

**+ 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 + Dear Saints, Are You Listening? +
+ Third Sunday of End Time: Saints Triumphant + 15 November 2009 +**

At certain times in the Church's life, you expect certain kinds of music. For example, at Christmas, you expect joyful songs like "Joy to the World", "Hark the Herald Angels Sing", and "Silent Night", because of the Savior's birth. On Good Friday, you expect somber songs like "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded", "What Wondrous Love Is This", and "Lamb of God", because of what Christ accomplished on the cross. On Easter Sunday, you expect happy songs like "I Know that My Redeemer Lives", "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today", or "He's Risen, He's Risen", because of the Savior's victory over death. Even on Thanksgiving, you might expect a thankful song like "Now Thank We All Our God" out of thanksgiving for God's gifts of grace.

...But then there's today—a Sunday in mid-November known as "The Third Sunday of End Time: Saints Triumphant". Not necessarily a day we mark on our calendars, but I'm quite certain that most of the songs we sing today are considered "favorites" by many of you. In fact, I think the hymns we sing today are some of the happiest, most hopeful music we sing any time of the year with songs like "Behold a Host Arrayed in White", "For All the Saints", "Jerusalem the Golden", and "Lord, When Your Glory I Shall See".

There's another time when we hear such songs—a time most of us would rather avoid. Those sweet, clear, soothing songs of Saints Triumphant are often heard resounding through the church when the Lord calls one of his own to himself in heaven. Though these songs are some of the most beautiful hymns ever written, we usually associate them with funerals.

So why sing them today? Why hear their sweet, clear, soothing tones now? Saints Triumphant has a unique place in the life of the Church. We're in the church season of End Time, a time when we look ahead to the Last Day when Christ will return to judge the living and the dead. This Sunday reminds us of our mortality, of our grief and struggle and sorrow now, of loved ones at rest with the Lord and the unsettling reality of our own death.

All those stark reminders could silence the sweet, clear, soothing songs of the day, but then St. Paul comes along in our reading with a "loud" song of victory in Christ that gives every reason for the beautiful songs of Saints Triumphant. So then, **DEAR SAINTS, ARE YOU LISTENING?**

"Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him." When the Lord in his wisdom allows a funeral to take place here at Cross of Christ, I guarantee you will always hear something. You will always hear singing. Not mumbled dirges or shallow schmaltz, but loud, sweet songs of hope like those today.

That's so unusual in our world today, where the living do everything they can to drown out the bitterness of grief with make-up, flowers, a nice box, and eulogies about the dead and how great they were. No matter how hard they try, though, they can't mask the terrifying reality of death as ***"the wages of sin"***. They can't drown out the relentless dirge of grief—the bitter sounds of tears, the painful silence of loss, or that awful sound of dirt returning to the grave. We've all been there. We've all heard them. Even for Christians, it's a reality. We do everything we can to avoid death. Death and grief and loss hurt no less for us. We are no less sinful than anyone else out there in the world, no less earning the same wages of death for our disobedience of God's holy will, no less expected to grieve without hope, but **Dear Saints, are you listening to the sweet song of hope amidst the bitter sounds of grief?** Is it not true that you and I do NOT ***"grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope"***?

Why do we sing such loud, sweet songs of hope when a loved one in the Lord falls asleep? We sing because of what we know by faith. We know the sweet song of hope in Christ, the sweet melody of faithful confession that we believe that Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. We know the sweet song of sins forgiven and death defeated through a crucified, risen, and returning Savior. We know the sweet melody of the blood and righteousness of Jesus that makes each of us holy, "saints" before the holy God. We know the sweet melodies of promises guaranteed ***"according to the Lord's own word..."***, that that loved one, who has fallen asleep in Jesus, will be brought to be with him in heaven forever, that ***"we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep."***

Yes, that sweet song of hope rings out amidst the bitter sounds of grief that threaten to overwhelm you and me when faced with death. That sweet song drowns out all that and gives us hope because of Christ, who does not lie to us, who did not live and die and rise again in vain. That's why we sing. That's why, dear Saints, you

listen to the sweet song of hope amidst the bitter sounds of grief, even your own grief, but that's not the only song you hear. There is also the clear song of triumph!

