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*September 6, 2020*

*Sermon Text: Matthew 16:13-20*

*Pentecost 14 – See How Christ Brings Us into the Promised Land of Heaven*

## **Battle at the Gates**

*The Lord says: “Be still and know that I am God.” Amen.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

The sound of battle surrounds the ancient fortress. From the high walls soldiers launch showers of arrows down on the attackers. But despite all their efforts, the enemy keeps coming. Now **the battle is at the gates** as a mighty battering ram rolls into place.

A thunderous boom rattles wood and stone as the great ram strikes. Defenders rush to brace the gates. But the great ram strikes again, and the gates begin to splinter. Will they hold? Can those inside **overpower** the enemy at their gates?

This is the kind of imagery our Lord gives us as He says: **I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overpower it.**

But how do you picture that? Do you picture the Holy Christian Church on the defense? Do you see believers in Christ as the ones inside the walls of the fortress, as the devil and his evil allies attack, eager to batter away our faith?

There are certainly good reasons to picture things that way. We often sing Luther’s paraphrase of Psalm 46: *A Mighty Fortress is our God*. That Psalm does picture God’s people under siege with enemies all around.

Jesus once told his disciples He was sending them out like **“sheep among wolves”** (Mt 10:16). 1 Peter warns us: **Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour** (5:8).

We see the evidence of what Jesus said things would be like in this last age of the world: **many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other... many false prophets will appear and deceive many people... because of the increase of wickedness the love of most will grow cold** (Mt 24:10-12).

I hardly need to point out how we see those words played out all around us, not to mention in us as we give in to sins of impatience, short tempers and wanting to join the sinful world in just yelling down anybody who dares to disagree with us, rather than speak the truth in love.

Even though we know the Lord has a good purpose and plan for us during the pandemic, yet we can also see the devil has also been busy, using the struggles to sow the seeds of doubt, fear, panic, worry and discord. We see how it has kept people from being together to receive God’s Word and the Lord’s Supper, how it has kept people from Bible study and Christian schools.

So do we see ourselves as cowering behind the fortress doors, unable to do anything as the enemy is outside and the battle rages at the gates? Perhaps we wonder if we will make it if the gates will even hold?

If so, I would like you to listen again to the words of your Savior and then take another look through the lens of this powerful verse of encouragement and comfort. Your Lord Jesus says: **...I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overpower it.**

In the simplest way to understand this verse, where is Jesus' **Church**? Not hiding behind its own gates hoping to barely hold on against the devil's forces. The battle here is at the **gates of hell**. Gates don't get up and march out to attack enemies! Gates are defensive weapons. They are what you use to defend your fortress! So here in this verse it is the devil and his kingdom that are under attack, trying to defend their gates.

In this picture, Christ's **Church** is the one the attack! The **Church** with its dear Lord beside and in front of it attacks the devil's domain of sin and unbelief. The battle is at **the gates of hell** and Jesus has promised those **gates will not overpower His Church** as the Church proclaims Jesus' saving victory in the Gospel that rips down **hell's gates** and opens **the kingdom of heaven**.

This is the mission Christ has given to His Church: **I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.**" The good news of Jesus' death on the cross as the payment for all sin and His resurrection from the dead as the proof of eternal life is what **opens the kingdom of heaven** to believers.

When we assure those who believe Christ that their sins are **loosed**, removed, forgiven, then it is just *as valid and certain in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us himself* (small Catechism).

When we warn unbelievers and the impenitent that by rejecting Jesus, they remain **bound** in their **sins** and shut out of **heaven**, we don't do it gladly, but in the hope that they will listen, repent and believe in Jesus so we can assure them they are forgiven and that heaven stands open for them.

The mission Christ gave His Church is not to improve society and try to make this world just a little better. Yes, we will pray for our world, and as Christian citizens we will serve others, vote and even use petitions to help others.

But we also understand the task that Jesus has given His Church is not to transform society with laws, but to point souls to Jesus Christ as the only Savior through Word and Sacrament. The Word of God is our weapon and this is our work that Jesus has promised **the gates of hell will not overpower** no matter how dark and difficult things may look or feel.

