill to work to tame experimental aircraft, some of which were little more than jet engines with wings and a seat. They were risk takers. They were the ones who challenged of the limits of applied physics. They weren't about to become mere cargo. There *had* to be a window. They had to be able to see where they were going even if they couldn't do anything about it.

What the NASA engineers discovered about humans is something our gracious God has known all along. We need to be able to see where we are going – even if we can't do anything about it. And that's what today's Scripture readings are all about. If the Lord doesn't come back first, we are all going to die one day. And there's not a thing we can do about it. But in today's readings, especially the one from Revelation, God has given us a window to see where we are going when we leave this earth.

But before we get there, I'd like to take a look back at the earth we are going to leave behind. Most of you are probably familiar with Mark Twain's classic work *Tom Sawyer*. I'd like to refresh your memory about one episode in particular. It happens after Tom and his friend, Huckleberry Finn, are believed to have been drowned in the Mississippi River and lost. The good people of Hannibal, Missouri gather at the church to hold a memorial service and pay their final respects. Of course, Tom and Huck aren't really dead. They're hiding in the church attic, and from their elevated perch they get to attend their own funeral. They get to hear how they will be remembered. And what makes it so funny is how surprised these two borderline delinquents are to hear that people remember them as little saints and angels.

There's something about that part of the story that appeals to us. Sure, we want to see where we're going, but for many it's even more important to know how people will think of us when we're gone. We want to be remembered. We tend to measure the success or failure of a human life in terms of its lasting legacy. And I suspect that most of here would like to know *how* we are going to be remembered and by whom.

So, let's imagine that for a moment. Go with me to your own funeral. Station yourself next to your open casket and listen to what people are saying. What do you imagine they might say? Better yet, what would you *like* to hear them say? What a wonderful parent or grandparent you were? A real blessing as a son or daughter? Such a special, helpful person? Devoted and loving spouse? The best and noblest of friends? I remember hearing a comedian say that if he could listen to what people were saying at his funeral, he what he'd really want to hear is someone say, "Hey everybody! Look! He's moving! He's not dead; he's alive!"

Of course, a lot of what people say at funerals is exaggerated. Shakespeare wrote, "*The evil that men do lives after them, the good is oft interred with their bones*", but I haven't noticed. Seems instead that we want to downplay all the negative things we remember about the deceased and heap praises on them instead. If you really could listen to how you would be remembered, my guess is that you would be pretty uncomfortable with a lot of what you would hear. "*Such a wonderful person.*" "*Why is it always the good ones who are taken away?*" "*I guess God couldn't wait any longer to have you home.*" On and on it would go, but before long you would realize that they were stretching the truth well beyond the frontiers of reality, or they didn't know you at all. You would find, especially knowing that you were about to face the final judgment, that your own memories of your life would be far different than everyone else's. But this is how the world makes saints: by remembering people better than they were.

And as you stood there listening, sooner or later some well-intentioned but misguided comforter would say the often-repeated phrase, "*As long as we remember him in our hearts, he isn't really gone.*" Which, of course, is perfect nonsense. Because at that point, you really are gone; and even if it were true that you could live on in people's memories, what would that give you? At best, just another few decades of what started as overly kind opinions of your goodness, slowly fading out of existence as people who said they'd always remember you became susceptible to the forgetfulness of age and then died out themselves. No, as much as we would like to be fondly remembered, I think the comedian had it right. Rather than be remembered, he wanted to be *alive*. His trouble, however, was the only life he could think of was the one he's going to have to leave behind. He wasn't looking through the window.

People from outside the Lutheran Church very often don't have much appreciation for the way we do funerals. They are often surprised to discover that, as a general rule, we don't spend any time eulogizing the dead. We don't recount their great and noble deeds. Even today, All Saint's Day, we don't focus on the sensational achievements of the great heroes of faith. We don't remember how good they were. Instead we look through the window God has given us. What we focus on is the fact that they are *alive*. Their existence has nothing to do with how we remember them.

Who we remember at a funeral and whose deeds we talk about, is the blessed Pioneer and Architect of our faith who made them alive. We talk about the One who became poor in spirit to attain for us the kingdom of heaven. We talk about Him who meekly sojourned among us, humbling himself and becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross in order to redeem our fallen world. We talk about the One who hungered and thirsted to fill us with his righteousness. We talk about the merciful One whose mercy we receive. We talk about the One with the pure heart in whom we see God. We talk about Jesus Christ, God's Son, who is the Peacemaker, and we celebrate the peace he established for us with his Father. We talk about Jesus, the One who was reviled and persecuted and falsely accused to earn for us the great reward in heaven. And if we talk at all about the achievements of the redeemed saint who died, we do it recognizing that whatever good they accomplished was worked through them by the grace and power of Jesus' Spirit. In the vision we are given today of the saints in glory, they're not slapping each other on the back and doing high fives in a self-congratulating sort of way. They're attributing all blessing, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honor, power, and might to God and to the Lamb. They understand that only thing about them worthy to be remembered is what Christ has done in them.

Herein lies the big difference: the world creates saints by falsely remembering people better than they were. God creates saints by taking sinners and changing them into something *better* than they were. The world looks back on a dead lie. We look forward to a living truth. The world imagines spiritual giants who seized the kingdom of heaven by virtue of their godly lives. We see the poor in spirit to whom belongs the kingdom by right of inheritance. It's an inheritance that was given to us when we were born into God's family

and made his children by the washing of regeneration in the power of his Holy Spirit. It's an inheritance that we continue to receive by faith in Jesus.

Now, don't misunderstand me: it's entirely appropriate that we cherish the fond memories we have of those who have gone before us. It's right that we celebrate their lives, and that we thank God for the good he accomplished to them and through them. But far more meaningful to us than what they *were*, is what they have become. As we look through the window and see them gathered around the throne of God singing the praises of the Lamb in whose blood they were cleansed, now free of the curse of sin and of every pain and need, and living in the glorious light of that endless day, we too should praise God for the great salvation he has given them, and long for its completion in ourselves.

We humans have a need to see where we are going. And God has given us a window to see what's ahead. As we struggle with the tasks he has given us here below, let's not forget to keep our attention on the goal. And as we do, the Lord who has written our names in the Lamb's book of life will bring us through every trial and tribulation. *He* will see to it that we arrive safely there. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!