

The climate of the northern hemisphere shows why the ancient pagans thought nature died. The trees shed not just their lively colors, but, with the falling leaves, the trees seem to lose their very lives. The days grow dark and cold. The sun is increasingly hidden behind the midwestern permacloud. This darkening and cold has an emotional effect on many people. Thankfully we are given a reprieve in the celebration of holy Christmas and the many lights that celebrate the birth of He who is the Light of the World. But otherwise, when we cannot escape the darkness with a distraction, dress it up with pretty lights, when we can no longer simply pretend it is not there, we hunker down and wait with longing hearts for spring.

With our entry into the month of November through the Festival of All Saints, the church year would direct your attention to the Last Things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell. It is the perfect parallel with our attitude towards the growing darkness of winter. It is coming, count on it. You will one day die, the Final Judgment is inescapable, and every person who has ever lived will spend eternity in either heaven or hell.

The first of these, is what we can consider particularly today. Many try to dress the truth of death up with pretty things to distract from the reality: euphemisms to talk around death, having celebrations of life instead of simply allowing godly mourning. The highest compliment you can give to a funeral director (we used to call them “morticians” and “undertakers” – another change of terms to sanitize things), is that the deceased looks alive, like he is only sleeping. And yet all the makeup in the world cannot make cold, stiff hands warm and lively again. But usually we don't try to make death look like something it's not. More often we just ignore it altogether. Pretend it isn't there.

Or hunker down in absolute fear, dreading the inescapable reality of it. We see a lot of that, don't we? The pandemic has exposed our world's inability to cope with the reality of death. It terrifies us, especially those who are so convinced that this life is all that there is. And American Christianity, with its happy, go-lucky, best life now, no negativity spin has been forced to reckon with death. Christians are relearning or learning for the first time to seriously contemplate death.

It is no accident that the Reformation was kicked off on the eve of All Saint's Day. Luther's *95 Theses* attacked the practice of selling indulgences, pieces of paper to get you or a deceased loved one out of purgatory. It was on All Saints' Day that the castle church of Wittenberg displayed all the relics for the faithful to venerate and lessen their time in the fires of purgatory. It was a time when people, unlike today, were very aware of death, were confronted by it all the time. It was inescapable. High infant mortality, plague, war, and famine all contributed to a regular exposure to death in the life of every person.

In the medieval era, a major genre of literature was called the *Ars Moriendi*, the art of dying. These were works written for Christians to use to prepare for death. Countless versions and editions were prepared and eagerly bought up. In addition to their directing the Christian to call upon Mary and the saints to intercede for them, the *ars moriendi* were built upon three central points: (1) the uncertainty of salvation, that you cannot know for sure that God is pleased with you or angry with you; (2) that you must do whatever you can to live a holy, God-pleasing life to the best of your ability; and (3) by feeling truly sorry for your sins and patiently enduring suffering on the deathbed, time in purgatory would be lessened.

While today we don't have the same familiarity with death, those three points are still evident. The last two are widely assumed. Many people, even Christians, think that we are capable of pleasing God on our own, that we ought to do whatever we can, and your good intentions, your good works in this life will earn you a place in whatever type of pleasant existence is on the other side of this life. But for even the firmest adherent of this, there remains the first point of the old *ars moriendi*: How do you know? How do you know you have done enough? How do you know God is pleased with you? Will you stake your eternal fate on what you think is enough? May God protect us, may God guard *you*, from such thinking!

Today teaches you to consider the blessedness of Christian death. Death on its own is a horrific thing. We see that our Lord hates death, has come to undo it, in His miracles of raising the dead: Jairus' daughter, the son of the widow of Nain, and Lazarus. It is a truly comforting thing to see Jesus as the destroyer of death, the one who sets people free from its clutches. Death scares Christians: the how, the when, the concern for who is left behind. Death also grieves us. We suffer loss because of it. More than almost any other day, today brings the memories of our loved ones to mind. The tears flow

for even the most emotionless German. Because death robs us of the physical presence of those whom we love. It alters our lives to a degree that exceeds even the most stringent pandemic precautions and mandates.

And there so often remains, even for the most devout Christian, that old question of certainty. “How do I know that my dear ones are where the pastor and the liturgy at their funeral, proclaimed they are?” How do I know with, with far more than just an “I hope so” that they live now in soul comforted in Abraham’s bosom, and that they will live again in body at the resurrection?” “How do I know that that is where I will be, that, whenever, however, death comes for me, my eyes that close in death will open to see the glorious face of the Savior?” How do you know?

Because of Jesus’ cross. Because of Jesus’ empty tomb. The obituary page that began with the closing of the gate to the Garden in Eden, that encompassed all humanity, was stopped in the early morning hours at the garden tomb. Jesus’ resurrection is the proof that your sins have been forgiven. It is proof that the death which seizes you has been defeated and does not get to keep you. It does not get to keep your loved ones who have died in the Faith. Everyone in Jesus lives! For in baptism, you who were stained as filthy rags by even your *best* works, have been washed. You have been cleansed, made white in the blood of the Lamb.

The life is in the blood. That is true of us. It is even more true of Jesus. What ran down the rocks of Golgotha, what sat cold and congealed in His veins as He lay in the tomb now flows with forgiveness and life that will never end. The blessedness of Jesus’ life, what belongs to Him, is given to you. The promise, His sure and certain guarantee of the kingdom of heaven is yours. The comfort of His promises, what He gives to His blessed dead, is yours. The inheritance of all things, the satisfaction of His perfect righteousness is yours. The sweetness of His mercy for sinners is yours. Access to God, the door opened to stand before Him without fear is yours. The status that is Christ’s, that of the beloved Son, to whom all things are given, is yours. This is why the color for this day is white. Today is a feast of Christ, celebrating and giving thanks for all those who comprise His body, the holy Christian Church, whose robes are made white in His blood.

God’s Word shows you where the faithful departed are. It shows you where you will be. Passing through the great tribulation, you will, by virtue of Christ’s blood, stand before the throne of God. Indeed, that is the best place to be. That is why Paul can say, **“For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better”** (Phil 1:21–23).

To depart and be with Christ, to pass through what our chief hymn today calls the “dungeon” of this world and stand before God in His temple is far better. There, all the promises of the beatitudes are given in full: service before God, shelter from every storm and fear, no want of anything, no threat. In the care of the Shepherd, guided to living water, and comforted from all sorrow. That is where so many saints already are. They have gone before us. They are removed from our sight, and yet they are not removed from our fellowship. All are one in Christ, all whose robes have been made white in the blood of the Lamb. This is Christ’s promise to you. You are His saints, His holy ones. You belong to Him. This is the shining light of His consolation even in these dark days.

And so we rejoice on this day. We give thanks to God for guiding the journey of so many to the safe haven above. We give thanks to God for His gifts and promises to us. And we long for the breaking of that yet more glorious day, when the when all the saints will rise in bright array as the King of Glory passes on His way, waking all those who sleep to the joy and rest given through His blood.