Need some proof? Look at our Gospel lesson. We heard how the best the majority of the people of His day could come up with was the same thing that so many still say about Jesus today: He's a prophet, or a good teacher who will show you the way, well at least for some people that is, if that's what you're into. Of course, there were also those like the Pharisees who didn't want anything to do with Jesus and His Word.

It matches exactly what John's Gospel said about Jesus: **He was in the world, and... the world did not recognize him... He came to His own, but His own did not receive him** (Jn 1:10-11). See how valiantly the devil was defending his fortress walls of unbelief?

But the Bible tells us, **the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work**. And so the battering ram of Jesus' words smashed through hell's gates and claimed **Simon Peter** and the other apostles as God's believing people!

Notice how clearly our lesson teaches us that Peter's faith in Jesus was not the result of his own choice, decision or work in any way: **Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father who is in heaven."**

Peter and the others believed only because of the loving choice of God the Father, and the work of the Holy Spirit creating and sustaining faith through words and works of Jesus, so that Peter confessed of Jesus: **You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.**

He did not say Jesus was a good teacher, a moral guide or a life coach, but that He is nothing less than God in human flesh and blood: **The Son of the living God...** Jesus does not show the way, but is the Way. He is the **Christ**, the long-promised Savior who delivers His people from sin and hell, the only source and Way to eternal life.

And so it is not Peter, but Peter's beautiful confession that **Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God** that is the **rock** on which Jesus' **builds His Church** as the Holy Spirit creates faith through the message.

The thunderous boom of the great ram smashes wood and stone into a thousand pieces. The **gates crumble** as the good news that Jesus is the all sufficient Savior reaches in and steals another soul from Satan's stronghold and says, "Christ forgives you! You are God's child!"

And dear friends in Christ, *that is your story!* In a **battle at the gates of hell** Satan was driven back when through the word and water of Baptism, the same Lord Jesus who in His Easter victory over the gates of death declared you part of His Church.

The Holy Spirit used the Gospel proclaimed by Christ's **Church** to create faith in your heart that looks to Jesus of Nazareth as the eternal Son of God, the one who has paid for your every sin on the cross.

And to keep you in faith, Christ has preserved His **church** to this very day to announce to you through the lips of this stumbling minister, that you sins are **loosed**, forgiven on account of Christ's saving work!

See, Christ has brought you into His Church of believers that will outlast this world, outlast death itself and share forever in the Jesus' endless victory! He has built you onto the rock-solid foundation that He is the Savior, the **Son of the living God** who gives you everlasting life.

And in so doing, He also calls you and me to join Him and His **Church in battle at the gates**, to war against Satan as we and our families hear, learn and study God's Word so that we are built up and ready to wield the saving weapons of God's Word... to share with that friend or neighbor the confidence you find in Christ as we live in this crazy world, that in the face of death, we have eternal life.

With our prayers, offering and serving each other in the congregation, we work to proclaim Jesus' Word here at Peace and through our Synod, around the world and so take the **battle** to the **gates of hell**.

Will this be easy? No. As sinners living in a sinful world, it will be as easy as storming a mountain fortress! Will it always look successful? No. Indeed, many will stubbornly reject the message and stay with the devil's doomed domain.

But dear friends, the outcome, the battle, the war, the victory doesn't depend on us, but on Christ, His powerful Word and His unflinching promise that **the gates of hell will not overpower (My Church)...** So when and where He wills it, the Lord will bring those gates falling down so that still more fellow forgiven sinners will get to join us when with our own eyes risen from the dead we will see what that old hymn describes:

*The Church shall never perish, Her dear Lord to defend...*

*soon the night of weeping shall be the morn of song...*

*she waits the consummation of peace forevermore,*

*Till with the vision glorious her longing eyes are blest  
and the great Church victorious shall be the Church at  
rest.*

Amen.

*Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah,  
the Root of David, has triumphed. Amen.*