

Sermon for the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

“And the people became impatient on the way.”

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Russia is much in the news these days, as a sort of evil empire. And so I will tell you a tale of Russia, when it was most evil.

There were once many Lutherans in Russia, millions; that is, until the first purge of Stalin, who put to death about five thousand Lutheran priests, and exiled the laity of the Lutheran church to Siberia.

This was during the reign of the Soviet Union, when everything beautiful of that ancient nation was replaced with concrete and uranium.

When the Soviet Union fell, a professor of one of our seminaries was sent to Siberia to seek out what Lutherans might remain there, and to serve them.

He in fact found many Lutherans still there, in Siberia. They had maintained their faith for eighty years, baptized by laymen, as they had no pastors.

To them he brought communion, a gaggle of men and women, old and young, in a small wooden shed that they gathered in and called their church, though there was no sign on it to say it was, since it was illegal.

As he gave them the body and blood of Christ, saying as we are used to hearing from any pastor *‘the body of Christ, given for you; the blood of Christ, given for you’* he noticed them, with tears in their eyes,

mouthed these words in Russian.

It was then and only then that he realized the obvious: that this was their first communion; grey haired old women, and balled broken men were greeting their Lord in person for the first time; and the Words of Institution that they mumbled softly under their breath, they knew not from hearing it week after week from a pastor's lips, as they had none, but from the Small Catechism, which was preserved from memory and passed on from generation to generation. So they ate the body of Christ, and drank His blood; this food, that they did not count as *worthless*, but the fulfillment of their unending waiting.

When they had properly received Our Lord, they made the sign of the cross, and went to the back of the wooden shed, that others might do as they did.

The cross they put upon them. When the empire that was to usher in the end of history had ended, when the hammer and sickle had ceased to be waved, the cross remained.

The Red standard has fallen, even as the SPQR of the two thousand year long reign of Rome has fallen. Every flag has been taken down, and every kingdom and imperium ceased. And even the Stars and Stripes shall one day be torn down, for though a great creation, our nation is a creation of men, and is therefore mortal, short, and passing.

But the cross shall remain: perhaps on the flags of nations; perhaps in the halls of churches; perhaps hanging in the entryways and living rooms of Christian homes; but always imprinted invisibly and forever upon the forehead and heart of every baptized body; the sacred temple of the Spirit when all that is sacred it cast away.

This banner waved invisibly on hundreds of thousands of Russian exiles, just years after the Red hammer ceased to be waved anywhere in the vast domain of the Soviet.

This banner, this imprint, this vision, is the Holy Cross,

and it shall outlast all things; every ruler and king and dictator and president; every nation and empire and utopia; it shall outlast the earth and the stars. Nothing will overcome it. For the Holy Cross is emblem of the reign of Christ, *whose kingdom will have no end.*

For He, and He alone, with the Father and the Spirit, eternally one, is God, who has no beginning nor end, as His kingdom has no beginning or end; as His Gospel has no beginning nor end; as His Passion has no beginning nor end; and thus His Cross has no beginning nor end.

So we make the sign of the cross upon ourselves, not just to mark ourselves as ones baptized, though this is true, but to show our citizenship to the *imperium sine fine*, the empire without end, the rule of our Lord Christ, who is as a *lamb slain upon an altar*, and to whom *crowns of kings are thrown*.

When the Son was slain, it was written *behold the king of the Jews*. The Jews demanded that the inscription be changed, but the gentile ruler rightly declared *what I have written, I have written*. For He would forever be the king of the children of Abraham, and of all those who would be made children from *rocks cast on the road*. And this again written upon the cross.

We fear in our age that the time of the Church is coming to an end, that modernism, postmodernism, materialism, scientism, that these are all exterminating the old ways of Christ. We anxiously look at polls of how many Americans call themselves Christians, and with worry look at how God is pushed out of the public sphere.

But God is pushed out of nowhere, for *he is a God who hides himself*. We worry and fear where He does not, for we do not live very long, and so a short time seems long to us. We too *become impatient upon the way*.

Foolish Christians, do you not know that the sign of the cross placed upon you in baptism will cover even your coffin? Do you not know that when you close your eyes for the last time to this sinful world, you will

open them to the Holy Cross, in the world without end?

Everything shall pass, everything, but the Holy Cross, drawn upon your forehead, and upon your heart. The symbol of the eternal kingdom of God, everywhere and always present, made immortal in the resurrection of the flesh, which shall be raised in the last day, to enjoy the vision of Christ your God forever. Therefore, grumble not, but be patient. This is the meaning of the cross.

Now bear this cross upon you knowing that:

Whoever loves his life shall lose it; but whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Numbers 21:4-9; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 12:20-33.