

“WHATSOEVER is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?” So begins our Epistle from the Apostle John this morning. One clause that stands out in these sentences is, “overcometh the world.” We see that all that is born of God overcometh the world. We see that our faith is the victory that overcometh the world. More specifically, we see that it is our faith in Jesus, the Son of God, that overcometh the world.

As Christians, certainly we would hope that these first verses of the epistle describe us. We have faith in Jesus and therefore we are the ones overcoming the world. Our victory over the world isn’t just our aspiration, but it is also evidence of our faith. It is both a present belief and an ongoing goal. Yet, in our trying times (and let’s be honest, what times on this earth haven’t been trying times?) it perhaps does not feel as though we are the overcomers. It doesn’t perhaps feel like we are the victors. Our perception of reality doesn’t match up with our understanding of theology.

But St. John continues: “This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood.” Now if you ask, “What does that mean?”, you would not be the only one. Turns out many many people over the last couple of millennia have asked the same thing. It is thought that John is referring to a Gnostic heresy that was drawing people away from the apostolic faith that claimed Christ came only by water, and that the Spirit of God left Jesus prior to His crucifixion, and therefore He did not come, “by blood”. That is, this heresy would assert that a mere man was crucified who had been Christ. Christ, The Messiah, as God, was beyond death and therefore did not die, did not come by blood. In this statement, and actually in the whole epistle, St. John is arguing against these hereitics.

What we can say is that water and blood have many meanings inherent in both words. Water

we associate with birth – amniotic fluid in particular, but it is also the element through which we experience new birth in the sacrament of baptism. It is the element into which Christ was baptized as well.

Blood we, of course, associate with death. The first murder recorded in the Bible was the spilling of Abel's blood by his jealous brother Cain, which blood cried out from the earth to God calling for justice. We also have been talking about the blood of the Passover Lamb which was poured out for the salvation of the Hebrews during the Exodus. And of course, during this season we also have been focused upon the blood of Christ, Our Passover Lamb, which was shed for us on the cross, which also importantly points us to the blood of the New Covenant of which we partake in the Eucharist.

Now are these categories completely distinct and separate? Does water just mean birth and blood just mean death? They do not for blood is mixed with water during the birth process. Our baptisms, likewise do not merely represent a birth, but also first a death to the old person, the old sin nature, before a rebirth into the family of God. Also the gospel record doesn't say that just blood came from Christ's side when He was pierced by the sword, but that blood and water issued forth. So we can associate general meaning with these terms, but we should not be overly insistent about these meanings.

Death and new, resurrected, life are signified together in our existence. In sin, we have died. Therefore we must die with Christ due to sin so that we can live in Christ eternally. The seed must die, as St. Paul says, before it can come forth in new life. So we can interpret water and blood to generally mean birth and death, but we should understand that these themes overlap and you do not have one without the other. Even in the Eucharist, we add water to the wine before it is consecrated to demonstrate these realities. In our participation in the Holy Communion, we are showing forth our baptisms as well.

St. John is using these images to both argue against the heretical thought that had infiltrated the Church in some quarters, but also to highlight the factuality of the birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ. If you believe in the birth/baptism and the death/resurrection of Jesus, then you are believing in real events, historically verified events, not in spiritualized wishful thinking. Most ancient myth communicates fundamental meaning to us, but such myths are not grounded in actual events. The story of Jesus Christ therefore is mythic in that it carries the greatest meaning, but unlike ancient myth, the story of Jesus Christ is true. We think of CS Lewis as stating that the gospel is the myth that is true. It is the most true thing there is. It is the most meaning-ful thing there is, and if you believe in Jesus, then you have the cornerstone truth through which the world can be correctly interpreted.

Those who deny Christ, therefore, cannot see the world accurately. They are blinded and enslaved to the world. In the Old Testament this morning, we read, “Bring out the blind people who have eyes, and the deaf who have ears. ... Let them bring out their witnesses, that they may be justified; Or let them hear and say, “*It is truth.*” Yet, we know that these blind and deaf people cannot see or hear truth. They have no witnesses. They have neither the life of Jesus Christ nor the death of Jesus Christ to establish their understanding. And they have not the confirmation of the Spirit of God to overcome their bondage.

We, on the other hand, will, like all men, be constrained by the material limitations of the world, but because we know Christ and see the Truth of God in Christ, we cannot be personally bound by the lies of the world. We have this freedom in Christ. We have this liberty in Christ. We are the ones who have overcome the world. And we additionally have, according to St. John, the internal confirmation, the witness, of the Holy Spirit.

Now we must draw a distinction here, again, between the Gnosticism that was preying on the

Church and the Orthodox faith in Christ. Among various tenants of Gnosticism is the expectation of continuing revelation from God. It contains a hefty dose of subjective information. We Christians, would admit that each of us is in a different place in our spiritual journey, we certainly grow in the knowledge and love of God, but we must always measure our insight against the Biblical narrative and against Biblical principles. The Gnostics, disbelieving in the Biblical account of Christ, were not bound by the text of the scriptures or the teaching of the apostles. Their “revelation” was of merely a personal and secret nature, and thus could not be generalized more broadly. Their insight was untethered from any historical events.

However, the life of Christ is not just a collection of abstracted ideas. It is an historical fact, and it is upon His life that our lives are grounded. As time goes on, there is more and more physical evidence that verifies the Biblical account. But knowing the story of Christ isn’t the same as knowing Christ, as submitting to Christ. Even though we are at different places on the journey, all of us are headed toward the same destination, the same Christ.

It is a freedom to believe in the apostolic witness and doctrines of the faith. The three witnesses of our epistle work together to confirm our faith, and they therefore enable us to overcome the world. The water and the blood and the Spirit. We do not receive any doctrine or writings that are contrary to the Biblical account. To do so is to intentionally make ourselves blind, deaf, dumb, enslaved. This is not the path of life. It is the path of death.

We have the witness of the life of Christ, a man born in history, born through the waters of life. We have the witness of the death of Christ, God dying for us, shedding His precious blood for us, in history. And we have the witness of the Resurrection of Christ, as confirmed in us by the Holy Spirit, as evidence that Christ has banished sin and death. It is by these witnesses that our faith is grounded, and by this faith, that we are indeed changed, that our

sins have been forgiven, and that we have been reborn into the family of God. This is what it means to overcome the world. This is the confidence of the Christian, our faith in the victory of Christ, the Son of God, for His victory is, and will ever be, our victory!

May God grant that we would increasingly grasp, increasingly have a firmer conviction, that Christ's victory over sin, and death, and the world, the historical reality of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ, (that His victory) is our victory. God grant that we would have greater and greater confirmation and confidence in Christ as our days increase. And God grant that His life in us would graciously overflow to all around us so that they too would submit to Christ and overcome the world.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.