

There is a hymn we regularly sing in the course of the year, hymn 755, *In the Very Midst of Life*. The hymn is Luther's reworking of an older medieval chant – *media vita in morte sumus* – in the midst of life, we are in death. It is not a very cheery thought, and it's not what you would call a happy hymn. But this confession preaches a truth that is necessary to know and believe. It compels us to face the earthly reality that death encompasses the world, we are surrounded by it. For years now we have had wars in Ukraine and Gaza. More recently in Iran. Who knows what may come to our shores, to our people? Inevitably in each person's life, death rears its ugly head, snatching those we love, sometimes suddenly, other times agonizingly slow.

The medieval chant and Luther's hymn don't just teach us of the reality of death, but also the root cause. It is because of sin, which brings not only death in this body, but eternal death. And the only hope, what the hymn powerfully teaches us by its threefold refrain, is God. The holy and righteous God, the holy and mighty God, the holy and all merciful Savior. We cry out to Him to save us lest we perish, to save us from the terror of hell, to preserve us in the peace that faith can give.

All this is a truth you must recognize and believe. To be honest, most of the time, most days especially for us who live in a deluded age that would deny all this, it is necessary to let the heavy weight of this truth to hang over us. Because unlike in most of human history, unlike most of our fellow Christians, we have lost the reality of death. And we really don't take sin all that seriously.

But in the end, when we cannot escape, when the truth of divine judgment hits home and the terror of death arises, when you realize the reality of hell and that by your sins you do deserve to go there, we need something more than the plea to God for mercy, the hope for the peace that faith gives. We need it spelled out more clearly than a hope that God will be merciful, and a desire for a good conscience steadfast in the face of sin, death, and hell.

And so there is another hymn, one we sing today, also by Luther, written the same year as the other hymn. *Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands*. This hymn too is based on an older chant, what was sung before the Holy Gospel. This hymn and chant tell us the basis of the peace that faith gives. It proclaims the truth that faith clings to. It announces the reason for our joy, not just on this holy day, but as Christian people every day. It is our comfort and proclamation even as we sit at the deathbed, and stand beside the yawning mouth of the grave. It is that Life has gone into the midst of death, done battle, and life has emerged victorious.

Thus the angel asks the women when they come to the tomb, “**Why seek ye the living among the dead?**” and proclaims that He who was crucified, who did indeed enter into death and was laid in the tomb is not there because He has risen. The living go to cemeteries, and ordinarily they leave alive. Those who are dead and go into the cemetery do not. But there is One whom death has no claim over. Death unjustly snatched Him in its jaws when He gave up His spirit, thought Him to be just like any other human prey. But He who is Life itself cannot be held. He has burst His prison.

So the women go where the dead are found, and He is not among the dead. He is the crucified one, but He is risen and He lives. Life returned to what lay dead and buried, incorruption arose and walked out of the place where those who enter in death, stay and decay.

And you, dear Christian, are joined to this one. His life is yours, even as you live in midst of death, are surrounded, vexed, and terrified by it. You have He who is Life, not just as your hope and joy, that He who is God and Lord and is most dear to you is not dead but lives, nor even that He promises that though you die you will one day live too. But already within you.

This is where Luther improves on the Gospel chant. He is the Prince of Life who reigns immortal, your Lord, your hope, is arisen, the victor King. But He is not far away as the risen Lord, out there somewhere, locked up in heaven. He has gone before us, paved the way through the grave to life eternal, but that is not all. Our true Paschal Lamb is here. His blood marks our door. He is the bread of heaven come down here as our meat and drink. This faith and confidence lives not upon some distant thing, but what is here, given and put into you.

Amid this world so filled with death, to you, vexed and troubled by your sins, pursued by death, as you see it crop up around you and working your final end out in your body, in this you are given Life itself. In the midst of death you have life.