Back in the days when armies still signaled by trumpet, battles between large armies would stretch out over great expanses of land. Without the benefit of radio, it wasn't unusual for units to not know what was happening on the other end of the battlefield, unless they heard the trumpet signal. As battles dragged on over the course of a day, the soldiers would grow weary facing or making attack after attack, but when a breakthrough was made or victory made certain, the trumpet would signal a charge, a rally. That good news would bolster their fellow soldiers fighting elsewhere on the battlefield.

Sounds familiar, doesn't it? ***“And when the fight is fierce, the warfare long, steals on the ear the distant triumph-song, and hearts are brave again and arms are strong.”*** The Christian life is a struggle from the day we're welcomed into God's family through the waters of Holy Baptism to the day he welcomes us home to heaven. The constant fight against your sinful self, the faith-weakening temptations of this sinful world, and the relentless attacks of Satan make you weary, don't they? The fight gets fierce. The war drags out and you start to lose heart as faith grows weak. You wonder if you can go on as your sinful self wins another battle, as you give into temptation again, as you are once again deceived by Satan's lies, as his fiery darts pierce you again with guilt and shame and fear and death. Who of us hasn't grown weary with the struggle, the fight, the war of this life?

...But **Dear Saints, are you listening to the clear song of triumph amidst the difficult strains of struggle?** As you struggle in this lifelong war, the distant triumph-song ***“steals on the ear...” “It is finished!” “Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!”*** You hear the song of your victory in Christ through the Gospel proclaimed here and now, but oh, how loud and clear it will be on the Last Day! ***“For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.”***

Can you imagine how loud and clear that song will be? The loud song of the archangel and the trumpet call of God will pierce the air. Every soul, living and dead, will hear it! There will be no mistaking it. Then there will be a sound heard only a handful of times in human history. Graves around the world will burst open. ***“...The dead in Christ will rise first.”*** What a clear song of victory that will be as death finally loses his grip on humanity, on us! Then the clear song of triumph will resound from hearts and lips as all believers in Christ will go ***“to meet the Lord in the air”***. Yes, a ***“more glorious day”*** will dawn when that clear song of triumph will drown out the strains of struggle forever! ***“And so we will be with the Lord forever.”***

Oh, how we listen for that Day, but it's not here yet. The struggle goes on. The fight continues to be fierce and there are plenty of casualties. We are still tempted to listen to the sad music of guilt and fear and worry and pain and sorrow and death, but **Dear Saints, are you listening to the soothing song of comfort amidst the sad sounds of sorrow?**

When one of our little ones is sad or scared or troubled, we sing to them. For example, just a few nights ago, Addie was having trouble getting to sleep, so I sang to her a hymn I was considering for our service this morning. ***“Jerusalem the golden, with milk and honey blest—the sight of it refreshes the weary and oppressed: I know not, oh, I know not what joys await us there, what radiancy of glory, what bliss beyond compare: To sing the hymn unending with all the martyr throng, amidst the halls of Zion resounding full with song.”***

That song calmed her down so she went to sleep. Dear fellow Saints, Paul urges us, ***“therefore encourage each other with these words”***, literally, ***“comfort each other”***. Hearts of our loved ones in the Lord grow weak. Soothe them with the song of heavenly comfort. The sad sounds of guilt and fear and worry and sorrow try to fill our ears. Drown them out with the soothing songs of the New Jerusalem, of the Lamb of God sitting on his throne victorious for you. Comfort the grieving not with shallow condolences, but with the promise of a reunion in the halls of song-filled Zion, a reunion guaranteed with blood and an empty tomb. Encourage each other with the soothing song of what is coming soon.

Dear Saints, are you listening? Today we lift our eyes and long to hear in full the sweet song of hope, the clear song of triumph, and the soothing song of comfort. We hear them in part through the Word, at the Supper, at the font, but we long for the day when those songs of salvation will completely silence all the awful sounds of this life ***“...and we will be with the Lord forever.”*** What glorious music that will be when the saints triumphant rise in bright array to praise Christ our victorious King! Even so, Lord Jesus, quickly come! Amen.